



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



Oral History Interview

with

Darnella McGuire Nelson

Interviewer: Kerry James Reed

Narrator: Darnella McGuire-Nelson

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Summary:

Darnella McGuire Nelson shares her memories of childhood, education, career, and involvement with the Douglass Cemetery Restoration Project.

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General	Childhood; Education; Historic Sites; Cemeteries; Church; Community; Career; Racial Segregation; Black Women’s Hair; Black Businesses; HBCU; Protests;
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Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:00:02] My name is Darnella McGuire Nelson. I am 57 years old. Today's date is March 22nd, 2024, and I am at the Lloyd House.

Kerry James Reed [00:00:12] My name is Kerry James Reed. I am 27 years of age. It is the 22nd of March 2024, and we are at the Lloyd House. So, thank you so much for agreeing to do this Mrs. Nelson, it's been an absolute pleasure getting to know you over these past few weeks. I suppose we can start at the very beginning. Where were you born?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:00:27] It's considered Alexandria, Virginia. I was born at DeWitt Army Hospital at Fort Belvoir.

Kerry James Reed [00:00:36] The Army Hospital. Was one of your parents in the service?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:00:40] My father was in the military.

Kerry James Reed [00:00:41] Father was in the military. What are some of your earliest memories?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:01:01] It's so funny, I was just thinking about all the things my mother took me. I didn't take it for granted, I appreciated it. But I guess she was into history, and she just always took me to the museums. Especially on Sundays after church. And I was kind of considered a nerd because I wanted my friends from church to go with me, but they would be like, "That's boring." But she still took me, and I was still geeking off of it. And, even when we had a holiday, say, like the day after Thanksgiving, we didn't have Metro, the subway at the time, we just had the busses. So, ride with her to work and we would go to like, the [Washington] Monument or the Bureau of Engraving and Printing. I used to like to see them make money and looking down at the people working there. I thought they were celebrities because they were making money and because they were my neighbors in my neighborhood and the ladies in the neighborhood. I used to see them working, and I would be like at awe. They're making the money! So, yeah, those are some of my memories.

Kerry James Reed [00:02:14] So the museums in DC are the ones you're talking about?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:02:19] Yeah. The Smithsonian.

Kerry James Reed [00:02:20] Do you have a favorite one that you remember going to?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:02:24] My favorite one I think would be the African one. There was one when we were in school, we used to go to just about every year. It was an African something museum, but at the time it was in a house. They didn't really have a museum, but it was in a house. And we used to be able to play the instruments. Yeah. But I can't remember where it was, but it was in DC, and it was located in a middle of a block in a house. And I guess my next one would be the Bureau of Engraving and Printing because they were making money. But, yeah, just as far as going to the other museums and with schools, the one with the big elephant. Is that the Natural History Museum?

Kerry James Reed [00:03:17] Yeah.

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:03:18] Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [00:03:20] The Natural History Museum.

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:03:21] Yeah. You have to see that elephant.

Kerry James Reed [00:03:25] Absolutely. It's a staple.

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:03:27] Right.

Kerry James Reed [00:03:29] Can you describe the neighborhood that you grew up in?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:03:32] Oh, absolutely. So, I grew up on Pit Street, across the street from Lyles-Crouch. It was all Black. And I remember I could run back and forth over anybody's house. I remember just we were able to jump Double Dutch in the street, ride bikes, and then a car would come, and say, "Car!" and we'd just move over. But. Yeah. So, it was pretty close knit.

Kerry James Reed [00:04:02] Terrific. Can you describe what your home look like?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:04:08] So it was a two bedroom, all brick. It had this huge yard. It was very long. And you don't appreciate it until you don't have it. So, it was a lot of land back there and the yards were long. It was like half of the block, and it was like a two bedroom, no basement, big yard. It didn't have central air, so we had an air conditioner in one room. It was my mother's bedroom, so I would always sleep there. And we had a porch. And at the time my mother rented. The lady that owned it lived directly across the street from us. And Ms. Eleanor Massey and my mother always wanted to buy, but Ms. Massey wasn't ready to sell. So, my mother wound up buying a new house on Wilkes Street. So, this is a couple of blocks over. Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [00:05:32] So you mentioned that because you would go see people in your neighborhood work at the Bureau of Engraving and Print that you thought of them as heroes. So, what was it like seeing those heroes around your community?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:05:47] We all went to the same church, and I just thought that whatever they did was fascinating. I don't know, in my eyes as a child, "Your mom makes the money!"

Kerry James Reed [00:06:02] So can you describe what your neighborhood looked like?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:06:07] So, basically everybody owned their homes. They had been there years. Most of the people worked for the federal government. I know my friend right across the street from me, her dad, he was retired military and he worked at the museum. It had to be Natural History. And so, I got to see him when I went to the museums, and I remember my mother taking me to see the King Tut exhibit and standing in line for hours to see it. And what made me remember it, because I saw something that's immersive, that's coming to DC on King Tut. And I don't think that immersive is the actual artifacts. But I was like, "Nah, I'm not going because that's not the actual artifacts." [Laughs]

Kerry James Reed [00:07:07] You already had full experience.

[00:07:09] Yeah.

[00:07:11] That's cool. Can you recall what businesses your family frequented in the neighborhood?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:07:16] Oh, there was this shop called People's Flower Shop. I think it was on Columbia Street. There was a TV shop on Gibbons Street. As a matter of fact, my

babysitter - I think, it's 610 Giddens Street. Ms. Baltimore, they owned a couple of houses on the block, and right next door her husband was a TV repairman, and he owned that. And he repaired televisions. And so, that's the first time I have been in a house where the bathrooms were side by side, a his and hers bathroom. And yeah, Ms. Barcees, Little Jim's. I don't know who owned Little Jim's, but I know it was a staple. It was a carry out. I think it was on Pendleton Street and everybody went, especially on Fridays, for the fish box. I remember working at the bank when I was in college, and I was a block away from Little Jim's and I would go. They be like, "Where are you going?" I said, "I'm going to Little Jim's." So, everybody in the bank knew Little Jim's was good. "Can you pick up an order for me?" And so, it didn't matter. Black, white or whatever. I would go get the orders. Yeah. So, we frequented that. I know there [were] plenty Black businesses because my mom had her choral ensemble. They would have the choir's anniversary, and they would have a booklet, you know, the souvenir booklet, and it would list all the business. And she took it to the library last year for them to look at. And, I was like, oh my goodness, I forgot about all these businesses that we frequented. And oh, the Alexandria Cab Company, I think that was Black owned. All the hair salons and barbershops. The hair salon was an all-day thing on Saturdays.

Kerry James Reed [00:09:44] Yeah.

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:09:46] And you would come, and people would come from churches, we'd have dinners. Chicken, chitlins, pig feet. And if they didn't order they would come deliver it to the hairdresser. Then all the ladies would sit around and eat.

Kerry James Reed [00:10:08] So you mentioned a little while ago that you'd be going to all these museums after church on Sunday. Your friends would think you were a bit of a nerd. Can you describe your friends? And you know you mentioned double Dutch as well, but what sort of things did you and your friends get up to in the neighborhood?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:10:27] Oh, we could roam the streets all day. We were kind of like latchkey kids. And we can roam the streets of Alexandria all day, and we just be back home. But I remember the tunnel on Wilkes Street. And it was trains actually running through at that time. And my mother would kill me if she knew this. But I guess I can tell it now. Like, we would go to the tunnel and my friends would say, "Train!" and then we would hop on the wall, because you know, God watches over babies and fools. So, I guess we were both. [Laughs]. But we would jump up on the wall. And I just remember after we came from under the tunnel, my shorts were wet, and I was more worried about the shorts being wet or dirty than me being in that tunnel with the train. Like, "My mom is going to kill me," but then it was so hot it dried, so I was like, "Phew!", but stuff like that.

Kerry James Reed [00:11:29] Are there any other areas that you played besides around the tunnel? Anything else?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:11:37] Oh, we played at Lee Street Park.

Kerry James Reed [00:11:39] Lee Street Park.

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:11:40] Yeah. That's what we called it. I guess is still Lee Street Park. And I know when it would snow, my friends across the street, they had a sled. And I remember her

mom taking the candle and so it would be fast. And it's not a big hill, but to a child that was the biggest hill in the world, going down the hill. So, we would do that. We also frequented a store called Ms. Connie's on the corner of Franklin and Royal Franklin or Fairfax. One of them. But it was on our way to church. But she was closed on Sundays. But sometimes after school, I would call my mom and ask her, can I walk to Ms. Connie's which was just two blocks up. And so, we would go get our candy and they had a little grill or hamburger or whatever. But Ms. Connie, she was a white lady, and I think it was her children or her family. And they stayed there for that little store for the longest. But it's torn down now, and it's part of just, next door to the house. That's a yard now.

Kerry James Reed [00:13:05] What was it like seeing Ms. Connie's get torn down?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:13:08] It brought back memories of how we used to just walk up that hill two blocks, and I can kind of still remember the way her cheeseburgers were wrapped in the parchment paper and everything.

Kerry James Reed [00:13:25] So then if you had to pick a favorite aspect of your neighborhood growing up, what would it be?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:13:32] It would be the neighbors, because everybody in that neighborhood went at the same church, Shiloh Baptist Church. That's where one of the church members, she taught me how to ride my bike. Everything was just that community. So, they were in a choir. I went to church with them. I went to Sunday school with them. We would all walk in the mornings to Sunday school because we could walk to church.

Kerry James Reed [00:14:14] So it seems like faith really united your community and brought it together. So, along that vein, do you remember any funeral practices growing up?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:14:26] Oh, yeah. Because, you know, those people were older and so we were always at funerals. So, someone passed, you know, you would automatically bring food to the house. And I remember now it's different. I just remember at our church you didn't even have to be a member. If someone was in need, they needed to have the funeral there or the repast, people just pitched in. People pitched in the choir, even if it was on a weekday. People got together. We'll do the singing. We'll do the food. You know, just calling on the phone. I remember my mom and everybody doing that. But now it's like you have to pay. You have to have been a member. You have to have been paying your tithes. You know, for some churches.

Kerry James Reed [00:15:28] Yeah.

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:15:28] And I don't know, I guess it doesn't sit well with me because I remember a white lady coming in our church. I was in the choir stand, and she needed help. And I just remember after church, people met with her, and they paid her rent, whatever she needed. They went with her the next day because it was a workday, and they squared her away. And we're all a Black church, but we just helped everybody. And yeah. And so that's the foundation that I have. So church is today, it's all these stipulations.

Kerry James Reed [00:16:10] Yeah. Very strong communal foundation. Right. Absolutely. Are there any other practices or traditions that your family would have growing up for church?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:16:24] For church or for funerals?

Kerry James Reed [00:16:26] For church but let's go with funerals first.

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:16:28] Okay. So, funerals, once you had the funeral and then you would have the repass, and the repass would either be at the church or around the corner there's the Departmental Progressive Club. And I just thought you either had all your events were there, wedding receptions, because that's all I knew. And everybody at church had their wedding reception there, and I didn't know, you know, I just know it was Departmental Club. I didn't know a group of Black men owned it. And that was their Black Country Club in Alexandria. And they still own that today. And so, we would have the repass and normally, things have changed now. You would have the wake the night before and then the funeral, but now it's more like you have it all in one thing, which I like better because I just think it was a lot.

Kerry James Reed [00:17:32] Yeah.

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:17:32] It's a lot. So, I'm glad that's changing.

Kerry James Reed [00:17:38] What about practices just in your family revolving around church and church service? So traditional meals on Sundays or anything like that?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:17:47] Oh, yes. You always had to have the big meal after church on Sunday. So, a lot of times my mother would put her meat, or turkey, or whatever in the oven while we were at church. And so, by the time we got home, it was ready. You've always had, like, a cake. Or sometimes she would invite the pastor and his wife, Reverend Davis, and his wife, Minnie Davis, over to eat. They lived in southeast DC. And she was my Sunday school teacher. And so, the ritual was my mother didn't go to Sunday school, but I had to get up. And normally I didn't do my chores on Saturday like I was supposed to. So, I would have to get up early on Sunday, clean up and then get ready for Sunday school, and walk to Sunday school with my friends. And then by that time she would come to church. And then we would have communion every first Sunday. And we used real wine back then, not the grape juice. And I remember I said to my friend, "I want to get baptized." I was like 10, "Because I want to drink communion!" [Laughs]

Kerry James Reed [00:19:15] That's funny.

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:19:18] I want to take the wine. And he looked back. Yeah. And so, we would do that. And then every choir on a Sunday that's when you sang. And I think the children we sang on the third Sundays. That was Youth Sunday.

Kerry James Reed [00:19:48] You mentioned [your mother] was part of the choir ensemble. Did she push you to be in the choir, or did you just naturally?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:19:59] Naturally. Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [00:20:01] So you also mentioned that your mother was very involved in the church, and that she would organize trips for the choir. Did you ever attend any of those?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:20:14] Oh yeah. I went on everyone, from Broadway, to New York, to Canada, Montreal, to Disney World.

Kerry James Reed [00:20:28] Oh, wow.

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:20:28] Yeah. The church always had a trip every year.

Kerry James Reed [00:20:35] Why would they go so far?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:20:38] That's a good question. I do not know.

Kerry James Reed [00:20:40] You have to ask your mother about that.

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:20:43] Yeah. [Laughs].

[00:20:43] Circle that one. Do you have any favorite memories from any of the trips?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:20:47] Yeah. It was always a bus ride. Except for one trip when we went to Florida, we were on the train. But I always used to like the front seat on the right-hand side because I liked to see everything. So, I was weird too.

Kerry James Reed [00:21:09] So can you describe what your church looked like when you were growing up? Is it the same now?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:21:16] It's pretty much the same. They added like a part where they added a newer bathroom. But that was in the late 70s, early 80s. It is old now. It's not accessible. So, it doesn't have like an elevator if you need to go downstairs. It's not wheelchair accessible, or anything like that. So, it really needs some upgrades. We don't go to that church anymore because of the leadership. So, my mom just stopped a few years ago, but that is where she was born and raised, and that's kind of hurt for her right there, because that's all she knows. And, we've had so many good memories in that, and this church is always in court. So, she had a back away.

Kerry James Reed [00:22:16] Yeah, that's a shame. Yeah. What was it like to leave the church that you've been going to your whole life?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:22:22] It was hurtful. I mean, I do go to another church. I haven't joined, so I haven't been back to my church since 2018. But churches are different, and I respect that. There's a church that I really like, two churches that I go to. And they're trying to get me to become more active. But my heart is always at Zion Baptist Church.

Kerry James Reed [00:22:57] Can you describe your mother?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:23:04] Strong. I was thinking about that over here. She's been through every milestone. My father and my brother died in a car accident while we were in France. She was actually pregnant with me, so I'd never met them. So, for her to endure that and to come back over here and raise me. But she's been at every milestone. So even her mobility isn't like it used

to be. She doesn't require a wheelchair or anything, but she walks with a cane, and she's had two hip replacements, but she's going with me to Florida to be hooded. And she just kept me into everything. I mean, she said I was easy. I really didn't give her any problems, you know, growing up. And so, yeah. She said I always wanted to do things, so that was never a problem. I have three kids, and I see my two boys. And my boys I always have to push, but my daughter is like, she'll just get it done, make it happen, find her money, funding for school, you know, all that kind of stuff. And I'm like, oh my God. Like she has it taken care of. So yeah. So, I don't know if it's about the women in the family that they...yeah.

Kerry James Reed [00:24:43] Absolutely. Your mother sounds incredibly strong willed to be able to do that. That's fabulous. Did she ever talk to you about your family history growing up?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:24:54] It's funny cause the older she gets, the more she talks. And she does a lot of talking, especially when I'm around my friends. And I'm like, yeah, I need to come around more often because she'll get to talking cause they just like, make her the center of attention. And I find out more about my father than she if I would be talking to her, she wouldn't say it, but when she's talking to my friends, she tells them everything. And I just happen to be there. So, that's a mystery because, I want to take the ancestry test. But I'm also afraid of that privacy stuff.

Kerry James Reed [00:25:44] Yeah.

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:25:46] So, I had a friend at work whose father was a genealogist. He's from San Francisco, and, we were at work one day, and I was like, "David find this for me," because his father taught him everything. And he did it in like, ten minutes. So, my mom used to always talk about how my great aunt, who lived down the Berg where I am now, the city took her house. Because I used to wonder how come all the Black people got down the Berg in public housing. Like we had to be more. And so, when David, he found some information, I was giving him names, they said she lived on 6-something Columbus Street. And that's when my mother was saying, "Yeah, mama R had a house on Columbus Street." And so that's the one they said they took. So, I was putting the pieces together. And then David moved, and I haven't heard from him. And he wrote me a letter, so I'm gonna write him back. But things like that, like he did it in like 10 minutes. I'm pretty sure I could do it too. Now that I'm finished this program, just put my mind to it. But I'm very reluctant to take that ancestry test. And so, as far as my father side, I get bits and pieces from my mom. I know he was born in Kentucky, but his family moved to Michigan. And, when I was, detailed over a job, I was talking to the WebEx people, and he said, "Your name is McGuire?" And I said, "Yeah." And he said, "Are you related to the McGuire boxing empire out in Michigan?" And I was like, "I don't know, I could be." So, I really need to check. That was in 2020. But I'm just, yeah. My friend said if I do it, if other people have done it, we'll pop up and maybe we can connect. I don't know though.

Kerry James Reed [00:28:01] So I certainly understand the trepidation for doing that stuff is something about.

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:28:07] Have you done it yet?

Kerry James Reed [00:28:08] I have not, unfortunately. My father is super fixated on our on our family history so he can tell me everything I know.

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:28:16] Okay.

Kerry James Reed [00:28:17] I don't know. I'm in the same boat.

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:28:19] Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [00:28:20] Don't want my name on any lists anyway, right? So, you mentioned that your mother was talking about your great aunt that had a house on Columbia Street.

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:28:28] Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [00:28:29] Was your mother's family from around Alexandria?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:28:32] Yes.

Kerry James Reed [00:28:32] Okay. Do you know how far back they lived here?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:28:38] I don't know. I know that they were a Jenkins. My grandmother's maiden name was Jenkins. And then when I went to where the Mobil gas station used to be going down George Washington Parkway, I did see a Jenkins on that plaque. So, I don't know, we could be in that family. I know I just need to do the research.

Kerry James Reed [00:29:03] Yeah, absolutely. It's always the hardest step. Interesting. Did your mother ever describe your father for you?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:29:15] Oh, she said he was a mechanic. He could take a car, take it apart, and put it together, and everybody would come to him on base to repair the car. He always liked Alexandria. So, when they came back, he wanted to buy a house here. She did say that the reason why they had an apartment in D.C. is because they couldn't find an apartment in Alexandria because of segregation.

Kerry James Reed [00:29:51] Okay.

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:29:53] So they started off in DC.

Kerry James Reed [00:29:58] Do you remember witnessing any of that segregation or racism growing up?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:30:03] Oh, yeah. I remember my mother put me in Brownie Academy. You ever heard of that school? It's on Telegraph Road. And it was an elite private school. But she put me there for the summer, and she used to say, "I had to get a loan every year from the credit union just to put you there for the summer," and I don't know why she put me there. But anyway, the bus would pick me up at the house. It was one of those vans every morning and drop me off. I went swimming every day. I did arts and crafts. I knew I was Black, but it didn't bother me. I think it was me and one other Black girl that went to the whole school. And then I remember a Black boy going there and I just remember we were doing arts and crafts, and we were doing tye-

dye shirts. We did a whole lot of stuff. And I remember this girl saying, "Shh! Here she comes, because she's the only Black." And I'm like... And I know we weren't even 10 years old, like you know what I mean.

Kerry James Reed [00:31:11] So what year was this?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:31:13] It was in the 70s. Yeah. So, I think after that I started asking my mom, can I do something else? I went there for few years, every summer. Can I do something else? So, I went to summer camp from like the fourth grade to the sixth grade. So that's what we did. And that was part of.

Kerry James Reed [00:31:42] Okay. What was it like hearing those comments from your peers?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:31:46] I didn't know how to react but I just, I know I felt some type of way and I just kind of looked at them. Because it didn't bother me, you know, like that I was Black, but I didn't know I was the focal point. [Laughs].

Kerry James Reed [00:32:05] Are there any, you know, physical barriers that segregation or racism introduced to your life growing up?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:32:15] Not that I know. But I just remember I was in the fourth grade, and I had a teacher named Ms. Sharp, and after lunch we would have free play. And Ms. Sharp said, "You have to take this test." And I guess her and my mom were in on it. It was for the gifted and talented program. And if I got accepted, I would have missed free play. So, I was kind of reluctant to take it anyway. But anyway, I took the test, and I passed it for history and something in social studies or whatever. But I just remember them talking about it and it was like the white people don't have to test in. Like, I had to be selected to test in, you know what I'm saying? Because in school you are always saw the white kids were already going to gifted and talented. But I had the test in, in the middle of the year, so.

Kerry James Reed [00:33:19] What's school is this?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:33:20] Lyles-Crouch

Kerry James Reed [00:33:25] Lyles-Crouch. Where did you go to middle school?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:33:32] GW. So, I lived across the street from Lyles-Crouch. I went to kindergarten and then all of a sudden for first grade, I had to go to Maury. So, I went to Maury for 1st, 2nd, and 3rd. And then I came back to Lyles-Crouch for 4th, 5th, and 6th. And at the time, I didn't know that was part of the integration, because Lyles-Crouch was from kindergarten to 6th grade.

Kerry James Reed [00:34:02] What was it like to be bounced around to different schools?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:34:10] It really didn't affect me. I just didn't know why I just couldn't go across the street. But I didn't understand integration. And when the bus used to pick us up, I remember, it going through the neighborhood and seeing the difference in the neighborhoods.

I thought I had it. I used to go seeing the difference in the neighborhood. Like this is how other people live. You know, just seeing the different homes and everything like that.

Kerry James Reed [00:34:48] Absolutely. Do you have any special memories of elementary school?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:34:57] At Maury I mean I had really good teachers. I had a really good experience. I used to get awards, penmanship awards. All kinds of stuff. So, I really didn't have anything negative to say, it was just school. But we had a really good time. I remember we had a principal named Ms. Beach, and I think they named one of the parks after her. She was really nice. She was an old lady. But yeah, we I never had any problems in Maury or Lyles-Crouch. I really have good memories about elementary school.

Kerry James Reed [00:35:48] It was around this time you started picking up band?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:35:53] Band in fourth grade at Lyles-Crouch.

Kerry James Reed [00:35:55] Okay. What instrument did you play?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:35:57] The flute.

Kerry James Reed [00:35:57] The flute. Fabulous. Do you still play?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:36:02] No. I need to pull it from my mom's house...play some chords.

Kerry James Reed [00:36:07] Absolutely. So, I know this is going back a little bit to what we discussed previously, but do you remember the first funeral that you ever attended?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:36:18] I don't know, it had to be at my church, but I attended so many.

Kerry James Reed [00:36:25] Yeah, yeah. Okay. Do you have any special memories from going to GW?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:36:37] Yeah. GW was hard. Because not only did you just met up with people from everywhere else. When I was going to Lyles-Crouch, the people down the Berg I always knew. We all went to GW. And that was the year I was supposed to go to Parker Gray. I wanted to go to Parker Gray's so bad. And then they closed it down. And then they merged it with GW. So, yeah, it was hard. And I still don't understand why GW is 6th grade now. But anyway, I guess you're finding yourself. And then you're going to gym every day, and then you have to change. And I remember someone stole my shoes.

Kerry James Reed [00:37:35] Oh no.

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:37:36] You know, just different experiences and. Yeah. I remember there was a quarter when I didn't do anything and I got like a D in science, and then my mom had to come to the school. I was just tired.

Kerry James Reed [00:37:56] Yeah, I understand.

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:37:57] Like, I ain't gonna do anything. It's cool.

Kerry James Reed [00:38:03] So it sounds like your mother placed a big emphasis on school.

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:38:09] Yeah. I do remember I took a test, and the test said that I must have been in eighth grade, seventh, eighth grade because she came up to the school. I didn't even know she was coming up there. And the tests said that I wouldn't be too good in college. And I may be doing okay if I go to a vocational school, but nothing past that. And I know my mother came up there and laid those people out.

Kerry James Reed [00:38:42] Absolutely. Do you remember when you took that test?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:38:45] It had to be in the 7th or 8th grade because I was at GW.

Kerry James Reed [00:38:48] Interesting, and that was in that test is supposed to?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:38:53] Kind of give you a trajectory.

Kerry James Reed [00:38:58] They said no college for you?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:38:59] No college for me.

Kerry James Reed [00:39:00] And you recently finished your dissertation?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:39:02] Yes.

Kerry James Reed [00:39:07] I'm sorry you had experienced that.

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:39:09] You know, it didn't bother me because I really didn't know what it meant, but I guess she knew what it meant, you know? Right. Oh, that's what that meant.

Kerry James Reed [00:39:19] Oh my goodness. Were there any other values that your mother tried to instill in you besides for education?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:39:30] Integrity and honesty. Yeah. And I don't know where I learned how to curse but I did. And I kind of know, but she never cursed. I've never heard her curse unless she was repeating a quote or something. But I yeah, I know my babysitter Ms. Pinky, she had daughters and they worked at the Bureau of Engraving and Printing, and they would come home, and I would still be waiting for my mom. They got home first, and they would come home, and they call Ms. Pinky, "Mother," and they would be talking about their jobs. And they would curse, and they could curse really good. [Laughs] So, I learned a curse. I said, "Oh I'm gonna try that!"

Kerry James Reed [00:40:22] So why was it so important to you to be able to go to Parker Gray?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:40:27] It's just the history. And everybody went to Parker Gray, and I wanted to get that experience. And, yeah, it was my turn to go. That's when they shut it down.

Kerry James Reed [00:40:39] Yeah. So, then you must have had different thoughts about integration when you were in middle school as opposed to in elementary school.

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:40:48] Yeah. The only time I talked about integration was when my mom said something about when in the PTA, they wanted her to be in charge of the hospitality committee, the food. And she was like, "Not all Black people just cook food." You know. And so, she became like the secretary or the treasurer. But yeah, I guess, by the time I got to the 9th grade, I was going up to T.C. because I was good in track. And I was on a crew team. And so, I was doing sports, so I can kind of get both worlds. And when we would go to Penn Relays, I would get out of GW, and they would pick me up and we would go to Pennsylvania and everything. But I guess, I really didn't really get to see racism "racism," really until T.C. Williams. I guess it was there because I was just being a kid. My teachers were Black and white. I don't know if you know this, a man named Mr. Cordell. He just passed. He was a teacher. And he was like, is that the same Mr. Cordell that was my teacher, and it was at GW. And Mr. Cordell used to joke in class, and I just remember this joke I was telling Steve. His class used to be so much fun, and that's the semester I said I ain't doing any work. And, someone said, Mr. Cordell, "Why are you sitting like a frog?" And he says, "Because yo mama looks like a frog." He would do Yo Mama jokes. And so, one day my son was at GW, and I was going to parent teacher conference, and I ran into him, and I said, "Mr. Cordell, you still do those jokes and act like you used to do?" He said, "Oh God, no I would get fired. We can't do that stuff." And it's just so much different now. You can't say anything. But I just remember cutting up in his class, and I was in full form, and my mother came in, and I guess he knew. I didn't know. Yeah, because I didn't feel like doing work.

Kerry James Reed [00:43:38] Like I said, I get the burnout. Rendered incredibly potent. So, you mentioned the T.C. Williams was the first time you experienced, racism? Is there an event or, series of events that makes you say that was the first time?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:43:56] So, me and Steve [Nelson] were talking about this because we were looking through the yearbook, and he was like, "How come the senior trip was, like, going to France?" And I was like, "I know! But we didn't get the memo." And it was for white people. I mean, you only saw white people. We never had that opportunity. And but you don't know what why you're in it. You just know there's a trip. But you don't know till when it's time for them to go or they came back. And so, I don't know how they were selected. And everybody said, "The only thing that we got was King's Dominion." So, yeah. So those underlining things. What else? I was in Advanced placement courses, and I had a really good English teacher, Dr. Powers, but I mean, it was just 2 of us in the class. I forgot his name. He wound up going, I think, to Annapolis, to the Naval Academy, and I went to Howard. But yeah, that's where you saw it.

Kerry James Reed [00:45:22] Yeah. What was it like being one of the only two Black people in Advanced Placement courses?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:45:28] It was uncomfortable. I don't know how he felt, but I was like, "Am I worthy?" You know what I'm saying? It was always that. And I wish I had more confidence back then. But I did when I think back.

Kerry James Reed [00:45:54] Were you running track all throughout high school? What did you run?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:45:59] I was a sprinter.

Kerry James Reed [00:46:00] Sprinter?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:46:01] Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [00:46:01] Fabulous. And you were doing marching band at the same time?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:46:05] Did marching band.

Kerry James Reed [00:46:06] Interesting. Very busy with AP classes.

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:46:08] Oh my goodness.

Kerry James Reed [00:46:10] So what was marching band like at T.C?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:46:13] Marching band was fun. Our conductor with Mr. Dillinger and very nice. And his wife, my mom would be a chaperone sometimes on the trips because we would go on good trips, like competitions, and we would go to Florida, and my mom would sometimes - I didn't want her to be a chaperone on those trips. And, I was like, "And don't be on my bus." You know [Laughs].

Kerry James Reed [00:46:46] I understand.

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:46:52] Yeah. He was really nice. And, his wife took a liking to my mom, and so they would always hang out on the trips. But I just told my mom the day trips are fine. No overnight trips. And then one time we were in history or social studies or somewhere, and we were going to the Supreme Court, and my mom was a chaperone, and I was like, "Do not get on my bus." And then my friends were like, "Your mom tried to give us a history lesson," and I was like, "Better you than me." Like, don't embarrass me. Don't say nothing!

Kerry James Reed [00:47:32] That's really funny. So, your mother tried to give a history lesson to everybody?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:47:39] I guess, like, if we would pass something, I guess she would go and say, "This is such and such." I'm like, better you than me.

Kerry James Reed [00:47:48] Would she try to teach you and your friends about Black history?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:47:53] Any history.

Kerry James Reed [00:47:54] Any history?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:47:54] Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [00:47:55] Okay. Did you learn much Black history at T.C Williams?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:48:02] So, not really. I really thought we were like Martin Luther King. Harriet Tubman. But that was it.

Kerry James Reed [00:48:13] Yeah.

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:48:16] And then we had Black History Month. But we had a teacher named Mr. Weber. So, when Steve went to T.C., he was a full-time teacher, but he had retired by the time I got there. And he was a substitute. So, if Mr. Weber was your substitute, you didn't even have to be in his class. Everybody said, "Where's Mr. Weber?" So, everybody would go to that class because he would give you the Black history. And that's where I first learned he was substituting my history class. And that's when I first learned that T.C. Williams was a racist. We were just like we needed that. And he gave it to us. So, yeah, normally when you have a substitute, you skip class, but not Mr. Weber.

Kerry James Reed [00:49:22] What was it like to learn those things for the first time?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:49:27] It was shocking. He said that T.C. Williams said over his dead body when you integrate the school. And he said they took him to die, so he was right, over his dead body. So, when my son was in school, I remember him saying, "We signed a petition to not to change T.C. Williams name." And I said, "Well, do you know who he is?" And he said, "No, but I like the name T.C. Williams." I said, "But do you know what it means?" And then when I told him, I was like, "You have to ask the questions to make informed decision. If you still want to keep it, that's fine, but you just need to know."

Kerry James Reed [00:50:05] Yeah, absolutely. So, you mentioned to me that you went to Howard after graduating T.C Williams. Was that your first choice for schools?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:50:20] So it was Howard. It was Georgetown, and it was George Washington.

Kerry James Reed [00:50:24] Okay.

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:50:26] In the area. And so, my mother and I, we visited each campus. But I just think that I was so intrigued how it had all these Black people that looked like me. I was just thirsting for that.

Kerry James Reed [00:50:46] Yeah.

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:50:47] And for school we went on trips to like Virginia State, Hampton University and I might have been Norfolk State in that area for the day. But I think I didn't really want to be far from home. And so I went to Howard, but I didn't even understand the richness that Howard had. So, it wasn't like I really knew about, you know, I just knew that it was close. Yeah. I didn't understand the magnitude of how a university played in society and everything.

Kerry James Reed [00:51:27] When did you become aware of the importance of Howard, HBCUs?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:51:31] When I went there. When I started going there and looking at the opportunities and, you know, I remember, there was a poet named Gwendolyn Brooks. She passed, but my psychology teacher was like, if you want extra credit, if you listen to her at the Moorland Spingarn Library. And I was like, okay, I'mma go. But these were Black feminist. I didn't know at the time. I probably didn't even know what feminist really meant. But as I think back, that's really when I came into being at Howard University because I remember we took over the administrative building, and my mom goes, "We're broke." I mean, my tuition was paid, "But you got the nerve to be up in the A building barricaded," you know what I'm saying? And then I had asked her, "Can you bring us some food? Me and my friend?" So, she did, and I went out and got it. But I just remember, like, Jesse Jackson came in to negotiate. Sonia Sanchez, all these notable people came in to speak. We had sleeping bags. We were tired. Yeah. So, I think we stayed there 2 or 3 days.

Kerry James Reed [00:53:13] Why did you barricade the A building? [00:53:16] [0.0s]

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:53:16] Remember Lee Atwater?

Kerry James Reed [00:53:20] Yeah, I'm familiar with it. I don't think I remember it.

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:53:22] Okay, well, they put him on the board. He was this white Republican. They put him on the board. They were making all of these changes. And I think that's what really - because he was so conservative. And I remember as leaving class, I was in the school of Business, and the teachers were like, we know we can't do it, but we are with you, and we support you. So, we took over the A building and they weren't processing financial aid. They were just slow, all kinds of stuff. And so, I think President Cheek said he would step down and Lee Atwater was no longer on the board. I just remember, Jesse Jackson being a part of those negotiations and coming in, and I think it was USA Today or Time [Magazine], it was 1989, they rated that protest as one of the best protests, like it was organized and as a result, Howard is a private school, but we get funding from the federal government because of the charter. And so, they had contractors come in. And it was it was so embarrassing because I went to the library. Financial aid moved to the library. They said, have a seat. And I sat down and like, in two minutes they called my name. I'm like, what's going on? And he was like, "Oh, we're here. This financial aid to help you." And I could be standing in the A building for hours, and it only took less than 10 minutes for me to go there to do what I needed to do. So, it was just like their processes. And that's one of the things we were protesting like. And then they would have an attitude with you at the window. And we just wanted to go to class. We just trying to find money, you know. All kinds of stuff.

Kerry James Reed [00:55:33] Yeah.

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:55:35] And it took that for them to. And then the thing is it's a Black school. But white contractors came, you know, so we were like, oh my goodness. But I guess that part got better before I left because that was my senior year. But the protest was a big memory, but just my friends and the people I met and just, the richness and understanding I really got a lot of

out of Howard University and people say you either love it or you hate it. I'm glad I loved it. I know some people who went there and hated it. So, I don't know anybody in between.

Kerry James Reed [00:56:24] Yeah, yeah. Very polarizing place, right? Were you very socially active in college like with activism or anything like that? This barricading the building the first big protest that you'd been involved in?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:56:39] It was. I don't know what I was doing. And my mother's like, "My God, we're barely paying your tuition, and you to -" [laughs].

Kerry James Reed [00:56:48] You know so well. So why did you feel it was so important to be on the right side of history?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:56:56] Because I just remember, like, my mother coming up there and, trying to pay my tuition, but I needed to go to class, and the lines were so long. So, she would actually stand in line for me so that I could go to class. You know, it would be that. And it would be an all day process. So, she can handle my stuff, and at least I wouldn't miss class.

Kerry James Reed [00:57:21] Yeah.

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:57:24] Because studying doesn't come easy for me. I have to study. Like some people just get it, and that's not me. I got to study.

Kerry James Reed [00:57:35] So you said you were studying business. What made you gravitate towards business?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:57:40] First of all, I like to travel. So, it was international business. And I just felt like I was into banking and so I thought that was a good fit. I didn't get into anything international when I went, you know, as far as my career. But I'm doing it now years later. So. Yeah, but I liked it. I like accounting. That was always hard for me when I found myself anything below a C, I would drop the class because it was really hard. So, I had finally got a good teacher that came where I can understand it. It was like my last semester at Howard University. I'm still trying to take accounting too, but yeah, but I liked it. I liked my professors. Some I didn't, as with any school. But I got through it.

Kerry James Reed [00:58:44] Were you living in Alexandria when you were going to Howard?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:58:46] Mmhmm.

Kerry James Reed [00:58:46] Okay

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:58:47] I commuted.

Kerry James Reed [00:58:52] Okay. What did Howard look like while you went there?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:58:55] Pretty much the same. It didn't have some of the dorms. They had a dorm on Malcolm X Park that my friends lived in, and I would go up there. I think they sold it, or they leased it now. But it looks the same. It looks exactly the same.

Kerry James Reed [00:59:26] So in your mind what are the importance of HBCUs?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [00:59:33] For me, my HBCU, they give you the foundation because they prepare you for the real world and prepare you for the racism that you may encounter. We actually had this class in the School of Business called Corporate Culture, and they gave you different scenarios and how to handle those scenarios in the workplace. And I thought that was rather interesting. After I left, they had internships. So, I wish I had the opportunity to do that. They laid the foundation and there's so many gifted people. It's so many people that want to progress in society. But you don't see that every day if you're not there. It's like an anomaly, but it really isn't.

Kerry James Reed [01:00:31] So what did you do immediately after college?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:00:39] I went into the banking industry, and I liked that. But they laid off people because during that time I worked at Essence Savings and Loans, and they were like going under. Mine was taken over by I think it's Truist now, but it was SunTrust. And so, they kept being taken over. And then finally I went to the federal government in 1993. So, from 90 to 93, 90 to 92, I was in banking for 2 years and I've been literally taken over twice. So, I went to the federal government, and someone said, "Oh, they pay for you to go to grad school."

Kerry James Reed [01:01:27] Naturally.

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:01:28] I'm like, okay, let me try this. I'm only going to be here for 3 years. Now 31 years.

Kerry James Reed [01:01:35] Where did you start working for the fed? In what office?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:01:40] I worked in the patent examining unit. I was in the clerical division. And that's when I really started to see racism, too, because even though I had a degree, all the Black people were placed in the clerical positions. And other people were placed in, like, human resources, you know, and so, I had to kind of like, fight to get out of there. And because I had good managers, Black and white, and the director, Mr. Goldberg, saw the potential, they got me out of there. But it's just funny how they put -

Kerry James Reed [01:02:33] Yeah. Was it the first time you experienced racism in the workplace?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:02:40] No. When I was working in college at this bank on Washington Street, it's Bank of America now, Sovereign back then. I was working at the one in Falls Church, and it was all white. I love that bank, but coming from school to Falls Church, was kind of getting on my nerves. And so that commute. So, I transferred here because I could walk if I wanted to. And it was mixed. One day I was coming in. I did the drive through after school. I had a small little Gucci bag and a Coach bag that I had all my books in. That was the style back then. And I put my stuff down, getting ready to open my drawer, and this white girl from Iowa said really loud in the bank, "What are you doing with a Gucci and a Coach bag? You can't afford this. Your boyfriend

must be a drug dealer." The whole bank got quiet. I just left that money there, whatever \$50,000 in the [drawer]. I left that money then and walked out that branch. And so, I told my mom, I was crying, and she came up to the branch. She talked to the manager. I didn't want to go back, and I didn't go back. I went back to my branch in Falls Church because I quit. But the lady had to apologize, and she said, "It's just that where I'm from, we only see Black people on welfare." So that was my first real "real" experience in the workplace of racism. And when I would go and work the drive-in, in Falls Church, there was this man, he was from Afghanistan. He had Afghan bakery. He would come, and he would put the bread through the drive through. You know, it was just a nice atmosphere. And I went, came here for convenience. And I'm like, no. So, it just doesn't matter. You can't say it's all white. It's all Black. You know. Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [01:05:12] I'm sorry you had to experience that. That's really very fortunate. So, you mentioned that working for the federal government, they would pay for your master's degree. What made you decide to pursue a master's?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:05:27] I just thought that it was time. So, I graduated in '90. I thought maybe because I was working in the scientific field that I was going to do, because, my minor was information system, I said, well, maybe I get me a master's in that and be a patent examiner. But I tried that at George Mason, and I was like, ehh, I don't like that. So, after a year I just played around, like, where I wanted to go, and then I was in Human Resources. Before I got to Human Resources. I had started this program at Trinity College. Back then it was Trinity College. It's Trinity University now Human resource development because, in '95, I'd only been there 2 years, and I was like, oh, I like Human Resources, so I'll do that. And I got my masters in that. And then from there I went to The Office of Civil Rights which is conflict resolution. But it wasn't until 19 years later that I decided I want to do a PhD. So, I was at a conference in San Francisco, and then the school that I'm graduating from they had a table in the exhibition hall, and I said, "Well, I'm thinking about it, conflict resolution, but I'm not sure." And he said, "You should try. The certificate program is cheaper first, and then you can matriculate, if you like it." And so basically that's what I did. I liked it, and the rest is history.

Kerry James Reed [01:07:23] Absolutely. So once more, where did you pursue your PhD?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:07:31] Nova Southeastern University.

Kerry James Reed [01:07:34] Okay. And then what is your dissertation on?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:07:37] My dissertation is called "Why is my hair micromanaged in the workplace? Black women and natural hairstyles in the federal government."

Kerry James Reed [01:07:47] That sounds fascinating. What made you gravitate towards that topic?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:07:53] Well, first of all, I wear my hair natural. And then second of all, I happened to be at a funeral, back then it was T.C. Williams. And about in 2019. Yeah, because it was before Covid, and I ran into a colleague from work. And it was because Coach Boone from Remember the Titans, he passed, and everybody was at the funeral. And she says, "Darnella, you live in Alexandria?" I said, "I do." She said, "I didn't know it was all these Black people in Alexandria because you didn't see them." I said, "Unfortunately, you don't see us until it's a funeral."

And then she asked me what was going on in life, and I told her, I'm starting my dissertation. I know it's about Black women in the federal government, but my chair says, "Okay, you got to condense it. What about Black women?" And then she looked at me because she wears a hair natural too. And she says, "Duh!" And I'm like, "Duh, what?" [She says], "Natural hair." And I was like, "Oh." So, when I went home, I started researching and it just stuck and my chair said, "You're going to get your Ah-Ha moment." And I did, because I'm like, I'm not getting it fast enough. And then the rest is history for that. But I happened to call her last week. I was at work and, I didn't even know she still worked there, but I asked her permission because I had already put her name in as like an acknowledgment to thank her for giving me my Ah-Ha moment. And, I had put in her first name and not her last name because I didn't want to assume anything. And she just said it was just such a blessing because she had forgotten. So, I called her those years later. So, she said I could use her whole name.

Kerry James Reed [01:09:54] That's terrific. Well, congratulations.

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:09:56] Thank you.

Kerry James Reed [01:09:57] I'm incredibly jealous. So, what kind of sources did you use, for your research? Because I imagine that experiencing racism within the federal government is something that goes back a long time, but maybe this is just my ignorance speaking, but it seems like the sources would be rather recent.

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:10:22] Yeah. I did give some background history and then I gave like some statistics of where Black women are now in the federal government. And the higher the grade the less you see Black women. And they're in grades like GS-6 through 8, like those clerical positions, but those professional positions you don't see. They're decreasing. And so, I started off with those statistics like from OPM, and the disparity in pay Black women and other women in the federal government. And it's like a \$12,000 difference for the median income. I used recent sources regarding hair studies. And I also put in there that it's global too, about the phenomenon of Black hair. So yeah.

Kerry James Reed [01:11:26] What do you see the importance of your work being socially?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:11:31] The importance is about authenticity and how you have to look at Black women through different lenses and not just the Eurocentric standards of lens, because not everybody is of European descent and don't have those features and understanding. I always tell people when people say, "Biologically, I'm Black." I say, "No, you're not. That's a racial construct." And then you break it down to them. Then I say, "I can provide you the literature too," you know, and just kind of know things for yourself. And I know the women that I interviewed because I did, a narrative, despite what they're going through, they wouldn't. They are happy with their decision. But it's like one or the other like. Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [01:12:29] It's fascinating. So how do you think having a PhD will affect your experience in the workplace?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:12:37] Hmhm. I've been thinking about that for the past two weeks. I ask a lot of questions. I ask a lot of probing questions. Maybe that's because I'm a certified

coach too. I always thought, I hate it theory, but I can put that theory and make it practical. That's what I see in my critical thinking and analysis of work and not being quick to respond, I have to really think about it, you know what I mean?

Kerry James Reed [01:13:21] Yeah, absolutely.

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:13:22] Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [01:13:27] Then just to cover my own bases here, did you ever experience, discrimination within academia?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:13:34] I did not.

Kerry James Reed [01:13:35] Okay. Thank goodness for that.

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:13:38] I do not. And I don't know if because of my professors, but I did not. Yeah, my chair said it after my dissertation. And it was like 30 people online, and I was like, oh, my God, this is scary. Because the lady said, "Oh, maybe like 4 or 5, maybe 6 max." But it was a lot of people. And then my chair said, "You're one of our favorite students." So, I just took on every opportunity they had.

Kerry James Reed [01:14:21] That's terrific. Were most of your professors Black or white?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:14:29] White. My chair was white. My committee member, he was African. He's from Zimbabwe. And then my other committee members are white. So, it's 2 women and a man.

Kerry James Reed [01:14:47] Okay, well, we've been speaking for about an hour and 15 minutes thus far. It's an absolute blessing hearing you talk about your experiences with your dissertation and your life in general. So, before we move on to Douglass, is there anything else that you would like to discuss?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:15:05] No, thank you.

Kerry James Reed [01:15:10] Okay. Terrific. So, do you remember the first time you saw Douglass?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:15:17] I do, it was with Michael J[ohnson], because I didn't know it existed. And it's embarrassing because my mother lives two blocks from there on Wilkes Street. And I never look on this side.

Kerry James Reed [01:15:33] So even growing up, you had never visited Douglass?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:15:35] No.

Kerry James Reed [01:15:36] Did you visit any cemeteries growing up?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:15:39] Arlington, where my brother and my father are buried. I go there every year. Coleman cemetery. And that one. And Bethel.

Kerry James Reed [01:15:52] Hmhm. So, your brother and father are interred at Arlington? Why would you go to Coleman and Bethel?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:16:07] Bethel because Steve's family is there. Coleman is because my family is there.

Kerry James Reed [01:16:23] So growing up then it was no experiences around cemeteries?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:16:28] Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [01:16:30] Okay. Interesting.

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:16:30] I mean, it was experience around cemeteries.

Kerry James Reed [01:16:34] Just not Douglass.

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:16:36] Douglass, no.

Kerry James Reed [01:16:36] Okay. When would you go see your father and brother?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:16:47] Memorial Day.

Kerry James Reed [01:16:55] So when Michael J. first told you about Douglass Cemetery, what was your reaction to that?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:17:01] "Where is it?"

Kerry James Reed [01:17:09] Can you walk me through the first time you saw Douglass? Your initial reactions, the things you saw.

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:17:15] It was like, how did I miss this? Was it because they always talk about that it had all these weeds? Maybe that's why I missed it? We used to play in a cemetery. Halloween, that Hobo Joe thing. And never. It must have been weed. I just I just don't know.

Kerry James Reed [01:17:47] So when you first saw it, I guess three years ago with that new lens, what was your experience then?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:17:55] Dilapidated. I thought that those condos were built over some of the graves because, you know, you hear stories about that. And that they didn't care.

Kerry James Reed [01:18:11] So what does it been like to experience sort of the rejuvenation, I guess, for lack of a better term, of Douglass since you joined the advisory group?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:18:24] It's given me hope. It's been a good experience. It's been a long experience. There were times when I thought the city didn't care, but they were going through the legalities. I thought they weren't being as transparent. But I think that was when they were trying to get that ownership so they could move forward. And, just seeing the archeologists out there and working it. And then when they told us to come, I was working from home. And I thought it was okay, they want a photo app, but we just started talking, I got it. I felt like I got to interview the archeologists. I was so glad to see that there was a Black archeologist out there, and I asked if I could take a picture, if I could record her. I need to send in the pictures too, but yeah. And she was the one that found the head buried beneath the soil. And so, yeah, it was a really good experience. And I just like the fact that Eleanor and her team are keeping us abreast. I feel like I'm a part of the city, but I'm not. And I go to work, and I talk about it. Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [01:19:55] So what do you think you seeing the archeologists working on Douglass? How does that make you feel about the progress that is being made?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:20:06] It's being made. I think they were respectful when I was talking to the Black archeologists. Her name was Rachel. She said that she told her white colleagues when they came, it was flooded. And she said, I just need to apologize now to the people, you know, because we're doing work to help them, but to respect the graves.

Kerry James Reed [01:20:34] So when the Douglass initiative started, when you first joined, how aware would you say the Black community was in Alexandria about Douglass?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:20:45] They were not aware.

Kerry James Reed [01:20:45] How do you think that awareness has changed now?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:20:51] It has changed because of Michael J. And because of his insistence, his assertiveness, and getting the word out, and other people finding out, "Oh I have relatives over there." As a matter of fact, I was taking pictures when I was over there the last time and because I saw Jenkins and I know my grandmother's maiden name was Jenkins, so I want to look that up. And then I saw my friend from church. Her name is Hilda Davis. But I automatically knew that she was related to Hilda. So, I called her, and she was like, "Yeah, that's who I'm named after. They call me Dee Dee." "Dee Dee, please, keep me abreast." You know, so it's like I'm doing research for this. I haven't even done it on mine, but yeah, but it's interesting now because I can do this.

Kerry James Reed [01:21:55] Yeah, absolutely. So, you have been doing a little bit of your own research then?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:22:00] No. But I'm going to start.

Kerry James Reed [01:22:01] Okay. Fabulous

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:22:05] Because when I called her, I was still in the midst of trying to finish up, but yeah.

Kerry James Reed [01:22:09] So you saw the family name Jenkins buried at Douglass. How does it feel to know that you might have family members buried there?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:22:23] That I've neglected them. I didn't know, but my mom said that my great aunt, Oriehal, her husband, I can't think of his first name, and she can tell you, is buried over there. However, we couldn't find his grave. And then when I talked [Ben Skolnik] on Eleanor's team, he said there were some records where they don't have records, but they know people were buried over there. And when the time that my mother said he passed is the records that are missing, but she says he's buried over there.

Kerry James Reed [01:22:58] Interesting

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:22:58] Yeah. So, I gotta research that.

Kerry James Reed [01:23:04] What do you think knowing that definitively that you have have family members buried at Douglass would do for your own understanding of your family history?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:23:13] Awareness, passing something down to my children. Knowing that we are a part of Alexandria. I know we are. We just didn't pop up. And being able to talk about their history and that lineage and where we are now.

Kerry James Reed [01:23:36] How do you describe the Douglass Initiative to your children?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:23:44] That we're trying to preserve history. We're trying to recognize the contributions of these people here that are buried here and some we won't ever know, but we want to pay that respect to them as citizens of Alexandria, Virginia.

Kerry James Reed [01:24:07] So you said that you went there a month ago to take some pictures. So last time you went can you walk me through step by step? What did it look like? You know everything that you did.

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:24:30] So it was busy. Archeologists out there measuring, working, sifting. It was exciting. We never took a photo op. It was just so exciting. And it was. I'm so glad it was more than a photo op because we stayed out there for a couple of hours, and then me and Steve [Nelson], we went to lunch, and I'm supposed to be at work. We got a call from Michael J. He said, "We found something." And so, we were like, "We're on our way." So, I was like, that's it for me at work.

Kerry James Reed [01:25:12] Yeah.

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:25:12] Yeah. And then, they found the grave that dirt was over the footstone. And then the young lady, the Black archeologist, was sitting beside it asking, "Did you find it?" She said, "I did," because I saw them measuring that when we left, like where they wanted to dig to make sure they knew where things were. And so, I asked, "How did that make you feel?" She said, "Excited."

Kerry James Reed [01:25:35] Yeah, absolutely. So, did you join the advisory group immediately after Michael Johnson told you about it?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:25:45] I was always on it because of SRG [Social Responsibility Group].

Kerry James Reed [01:25:48] Okay.

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:25:49] I don't know if it was an advisory group, but yeah.

Kerry James Reed [01:25:58] So when you talk about it at work, or you talk about it to people who aren't aware of the Douglass Initiative, how do you describe it to people?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:26:09] Lost history, and that we're finding it again. They weren't lost. We were. And then I have my director, who is a Black director, he lives in Alexandria now. And I don't know how in-tune he is to, you know, some people just live here in the community. But he knows I'm very community oriented. And so, he doesn't say much, but he'll say stuff like, "Oh, what are they doing in Delray? What are they building?" And I'm like, "You know, you don't have to try to test me. You can just go down, you know." I don't know. We have this strange relationship. I don't think he likes to hear me talk about Alexandria, but I don't care. It's where I live.

Kerry James Reed [01:27:15] Absolutely. So how do you feel now that the city is taking steps to make sure that the resting places of Black Alexandrians are respected, and that Black history is better understood.

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:27:29] I love the fact that they're doing that. My concern is I hope they don't make it political. Because things change, you know, different council members come in. Because we're part of Alexandria's history and I would hope that would continue.

Kerry James Reed [01:27:51] Yeah. So, you mentioned that this was lost history to the living.

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:28:02] Right.

Kerry James Reed [01:28:02] What do you think that forgetting about the dead does to the living community?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:28:08] It erases the culture.

Kerry James Reed [01:28:12] Can you speak more about that?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:28:16] I was taking this class at Howard University my last semester. It was called Harlem Renaissance. And, her name was Dr. Ramsey, and I wanted her to start at the Harlem Renaissance, in 1910, whatever. And, she said, "Okay, so in slavery, this, that, and the other," and I said Ramsey, "But this is Harlem Renaissance. Why are we talking about slavery?" And she says, "You gotta know where you came from in order to know how you got here, and where are you're going?" And that automatically stuck with me. She didn't say it like she was mad at me, but she wanted me to understand. Like, you can't just start here. You gotta understand

the root of it. How do we get here? And I think that's very important. Yeah. How we got here. Why we stopped burying people there. I mean, it's just so complex because some people were in the 1800s. Because after they stopped that cemetery, they people started going to Coleman, where my family is. So, I guess my great-great uncle was the last person in our family to be buried over there.

Kerry James Reed [01:29:39] Oh, really?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:29:39] Yeah, the Howl, and then because his wife is buried at Coleman. And it's like, they were born like 1890 something, you know?

Kerry James Reed [01:29:54] Yeah. So, on your visits to Douglass have you ever seen anybody not affiliated with the initiative at all?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:30:09] Yes. When they see us standing outside, they want to know what's going on. The person who takes care towards the Presbyterian side, he came over to say he could offer assistance, [she asked] early on what were we doing. But now I see where the manumission tour by Councilman Chapman. He includes that in his tour.

Kerry James Reed [01:30:41] Yeah.

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:30:42] So it's economic growth too. You know.

Kerry James Reed [01:30:50] How does it make you feel that you know the work you've been a part of is now included on that tour?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:30:55] [01:30:55] [0.0s] It feels good. As a matter of fact, I'm going to ask Councilman Chapman how I can become a part of that tour.

Kerry James Reed [01:31:03] Yeah. Fabulous. That's terrific. So, I went to Douglass yesterday because I was out by the archive and I hadn't taken the chance to go out there, in solitude, I guess I sort of like, think about think about everything I saw. And it just, you know, it was a very, visceral experience for me. And I was wondering, when you go out there, can you describe the emotions that you feel just walking around Douglass?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:31:46] I'm going to pay respects. Because if I have family over there - I'm pretty sure I do. That we haven't forgotten. And I do like walking in cemeteries. I tell people I'm not scared of cemeteries. I remember we were in New Orleans. I was there for work, and me and my coworker, I said, "Come on, let's walk through the cemetery." We wanted to take a bus tour. I said, "Come on Steve," he was with me. He said, "No, I'm scared." I'm like, "They're not going to bother you. You can learn a lot from the dead," right? But he won't do it. I love taking that shortcut through the cemetery and looking at the graves. It doesn't bother me, you know? So, I just find a sense of peace when I'm over there, and it does let you reflect.

Kerry James Reed [01:32:51] Yeah.

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:32:52] Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [01:32:53] Absolutely. So, we've been talking now for a little over an hour and a half. It's been an absolute blessing hearing you speak today. Before we move on to our closing remarks, is there anything else you would like to add about anything at all.

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:33:11] Oh, as far as cemeteries, Michael J. knows that I have people buried over at Coleman, and so he knows that my interest has piqued because of Douglass. So, he did recommend me to be on the board for a restoration project for Coleman Cemetery. Which now that I have more time, I am enjoying. And the person in charge is Mr. Richard Williams. He's in his 90s. Maybe he's almost 90, but he has so much history. So, if I were you, I would contact Mr. Williams.

Kerry James Reed [01:33:58] I'm actually interviewing him.

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:34:02] Perfect.

Kerry James Reed [01:34:05] So if you had to compare the state of Coleman to the state of Douglass, how would you do so?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:34:14] Coleman is bad, but it's not as bad. We have people from my understanding just being on this committee. We have money to keep the grounds to cut the grass. I noticed that we have vandals. And this is before I even - I always knew Mr. Williams but knew that he was [the one] cutting the grass. We have money to start some work. And, like I said, we have vandals, and I would always go, like, if people in my family, if their graves were knocked over, I would contact Mr. Click at Bethel and he would go over there and fix it. You may want to talk to Mr. Click too and, if like my godparents, they had a house on 332 North Payne Street that they left to the church, which is really sustaining the church. But like leadership doesn't even really know the impact that my godparents have had on the community. And my godfather was a trustee and everything. And so, I learned the business of how to keep up a church, things that go into it because my godfather would take me, and we would fix things and all that kind of stuff in the church. But just paying homage to them. I know when my grandfather died, they gave my mother, several plots, so she was able to bury her family members there. So, what we do is because they were born in, like, not my godparents, but they were born in, like, the 1800s, their tombs were sinking. So, Mr. Click, he periodically would go over there for us and fix them, you know. Just to keep it up. But you can't do it for everyone. And that gets expensive. So just making sure everything is neat and just like building a new canopy, just doing it gradually. So, I think it's going to be exciting. And like I said, Mr. Williams is a wealth. You're going to have a good time talking to him. [01:36:43] [0.0s]

Kerry James Reed [01:36:47] What are the names of your godparents?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:36:50] Helen Porter and James Andrew Porter.

Kerry James Reed [01:36:57] And you said that your godfather taught you the administrative side of the church?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:37:04] The administrative side. My godmother was like the treasurer. And, this is Zion Baptist Church, and I remember he would go down to the church and

fix things. And he just could build things. And I just remember I wanted a Barbie doll townhouse for Christmas. Cause he was like an engineer or something. And I got it, and it was wobbly, and he said, it was too wobbly. He was going to do reinforcements and put 2x4s. And I'm like, I just wanted to look like the box. I didn't want any engineer on it. [Laughs] I knew how to fix televisions back in the day if I knew what a picture tube, you know, just being with him. So, yeah.

Kerry James Reed [01:37:59] That's terrific. Very quickly, the Coleman restoration project, is that a city initiative or is that private?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:38:06] Private, because they're in Fairfax. So now we have to talk to the superintendent over there. So, we have our contacts to get started.

Kerry James Reed [01:38:21] Okay. Fabulous. So, I just have a couple of last questions. It's been an absolute pleasure speaking with you today. What are your hopes for the Douglass Initiative moving forward?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:38:39] That we will get it up to a grandeur. I'm a visionary, I don't think, and I don't pray. "Let's just get it looking like this," no, let's get it to the splendor. That would make us proud, our ancestors proud. And especially, the Blacks in the city proud.

Kerry James Reed [01:39:06] Absolutely. What are your hopes for the Coleman project?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:39:10] The same. And that when you take a tour of these, and understand the rich history, and understand the process. The process that we're going through now is empowerment alone.

Kerry James Reed [01:39:24] Absolutely. How would you like to see the city treat Black history moving forward?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:39:33] I want them to treat Black history as the city's history.

Kerry James Reed [01:39:39] Absolutely.

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:39:41] It shouldn't be separated anyway. It should be included.

Kerry James Reed [01:39:48] What do you think the inclusion of Black history into the city's narrative itself would do?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:39:55] The economic, just the number of businesses, the Black businesses in the city. I didn't realize there was so many Black businesses, and I think my mother has gotten a lot of calls. They come through me. If they can use that booklet regarding the Black businesses, and I say no, because Alexandria Library is doing what it's supposed to do, they are referencing because they are not going to give them that information. So, my mother doesn't want them to use it you know.

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

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:40:41] Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [01:40:42] And then lastly if you could hold onto one memory forever what would it be?

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:40:52] It's so many. I guess my childhood growing up in this city. I'm all about double dutch. I love that, just, yeah.

Kerry James Reed [01:41:05] Double Dutch in the city.

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:41:06] Yeah, on our street. Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [01:41:08] Yeah, absolutely.

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:41:10] Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [01:41:11] Well, thank you so much Dr. Nelson. It has been absolute pleasure speaking with you today.

Darnella McGuire-Nelson [01:41:15] Thank you. Thank you for having me.

Kerry James Reed [01:41:17] Of course.