

Interviewee: Martha Sass

Place of interview: Mt. Carmel United Methodist Church

Date of interview: July 17, 2017

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Length of interview: 1:08:07

BEGIN INTERVIEW

Katherine Pemberton: So, we are here at Mt. Carmel Church in Charleston, South Carolina, with MS, who has agreed to be interviewed for Historic Charleston Foundation, and I guess we'll just start with some really easy questions for the record, and once we get a transcript, if you could just say and spell your whole name.

Martha Sass: Martha Sass. M-A-R-T-H-A S-A-S-S.

KP: Great. And Martha, where and when, if you don't mind, were you born?

MS: I was actually born in Cross, South Carolina May 13th 1959.

KP: We are almost exactly 10 years apart, because my birthday's in April, 1969, so go Taurus. So, when did you first live in the East Side neighborhood?

MS: I moved to the East Side neighborhood when I was five years old - so, I forgot the year. Anyway, my older brother burned the house down that we lived in Cross where I kind of grew up. So, he burned the house down, we moved down here, my mom was a single mother - well, back and forth, but she was single with five kids. Four of us moved here - my oldest sister stayed in Cross to help my grandmother out.

KP: So, how did the house burn down?

MS: It was in the wintertime, and he was starting a fire, and he wanted to start it real quickly. He poured kerosene in the fireplace, and the rest was history. We came home, got out of school, and like, "we have no more house" - so we moved here.

KP: That must've been terrible. Did you have family already here when you moved, or were you kind of, just your household's kind of coming alone, or -

MS: My household came alone, because most of the family had migrated to Virginia or New York. So, it was just us.

KP: So, was your family originally, or come from a long line of South Carolinians, or -

MS: My family did come from a long line of South Carolinians. We lived here all our lives. Tradition back in the days when the older folks worked the fields, and then when they got older,

they finished school, they migrated north. Like I said, some of them went to Virginia, a lot of the younger ones went to New York, and they're still living there.

KP: Do you still have family connections in those places?

MS: Yes. We have our family reunion every two years, and we go back and forth between Virginia and South Carolina, so they're still there. New York, of course, we don't have a lot of history there, except my children. I have two children there, and my husband, all of his relatives moved to New York, and they're still there.

KP: So, you got here when you're five, and you had - tell me about your siblings. You have a few who are here with you?

MS: Start, got here when I was five, I have two sisters, two brothers. So, the two brothers and the sister came with me. Like I said, the elder sister stayed with my grandmother. We came out - we first moved like two blocks over on Line Street - that was our first. It was a two-bedroom house. Again, my mother, single parent, so that's all she could afford. And then later on, we went to the projects, which was three blocks in the opposite direction - and on Johnson Street is where I grew up.

KP: Okay. So, what did your mom do for work?

MS: My mom was, first she worked like nursing - nurse's aide, helping people. She cleaned house, and then she worked as a mechanic type - maintenance production worker.

KP: So, - let's see.

Charlie Phillips: Where did she work as a production -

KP: Oh yeah - where did your mom work when she was working in production?

MS: Oh - I forgot the name of the company. It was - I don't remember. I don't remember.

KP: That's okay. When she was nursing, was she working -

MS: She did like private duty nursing, yeah.

KP: There were a number of hospitals around, but I'm sure there was a lot of -

MS: It was in-home care nursing.

KP: Exactly. So, tell me about that first house on Line Street.

MS: The first house on Line Street, it was just a small house - we were just there. I guess that was the first place she found that she could afford, and we were all squeezed in there. We didn't stay that long, but it was two blocks from the church, and a lot of people here came from Cross

as well. So, she did know some people - that's how we became here. I was a member of this church starting at five years old, and I'm still a member.

KP: Ahh -

MS: So, I've been to this church over 50 years.

KP: So, probably - so you've got some family connections with other folks who were here in Cross?

MS: Yes.

KP: That's great.

MS: Well, they claim they're all related anyway - so, like we're all family. We're all from the same place, we grew up in the same neighborhood, so we're basically related.

KP: So, do you know much about the history of the church?

MS: This church was built - we just celebrated, well, this year we're celebrating our 89th anniversary, so the church has been here that long. Of course, this is the second church. The first church was rebuilt - this one's been here about 30, maybe 30 years, because the first church was older, and it had like an upstairs that went on the sides. So, this is an improvement.

KP: Right.

MS: But I don't - yeah, 89, so, I'm real bad in math, so we go back 89 years. That's when the church first came on the site.

KP: And what denomination -

MS: This is United Methodist.

KP: It looked a little familiar. That's what I was thinking. There's so many different denominations, and different groups that are in the area - it's so nice to kind of see how that plays out with churches, for sure. So, we are - we threw around the neighborhood name, East Side. How would you define the neighborhood, maybe boundaries of the East Side.

MS: Boundaries of the East Side - well, it's before you had where East Side, there was always a struggle between East Side and West Side. So, East Side, it was based from the Battery - well, not the Battery. It would start over, I would say the projects, like Reed Street in that area, and would go down to Stewart Street, that whole area there. And that's like the area that I grew up - so we had that boundary. And then it goes to the Harborwood directions, but going to the northeast, southeast - this way towards the West Side, which we call - so we have the East Side and the West Side. So, from Ashley Avenue forward, that's the West Side. So, those'll be the

boundaries. So, Ashley Avenue on to where the Ashley River Bridge, Burke High School, that area.

KP: So, growing up, did you ever hear the term “Hampstead” for this neighborhood?

MS: I have not heard of that before.

KP: It’s interesting, because I think, there’s a little bit of a move to refer to the neighborhood by its historic name from the late 1800s, which was called Hampstead. But most people -

MS: I’ve never heard of Hampstead. We’ve always referred to it as the East Side, and everybody - I grew up on the East Side, that’s what I tell everybody. I’m from downtown Charleston on the East Side, and everybody that grew up in the area, especially the East Side, the West Side, they wouldn’t know what you were talking about.

KP: That what?

CP: The crossover.

KP: Oh yeah - did you, I mean, was it sort of set up in front of East Side, West Side? Was there a rivalry?

MS: There was kind of a huge rivalry between the East Side and West Side. And it went on for years for a generation. I don’t know where it [had] begun, but it was like, the East Side people don’t go to the West Side, the West Side people don’t come to the East Side. The only time we would do that was when we had football games, and during football games, you can be assured that after each game, there’s going to be a fight. It was horrible, so you know that. But, I also went over to the West Side, because when I was in high school, I took cosmetology, and then they bused us to the West Side because they had the cosmetology, they had engineering courses, they had mechanical - they had different courses where it was only available on the West Side. So, we did interact with some of the folks, some of the people on the West Side.

KP: Talk a little bit about - this kind of leads in a little bit to school. Where did you go to elementary school?

MS: Elementary school, I went to Sanders-Clyde Elementary, which they’ve improved that a lot too. So, I was there from first to seventh grade, and then eighth grade to twelfth, well, I actually skipped twelfth. Eighth through eleventh, I went to C.A. Brown, but Sanders-Clyde’s where I grew up.

KP: And Sanders-Clyde is where it’s still located.

MS: It was where it’s still located - it’s just now gotten a real nice facelift, and it looks a lot better than it did when I went there.

KP: Well, how was the school when you went there?

MS: The school was really nice - it wasn't, you know, everything was within walking distance. We didn't have school buses, so anything - the teachers were really nice, so those of us that wanted to get an education, we got it. Those that didn't - they just, well okay - if you're not going to be here to learn, then we're not going to, we're going to pretend you're not here. But those students that was interested in learning, the teachers really focused on them, paid attention and made sure that they got what they needed to get to become successful students.

KP: How would you - let's say, this is kind of reaching back into the memory, but let's say you woke up as an elementary school student, you got up and you walked to school. How would you get there? What was your route? What would you see along the way?

MS: My route is right through the projects. The school is right across from the projects. We would see other students, because we all got together - we walked, and it's just a, almost a dirt path. You'd cut through the project and you're right there at the school, so it's about a two-block walk. You just saw more students, projects, a little bit of trees - I saw concrete, trees, and people - and project. Not a whole lot more.

KP: Do you think that most kids kind of walk to Sanders-Clyde now, or do you think it's changed much as far as how people get to school downtown now? Or is it about the same?

MS: It's about the same, because it's not - most people that go to that school, it's about a two, three-block walk. And the parents there to the point where they wouldn't let the kids walk. They normally have all the classmates that they walk to school with - the kids enjoy the walk. I would think they would only have to be dropped off if it's raining. You know, if the weather is bad. Other than that, it's a good walk - it's good exercise. And I think the kids enjoy it also.

KP: Right.

MS: I know I did when I was a kid. Just getting to hang out with my friends, just walking, just having a ball, just having fun before school.

KP: Still a little bit more independent too, to assert yourself?

MS: Yes, yes.

KP: We had an interview not too long ago with some folks, and they were sort of talking about how that book, our phrase, you know, it takes a village - you know, a lot of times, elders who know those children were along the route, so you felt a little safer in the neighborhood, and maybe as a child, you felt a little more accountable. People who might know your mom were looking out.

MS: And that's true - we actually all knew each other. My best friend from high school, she actually still goes to this church here today. I didn't have a father growing up - he left us when we were young, but she had a father, and I would always go to her house, and he was like my dad also, and you know, her mom was real nice, and I always went there, hung out there. You

knew the neighbors - your friends, you knew their parents, and you got to know everybody, and you do know people. Everybody knows the kids, so you're safe. You don't have to worry about strangers coming in the neighborhood, because everyone knows everyone. We all got along.

KP: That's good. So, can you think of any other kind of landmarks in the neighborhood? Like, where were your - what was your sort of range for walking with your friends? Obviously to school, but did you have any stores, or at the church - beyond church and school, were there other places that you walked to?

MS: We walked everywhere. So, once in a while, it was a luxury just to ride the buss. So, for the most part, we would walk to - after school we would go to the park. The park was a block away from the school -

KP: So, which park is this?

MS: It is Martin Park. It's Martin Park, and actually, my first job was at the swimming pool there at Martin Park. I worked as the pool attendant - so, it was good and bad, because you got to know the neighborhood kids, and then, of course, every neighborhood, they have gangs. They were really more not gang - more drug dealers than gang. But they're their own gang. So, I can remember one time working at the swimming pool, and this guy comes in - and admission to the pool was just like 50 cents. Of course, he didn't want to pay the 50 cents, and then I'm like, you need to pay your 50 cents, or you need to leave. And he basically, at this point, threatened me, and told me that, you know, I could kill you right here, and I would only serve seven years. So, things like that you had to deal with. You went to school - especially when I was in high school, we still walked to school. It was a further walk, but you would walk there. The drug dealers would be on the corner, and then when I started working, they were like, yeah, we're making more money than you are just hanging on the corner. But they didn't, for the most part, they didn't try to bully you or take advantage of you or anything. They were your friends, and I'm like, you just say hello to them and keep going. You acknowledge them, and you go on - you leave them alone, they'll leave you alone.

KP: So, this is probably during high school when you had that further walk. Now, where did you go to high school?

MS: At C.A. Brown High School.

KP: Okay.

MS: So, the walk was a little further.

KP: Now where was C.A. Brown located?

MS: C.A. Brown was located on Columbus Street. Drake Columbus, it's now the old - it's like a substation for the police officer, and then Trident Tech had it at one point.

KP: Gotcha. And so, when did that go away as a school?

MS: That went away around, in the '80s, early '80s - like around '80, '81. And then what they did is, they combined - they had about five different high schools, so you had C.A. Brown, you had Burke, you had ICS, Charleston High, and then now they combined it all into one school - it's funny because I've said before, they didn't allow us to, kind of like mingle, but now they just coordinated, combined everything. But C.A. Brown still exists as far as for the alumni. And I just found out that every year, C.A. Brown alumni, they get together once a year - it's always the weekend before the Fourth of July weekend, and they get to know each other. They have this alumni function going on - they do fundraisers just to raise money, and then once a year, when they all meet, just to see how people are doing. It's all free - they have food, they have drinks, and they even have T-shirts.

KP: Gotcha. So, you mentioned before, you skipped 12th grade.

MS: Yeah.

KP: Did you go straight to college, or straight into the working world?

MS: What I did is, I had enough credits to not go to the 12th grade. So, after 11th grade, I did the summer to get my last English class out of the way. Once I graduated, I went to New York because I wanted a break before I went to school. I finished in July, so from July to December, I spent that summer in New York. And then I came home and went to school during the fall.

KP: Were you in New York City?

MS: I was in the Bronx. I had an aunt and an uncle that lived there.

KP: And so you stayed with them?

MS: I stayed with them, and I actually made money, because - I can remember, this was in - I graduated in '76 from high school, so when I graduated from high school, I went to my aunt, I babysit - she had two boys, so I remember room and board, and I got \$20 a week, and I saved up that money so I could have some money when I went to school.

KP: How was it coming - did you come back to Charleston?

MS: I came back to Charleston - yes, I did.

KP: How was that? Was that a little bit of a shock?

MS: It wasn't - it wasn't. Because New York is kind of - almost like, well, it's not really like Charleston. It's real fast-paced and everything, but they lived in an apartment which they call a condo now, and you didn't really venture out too much, because all the kids got together. All the kids would go to the park and play, but they didn't go too many places.

KP: Right. Yay - all right, and we're back. So, just really quickly, when we were in the break, we were talking about going back to sort of very early days, so for you, if you maybe remember, to Cross - and were you or your siblings born in a hospital, or born at home?

MS: I was born at home. I'm thinking my oldest sister was also. And then we went between home, the elder sister was born at home, my other one sister was born at home, my older brother that passed away last year was born in Virginia because my mom went there for like a year or two. I was born at home, and the midwife that delivered me, her name is Martha Butler - she's actually my grand-aunt, and I was named after her.

KP: Oh, that's so interesting. So, were the hospitals or medical places around when you were really little in Cross, or was it really out of a home?

MS: It was out of a home. The nearest medical was here in downtown Charleston, so there was nothing available.

KP: So, do you think you mom kind of got her medical knowledge from her aunt, from Martha?

MS: I'm pretty sure she did. She did from her, and then my oldest aunt was also a nurse. She passed away, but she had 13 children. And she was the oldest of the siblings, because my mom had - well, she had eight brothers - well, there's eight of them. Four boys, four girls. And the oldest who went to Virginia, my mom went and lived there for a while, so the oldest aunt was a nurse.

KP: The home in Cross, was it just your mom and your brothers and sisters there, or was it sort of multigenerational?

MS: It was my grandparents' home. So, my grandparents lived there, and then my grandparents had like, the oldest - actually, she had four daughters too. My mom, plus her two sisters. All of them had only one kid - well, the two other sisters only had one, and they were both girls. So, my grandmother kept all the girls, and she kept them for her to do the housework and keep the home up and everything. So, it was my two cousins, plus my older sister that stayed there, my grandparents, and then us - the five of us were there. They had a farm, so there was a cotton field that, everybody worked the cotton fields, and they had like a big garden that they grew watermelon, cantaloupe, peas - I can't remember all of it, because I tried to stay out of the garden. And then they had horses, cows, chicken, pigs, because I remember every - yeah, at Christmas time they would kill the pig, and we would have a festivity.

KP: Did you go back to Cross fairly regularly from downtown?

MS: Yes. We had what was called the work bus for everybody from Cross, they had the work bus. They got on the work bus because most of them lived, I mean, worked in Charleston. So, they would do the work bus every day going back and forth, and on the weekends my mom would send us back to stay with my grandparents.

KP: Where did you pick up the bus, the work bus?

MS: It was in the north area that we picked up there, yes.

KP: So, you had to kind of drive -

MS: No. We actually did a bus, the city bus. We didn't have cars. I was actually the first person in my family to have a car.

KP: You were kind of getting around by walking and bus -

MS: Walking and bus is the only way that we had to get around. For the most part, you were in good shape, because you walked almost everywhere you went. You would have buses once in a while to get to far places, but if it was close enough for you to walk, you would walk there.

KP: Where would you do your grocery shopping? Let's say, when you were kind of in your growing-up years.

MS: You had the little Mom and Dad stores, and the little corner stores. And you didn't do a lot of shopping, so you'd just go to the corner store and picked out what you want. And it was just real easy - you walk there, and then we got the Piggly Wiggly later on. But for the most part, the little smaller stores - corner stores is what we called them.

KP: Right. Do you remember any particular corner store location?

MS: Yes. There was one that was, what was the name of it? It was right on Johnson Street - it's right up the street on Johnson, right before you get to Meeting Street. Brown's is the name of that store. And then there was the one on the corner here, almost across from the church, and then there was one that's still - there was [00:23:54 unintelligible] food store that was right across from the church, and the one on the corner that, as the church here, is still there. So, you had these little corner stores that you go to.

KP: Did they sell kind of different items at each, or -

MS: They'd sell basically the same thing. But one thing about the one that's down here, was on the corner, but closed a long time ago - they had these links that everybody loved. So, they're like sausage links with mustard - and you know, everybody went there for the links.

KP: So, was your mom kind of working? Was she able to cook pretty much every night, or did you - I know my kids have to fend for themselves sometimes at supper.

MS: With my mom working, she worked two jobs, and my older sister, she did all the cooking and the cleaning. So, I was lucky - I didn't get to do a whole lot because she did everything. She was older, and her job was to do the housework. I did some things around the house - I was the youngest girl, so I didn't really do a lot. I spent most of my time actually studying - I was the

nerd, the bookworm. So, I spent my time looking in the book reading, getting to figure out my homework.

KP: So, how did that work as far as - did you share rooms with your siblings, or did everybody have their own -

MS: Oh, no, no - you did not have your own room. It was four of us, so it was two girls and two boys. So, the two boys shared a room, the two girls shared a room, and my mom had her own room. So, when we grew up on the project, we had the three bedroom.

KP: So, what did you do for fun beyond school? How would you spend that Saturday afternoon?

MS: I worked at the pool, but before I started working, we would play like Jacks - Jack stones with a ball and the jacks, which the kids these days probably don't know what that is. We did hopscotch, we did softball - but where we grew up, we had to play like in the yard or the street, and you couldn't - it wasn't like it was a soft softball, because you had windows and everything, and you didn't want to break anybody's windows, and then you didn't really have a real bat. You had a stick, so it was more stickball than softball, because that's all we had. And then there was kickball.

KP: Did you ever kind of travel beyond the boundaries of your neighborhood, or were there places that you knew you shouldn't go past?

MS: Never really traveled beyond, except when we went to ball games - like if we'd go to the football games, we knew we had to walk over to the East Side. The park was right there. Almost everything we needed was in walking distance. Oh, another thing we did is, we would go down to County Hall, we went skating. So, did a lot of roller skating.

KP: Where was this?

MS: Down at County Hall. It's now -

KP: Oh, on King -

MS: On King Street.

KP: Okay - and it's sort of the, what is it called, the Municipal Auditorium?

MS: No, it was called -

KP: It was King Street Hall?

MS: It was called County Hall. It was called County Hall - yeah, I think they're renovating that building now, because they used to have skating, and then they used to have wrestling there also.

KP: Right. So, kind of got a big dome -

MS: Yeah - yes, um-hmm.

KP: Yeah. I can't remember the address on that, but kind of upper King, way upper.

MS: It's on King, across from where there's the library there now, there's a Food Lion. King -

KP: Not too far from Dart Library, kind of on King, right?

MS: I don't know the name of the library. I know there's the Bea Norton's Children's Center - it's right over there.

KP: Right. How interesting. Did you ever go to the beach in the summertime, or have an opportunity -

MS: We did go to the beach every once in a while. We would go to Folly Beach, so we would go there. And then there was Mosquito Beach, they called it - and I think that was part of Folly Beach up there too, but I remember they called it Mosquito Beach because there were lots of mosquitoes there all the time, yeah. And that's what we called it.

KP: We've been actually doing a project with Mosquito Beach, and they're trying to kind of revitalize it. But it sounds like it was a lot of music, and kind of a big gathering place. Do you remember going out to Mosquito Beach, what it was like?

MS: I do. It was just a place you go. They had - I know people were there, there was music, there was food - it was fun. But, and I know also, we went there. But also on Sunday afternoons, we would hang out at the Battery. So, we did that for fun too.

KP: Did you walk, or take a bus?

MS: I walked - you walk everywhere. So, you walk from here down to the Battery, and you just hang out. And that's just where people hung out.

KP: Take a picnic, or just kind of walked around?

MS: Kind of just walk around - no picnic.

KP: Kind of socialize - socializing?

MS: With other people - it's like the hang-out spot.

KP: Right. So, how would you kind of do it - would you be in the park, or kind of walking along the waterfront?

MS: You could walk along the waterfront, and then you hang out, just sit on the little bars, and you just hang out there. It was really nice, and the City did it for the longest time, and then, of course, people started coming, bringing their cars, making loud noise, and then had the noise ordinance, and then they're like, well, you can only be here a certain time, and they started blocking off parts of the streets and all like that, because the people that live down there complained.

KP: Did you ever feel kind of a weird racial divide between the White residents who kind of mainly, I would think, lived along the Battery, and kind of going there for Sunday afternoons? Was there ever any tension?

MS: I'm pretty sure there was tension, because they're the ones that always call the cops, and like, they're here making noise and all that. But for good reasons, because if I lived down there, and people were coming to my neighborhood and making all this noise, and I can't do what I want to do. I wouldn't make noise to complain about it. But I'm sure there was. But for some reason, I really didn't experience a lot of racism or people acting funny or treating me badly.

KP: Well, sometimes when you're young too, you don't really perceive some undercurrents sometimes too, But -

CP: Charlie Phillips: Ask if there was anywhere she wasn't allowed to go.

KP: Oh, right - were there any places in Charleston where you didn't feel like you could go, or weren't allowed to go because of your race?

MS: For me, no. I mean, because I grew up in a different era. But, of course, my parents would be different, because they're in the generation, and the people before them, where they weren't allowed to go different places. But by the time I was there, they had started like with the segregation in schools and everything. So, I really didn't have that problem at all. I guess I just found out recently, I guess about 10 years ago, when one of my friends, and she lives over on Daniel Island - Isle of Palms is actually where she lived, and she was telling me about how, because she's German, and her husband's Black, and then it's like if you're Black, you can't own land here, so some people experience because of who they are and what they are - and I say it goes back, but in Charleston, I never really experienced it.

KP: When you were growing up, was East Side primarily an African American neighborhood?

MS: Yes. It's changed a whole lot from when I grew up, because it was primarily African American. Now I come back and I look at it - even here at the church, and this neighborhood, you would see most of the time, because I can remember my best friend that grew up here, her grandmother lives right across the street, and now they're renovating that place. She died like years ago, but they're renovating it. We had some people that lived here, and now they're living somewhere else, and then as they move out, then you're noticing the Blacks are moving out, more of the Whites are moving in, they're re-doing the homes. A lot of homes are just heir property so once the older people move off, the children move away, they don't look back at the

place, they don't take care of it. They don't pay taxes on it, other people buy it. So, more and more people are coming into the neighborhood, They're revitalizing the neighborhood, they're renovating the places, and these little houses that they had, and they bought for little for nothing, they're going up to like triple in value now. So, -

KP: Do you perceive that - and this is a complicated question issue. Do you think that, for the most part, I guess just kind of maybe frame it as the advantages of that, or the pros maybe, and then if there aren't any pros and if there are any cons, too, how the neighborhood is changing?

MS: I think there's some good parts to it, and some bad parts. And I can say that because the good part is they're trying to make it more appealing so they can attract a lot of folks, because I know that Charleston is a tourism place. So, they want more people to come in the more people come in, the more money it makes. We stand out, we want to bring more people in to generate more income for everybody, but at the same time, when we're talking about preserving our heritage, our culture, the places were like, okay, I grew up here - it's like, because I'm thinking about it, and I'm like, well, it's changed the whole lot. Because even the swimming pool that I used to work at, and it's like we used to go there, and then all of the sudden, the pool is covered, and it's limited, and we don't really go there. It's like, we can't even go there anymore. So, it's kind of sad in some ways.

KP: Do you perceive - the word "gentrification" is kind of a loaded term, and it's perceived positively by some, and negatively by others. How would you sort of - how do you feel about that term, gentrification?

MS: I guess it all depends on, like if they're positive by some, and negative by others. When it's mentioned to me a lot, or the context that it's mentioned in, it's more of a negative tone, more so than positive. Because I'm looking around, and I'm seeing the differences, but we don't know the whole story. We don't know the meaning behind it, but I also know that people, like I said it earlier, leave these properties. So, you're leaving it, you don't want it to be an eyesore. If you want to keep it, you fix it up, you make sure that it's livable. You make sure that you pass it on, and if you don't do that, then if you're not able to, then get rid of it.

KP: So, do you see a lot of folks who have been in the neighborhood a long time, is there a feeling that folks are being displaced because of property values?

MS: Yes. Yes, definitely. Because the taxes - and I don't know the tax rate because I've never seen that part where, like when we lived on the project, we never owned real property. So, we can't say it, but I do know some people that I can tell you firsthand that there was a couple, and they're still members of this church, the husband took care of all the bills, paid everything and all that, and then he died. When he died, the wife found out later on that he had a second mortgage on the house. He didn't pay it. She ended up losing the house. She's lost the home that she had forever and the kids grew up in, and all that because he didn't take care of it, he didn't tell her about it, and now she comes to the church every day and noticed someone else is living in the house she thought was hers. She thought they had the house paid for and everything, but it didn't happen that way.

KP: Right. With the church, do you see - is it the same folks, and are they still living in the area, or have people moved out of the area and then traveled back to church?

MS: People have moved out of the area and traveled back to church. I live in Goose Creek. I come to church here every Sunday. Other people live West Ashley. There are only a few people that live in the neighborhood in walking distance. The majority of people that go here live outside the East Side. And we actually, the church also, we have properties that we bought here. For the same reason, people didn't pay the taxes on them, and we bought it with the intention of trying to expand the church, but with the Preservation Society and all like that, we're having a battle with them about that. So, what we want to do, our hands are kind of tied when we go to City Hall - well, not City Hall, but when they go to court and everything, they try to, like, this is what we want to do. It's like, well, you can't do that because the Preservation Society says you have to make sure that the houses are here. And the houses, some of them we bought, are in poor shape. And it's like, well, you've got to bring it back up to Code, as opposed to we bought it for the fact that we wanted to tear it down and expand the church. So, we see that a lot.

KP: So, do you think the prevailing sort of impression of what we would call historic preservation, is it a burden? For the church, it sounds like it would be - are there positives to having this being a historic neighborhood, or is it more, from your experience, that it's a burden for historic preservation?

MS: I think it's to the point because we're having to fight with the system right now with everything. It's more of a burden because we know when we bought the properties per se, we were going to use it not to try to preserve it, but to reconstruct the church and make the church more available to the community. Whereas when you're preserving something, you want to make it where, okay - you want to keep it the way it is, as opposed to making it better. But we've also seeing where we're fighting to do different things with it, and on the other side of the coin, we're seeing where other people are buying property, and they're kind of circumventing the system and doing things, whereas at least they're all supposed to be historical buildings. And so it's not the same standard that we're having to live up to. It's different, and we see it all around us.

KP: Right. Somebody said once that the most segregated place in America is on Sunday morning. It's a sort of racial demographic changing in the neighborhood. Have you noticed that change in the church?

MS: I would say there is some change in the church, but here, I don't see it because we're basically an all-Black church. Once in a while, we may have people that'll come visit, but as far as joining, we don't have but African American members here. And I know, even with the church, with the United Methodist Church, they're talking about trying to break that barrier with our - we have United Methodist Women's Group, we don't see where there's conflict because we all get together, we work, we do different things together, we perform different functions. I'm the Social Action Coordinator for the United Methodist Women, and we had an international luncheon in April, which was really good because - and I know I'm going off track - but what happened is, we had different people from different cultures, and we have a luncheon where they bring all the different dishes. And each table, we had about 10 different countries represented,

and each person has five minutes to give a history and background about their country, and the dishes, and then they could dress to represent the country. So, I see it, whereas we're trying to change, we're trying to do better. But it's a comfort zone also. Because I'm the type of person, I can go anywhere and be comfortable, but not everybody is like that. I played softball for the longest, and I can remember I invited one of my friends to come out to a softball tournament, and then when he came out, the first thing he said to me is like, "You notice you're the only Black person here?" And I actually looked around, and I did not pay attention to it or even notice it until he said it. And I'm like, oh - okay. But it didn't bother me because I like to go places, and I guess because I travel a whole lot, and I do a lot, so things don't bother me. And I have all kinds of friends, and I believe as long as people are happy, and they treat me the way I should be treated, and don't try to treat me any differently, then it's no big deal.

KP: Right. Well, that's a great way to look at things. So, I guess getting back onto, doing a little bit of chronological, and we talked about high school and going to New York and coming back, what was your life like once you got back to Charleston?

MS: When I got back to Charleston, it was like, okay, let me see how long it's going to be before I can go back to school. And then I left here and I went to school, but I went right up the street to South Carolina State College in Orangeburg. So, I spent four years there, and during that time, I came back and forth because I co-oped at the naval shipyard that was here, which has long since closed down. Co-oped there, so stayed in school a year later, because I did two co-op terms. When I finished high school, got a job at a Sheraton as a switchboard operator, and then left there and went to Bosch, and I've been there for the last 33 years.

KP: Some people who listen to this might not know what a switchboard operator is, as strange as that sounds.

MS: Okay - I know, because these - I don't think they have them anymore.

KP: So, what did you do at that job?

MS: So, as a switchboard operator. It's like I worked at the Sheraton Hotel. When people would call, you would answer the phone call, and then you would transfer them to the different rooms - I mean, whoever they want to talk to. It can be a person that's staying at the hotel, it could be Banquet, it could be whoever they want to talk to. I had this one guy, and I never ever met him, but he was an older guy. And he would call me all the time. He had lost his wife, and he just wanted somebody to talk to. And I can't remember his name, but I knew him on a first-name basis, and he would just call and, how you doing today, and he would just talk and talk. He was just lonely, and wanted somebody to talk to. And it was just normal questions. It wasn't anything freaky or any of that. He just wanted to talk. Yes, and it's happened - and he would just call and talk to me. I don't know what happened when I left there so hopefully he found somebody else that would talk to him.

KP: The Sheraton you're talking about -

MS: It's now the Marriott on Lockwood.

KP: Okay.

MS: Yeah, I worked there.

KP: So, that's kind of a haul across town. But you said you had a - were you the first person in your family to have a car?

MS: I was the first person in my family to have a car. So, my first car was - I was thinking about that. It was this Vega, and we called it The Pear. It was green, and I bought it from the guy that was dating at the time. His neighbor, her name was Tiny, she sold me that car for \$150. So, that was my first car. And I don't remember what year it was, but it was a green Vega. They don't make Vegas anymore.

KP: They're too small.

MS: Yes.

KP: So, it was when you had your Vega and your job - did you have everybody asking you for rides?

MS: No, because I like - I went to work, I went to school, I didn't do a whole lot. And even driving, I ended up saving up money for driving lessons because I didn't have a car to drive on. So I took driving lessons, and then I went and got my license from the driving instructor. I went to the driving school, and they took me to the Highway Department to get my license. So, I was the first. And then it took my mom a long time to get her driver's license after that. My older brother, he got his driver's license later, but he spent a lot of time with my grandfather, and he drove before he had his license. He would always have my granddad's pickup truck.

KP: So, Charleston, probably a little bit busier now on the road than when you were growing up a bit as well. What do you think about - what is your general impression of the sort of tourism that's come to Charleston?

MS: Charleston is a lot more exciting, busy, a lot of tourists - it's like a little like they call Atlanta - little New York. Well, Charleston is Little Atlanta, because it's real, real busy, the streets, parking is horrible, especially downtown. And I tell everybody the only time I come here is to go to church or Bible study or some meeting. Don't go further down, because if you have to go downtown, make sure you know where the parking garage is. And "Second Sundays," it's really hard to find a parking spot. But it's a lot different than it used to be, because - I can remember - even the stores, and walking downtown, we used to walk downtown to go to the stores just to window shop, because we couldn't really afford to buy things. But a lot of those stores have closed down, and they're bringing up new stores and everything. And it's like, oh, it's a big difference now than when we grew up.

KP: Can you think of some of the local stores that maybe -

MS: Like Edward's. There used to be an Edward's down there. There used to be like the drugstore. I forgot the name of the drugstore on the corner. Even up the street, the cleaners. They used to be Culbertson Dry Cleaner that people worked for years. That cleaners closed down. Kress, and I know Kress and Woolworth, those stores -

KP: On King Street.

MS: On King Street, yeah. So, a lot of the stores have gone.

KP: So, when you were, as a growing-up kid, and then once you came back from New York, did you live in this neighborhood when you got back from New York?

MS: We stayed on the projects. I stayed there until I went to college, and then my older sister, she left and went to stay in North Charleston. So, I would like go back and forth and stay with her for a little while, and then when I finished college, that's when I got married and moved away. Moved out, but didn't go away - went up the street.

KP: Now is your husband from Charleston?

MS: My husband is from Strawberry.

KP: Okay. So, Strawberry in Berkeley County?

MS: Strawberry is like Moncks Corner area.

KP: Right. So, it's interesting. A long time ago there used to be a ferry there at Strawberry which went to the other side of the Cooper River. But it's interesting. I was interested in your last name, or your husband's last name too, because there's a famous Sass who was a furniture maker in Charleston. Jacob Sass. And he was actually a White guy, German, cabinet maker. Does your husband have any idea about where - sort of going back with family history -

MS: I don't know. I would have to ask him because I never encountered that. But I can tell you that I used to be in the Coast Guard Reserve before I joined the Air Force Reserve, and there was this guy there named Michael Sass. And then for the longest, I was like, and all the Sasses were related. Every Sass I knew, they were related to my husband. And then, so finally I'm like, I'm going to meet this guy, and I met him, and he was a White guy. And I was like, wow, I didn't expect that. So, maybe it was his generation.

KP: It could be, yeah. It's so interesting. In Charleston, you've got like White Manigaults, and Black Manigaults, and so it's kind of interesting. I think as we maybe get more into more sources come to light in genealogy to kind of figure all that out.

MS: I'm going to ask. Actually his sister - we're going to Maryland this weekend because it's her 80th birthday. So, maybe she would know because she's older, he was the baby. He's four years older than I am, so he's 62.

KP: So, how did you meet? In Charleston?

MS: We met at the softball field. It was actually Alcoa. It was Alumax at the time when my husband worked there, and it's Alcoa, and then they changed it to something else now. But he's retired about five years ago.

KP: So, did he ever live downtown, or -

MS: He never lived downtown. Never lived downtown, and we met at the ball field and he goes to church. I go to church here, but his church is in Strawberry at Joshua United Methodist. And people are like, well, you both are Methodists, why do you go to a different church? And I get that a lot, but I tell them, I grew up here. This is where I'm comfortable. I have position here. I have friends here. I have family here. He grew up at his church in Strawberry, Joshua. His minister and I are really good friends, and I go to his church and they have different events there. And I go there, and he'll come here. So, we support each other. The kids, they were like split most of the time. The kids grew up here, but when they found out that Daddy's church got out earlier, they started going to church with him.

KP: That's great.

KP So, we're back from a mini-break. I was going to ask you just a little bit more about the East Side. When you were growing up, do you remember if the East Side, if there were White residents back when you were growing up, or was it just pretty much a Black neighborhood, as far as you remember?

MS: The majority were Black on the East Side. We had some White residents, but they were further up East Side, like near Alexander Street and going towards The Battery side. But the majority were Blacks.

KP: Right. Because it's interesting. I think, for many years, it's changed over time, but there were certainly different nationalities - Greeks, Italians, Irish and Germans - we were talking about Germans - within the neighborhood Mazyck-Wraggborough and the East Side. And of course, it's changed kind of over the years for sure. So, one thing that we touched on too was, with the midwife, when you were born. How did medical stuff kind of resolve as you were growing up. When you hurt yourself, was there a particular doctor's office that you went to, or did the doctors come to you, or -

MS: When we were younger growing up, when I moved to Charleston, like if you got hurt to the point where you couldn't use like a tape and some peroxide and clean it up yourself, we didn't do a lot of hospital visits. Mostly make sure you can take care of it yourself. If you can't, because we weren't rich, didn't have - I don't even know if we had insurance - we went to County Hospital, and that was the - they called it the Free Clinic. So, you went there to get medical care. Yeah - that's what we [audio stops].

KP: So, let's see - as a big event that we talked a little bit about was Hurricane Hugo. Were you in the area for that?

MS: During Hugo, we lived in Goose Creek. I can remember we were there for two weeks, and we had about 15 people in our house. And at this time we had a smaller house that was like 1,000 square foot, but my mom came down, my cousins, the people that lived in Cross, they came down to stay with us, because it was safer. My mom lived in a trailer, so of course, she's not going to stay in her trailer. And then my cousins, they just wanted to be someplace safe. And for two weeks they all stayed together. My mom cooked dinner the night before, so we had that food, we had a freezer. So, we actually lived really good for the two weeks. I was in the Coast Guard, so after a couple of days I had to drive some people down to Augusta to the airport because the one here was closed. And got dry ice, got food. We had a freezer full of food. We cooked everything that was in the freezer on the grill. My sister lived down a little bit. She still had running water, so we weren't supposed to travel but we went to her house, just make sure we watch their trees. My husband had a chainsaw so we would cut off the woods and stuff and clear the road and get there, and that way we took a hot shower because she had gas. So, she had the gas one so the heater still worked, and she didn't have a lot of damage. So, we had food. We had something to drink. And for two weeks we did fine until the lights came back on.

KP: So, how was it - was there any damage to the church, do you remember?

MS: The church, I believe, the roof - they had like roof damage, and shingles and all. Our house was the same way. We had shingle damage. My husband - a tree fell on his car so his car with the window stuff was shattered. We had missing shingles, but we lived in a cul-de-sac at the time, and all the houses around us got damage, but we were in the middle of the cul-de-sac, so we really didn't get a lot of damage. But other houses, trees fell on, they were missing a lot of things. We were lucky. We were blessed.

KP: Good.

MS: And, like I said, when we - a lot of people, like you're the only pregnant person we know, so got lots of baby items. Didn't have to buy diapers or formula for like six months.

KP: You were probably in the last trimester?

MS: She was born in November, so Hugo was September. So, seven months, yeah.

KP: That is a Hugo baby.

MS: Yeah.

KP: Too funny. So, I guess, coming back to the area downtown, with the East Side and everything. What do you sort of see as the future for this area? For your church, for the community, for this neighborhood that you grew up in?

MS: The future I can see that, when I come back down here, if the church is still here, I won't recognize anything. I won't know anybody that lives here because I think they will all have moved out. I talked earlier about the fact that the older generation, like the grandmothers and everybody, even people at the church, the older ones, they're dying out, which we're all going to

do eventually. The younger ones don't have interest in preserving history, this place. They're going to move somewhere else, they're going to do something different. You know, my kids the same way. I only have - two still live here. Two in New York and one's in Greenville. One's probably going to move away soon, and they're not interested in our history. They want to make their own history, and they don't want to do it here.

KP: Right. That's interesting for sure. And then, I guess, you know, future for the church - you know, it sounds like everybody kind of lives, you know, not in the same area. That they're kind of dispersed out.

MS: They are. And I know even the church, there's been talk about asking about the church, the property, not the church per se, but the property, and there's a possibility one day this church won't be here anymore. We've been here 89 years, but there's a possibility that five years, ten years down the road, we may relocate to a different location. And there's going to be something else on this corner. It's all possible, and I don't see us like going back, although they were talking about preserving things. There's not really a lot of things being preserved. I think things are going to change.

KP: Right. Definitely. Well, they already are changing for sure. Martha, is there anything in the interview that we didn't touch on that you think would be just good to talk about, or anything that kind of touched your memory, and you thought, oh, I should mention that?

MS: Are we pausing for a second?

KP: We can.

[pause]

MS: One thing that did come to mind when I was thinking about growing up, and how we're different, different cultures and everything, I can remember when I set up this seminar, it was like a team building. And I was the only female around all of these guys, and they were all White male. And then the facilitator says, "Okay, now share like a nice childhood memory." And he went around to everybody, and everybody else talked about their vacation time in Switzerland and the Alps, and all these nice, real nice vacation spots. And then when he got to me, he's like, "Tell me a nice childhood memory." And then he looked at me, and I hesitated for a moment, because the one thing that came to my mind was, I can remember being a small child, my granddad getting drunk, having a shotgun, and all of us hiding under the kitchen table. And that was not a memory that I wanted to share with the group. So, I told them, I said, I really had a bad childhood. I really don't want to share my childhood memory. And then he's like, okay. Because everybody else had just real happy memories about every summer we'd go to Switzerland, every summer we'd do here, we'd go to Zurich, we'd do different things. And I'm like, I didn't have that luxury - I can't relate.

KP: He sort of made the assumption that everybody's summer was sort of -

MS: Was good. So, you're sharing all these good memories, but I'm like, I had no good memories that I could recall, because the only thing I remember was us struggling. My mom working two jobs just to make sure that she could provide for us. Clothes - when it was time to go back to school I was lucky if I got one new outfit. My mom sewed on top of everything else. So, she sewed our clothes. My sister, I was hoping she would grow out of her clothes so I would get them. So, it was all hand-me-down, it was old stuff, it was handmade stuff. So, my mom made all of our clothes. She did everything for us.

KP: She sounds like an amazing woman.

MS: She is. She is.

KP: So, was she very active in the church as well?

MS: She wasn't really active because she worked most of the time. But she made sure that we went to church. We went to church, we went to Sunday School, we participated in the choir, the usher board. We did everything that we were going to do, but she made sure that everything was important. She made sure we got an education.

KP: Great - okay. Can you think of anything else to cover, Charlie?

CP: No, that was good.

KP: This has been such pleasure -

CP: Is your mother still alive, Martha?

MS: Yes. Yeah - we celebrated her 80th birthday this year, and it's really nice, because her birthday's the same as yours, May 12th, and it's really good. I can like do surprises, but I try not to anymore because this year here was her 80th, and my brother wanted to throw a surprise, but my younger brother and I do everything. It's like, we're the two youngest, but we're the ones that they depend on to do everything. When my brother died, same thing. We had to take care of everything. But I told my mom, I said since I'm responsible for making sure that you have a good birthday, I said, this is what we're doing, and you invite all your friends. I don't care if the other siblings want it to be a surprise. If they wanted a surprise, they should have planned it. And it's like -

KP: I find that with the youngest siblings, even though we may not have had the responsibility - like the older ones had the cleaning and cooking responsibility - but now that we're grown, the younger ones usually are the caregivers and the memory keepers for the family.

MS: Yes, you're right. Because even when my brother died, I had this aunt that like, talks all the time. They basically practiced with her, watch what she was going to say, because she was one of the speakers at his service, made sure they agreed on what she's saying. And lo and behold, I get up there, and I just tell stuff, and then they're like, oh my God, we were worried about her, and you're the one that went off. Because it was one of those things where, it's a

celebration of life. I didn't want people to be sad I would tell a story about my brother being a jack of all trades, and he would work on cars, and then he would go joyriding for two days with your car afterwards. And they're like, oh my God, you told all that? Just like, everybody knew how he was, so it's nothing to hide. And I kind of lifted people because they laughed at the stuff, and, you know, it was like - and they're afterwards, they're like, oh my God - she didn't do that. We have to watch her. Like, you don't have to watch me, because I'm going to do and say what I want to do and say anyways.

KP: I think that's the best way to be, too.

MS: And my youngest daughter - we have five children, six grandchildren. My youngest daughter is now married to a guy. He's Vietnamese, but his - we're talking about cultures - his parents had the hardest time accepting her.

KP: Really?

MS: Because they're basically within their culture.

KP: Right.

MS: And then, so his mom, to the point where she told him, well, if you're not going to marry someone of your own race, at least a White girl.

KP: Are they better now?

MS: It's a lot better now.

CP: Do they get along [now]?

MS: Yeah, they love her. They're like, we can't wait till you have babies. It's six years later, but at the beginning, it was a struggle to the point where she told [unintelligible name], if he kept seeing her, she was going to disown him. And he's the baby - and then he, that was the first time he stood up to her, and he said, Mom - they met at school, and he's a doctor now, he's a pharmacist, and she's an athletic trainer. But we're talking about race and some and all like that - and I like to jump around sometimes. But she was just offered athletic director position at a school in upper South Carolina, and she turned it down. And then her boss, who they don't get along, her supervisor, he's like, you should take that job. You'll have your own staff and all that. And then, so the district manager came in and he told her, he's like, Brianna wants to take that job. Brianna's like, no way, they're not going to hang me! [Laughs] And I said, Brianna, you didn't. She said, yes I did. Because she said it's an all-White school.

KP: So, it'd be a huge kind of shock, kind of culture shock of those sides maybe, right?

MS: Yes - and she's like, no - because she said, there's not even one Black person there. [Laughs] Well, when she said it, I'm like, I don't believe you said that. She said, yeah, I did. But - and then about the funny part about it is the fact that when we went out to eat Saturday, because

they came down, they had this thing as part of a Vietnamese dish, because we went to a restaurant, and she's telling him, her husband, how to mix it and how to do this and that. And he looks at her, and he's like, oh my God. You're more Vietnamese than I am. [Laughs] Because she knows them, and she knows the culture, and she's like, she knows the language, and she's already done all her research. She can speak part of the language. She can sing Happy Birthday, and she does all his stuff. So, and like I said, they've been together six years. And then she has another sister in-law who's married to the other sister, and then the mother always tells Lillian, who's the other sister, why can't you be more like Brianna? And Lillian is Vietnamese.

KP: That's good - that's really come like completely full circle. Great.

MS: Um-hmm, yeah. So, like I said, I look at people as people. And I don't have an issue with people. I mean depending on who you interview, some people would have a different opinion, because of the way they see things, and maybe what they've experienced, but -

KP: Well, maybe generationally too. [Recording cuts off]

END OF RECORDING