

An Interview with  
**Rebecca Bennett**

at *The Historical Society of Missouri* St. Louis  
Research Center, St. Louis, Missouri

**14 June 2016**

interviewed by Dr. Malaika Horne

transcribed by Valerie Leri and edited by

Josephine Sporleder



**Oral History Program**

*The State Historical Society of Missouri*

Collection S1207 Women as Change Agents DVD 86

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## PREFACE

The interview was taped on a placed on a tripod. There are periodic background sounds but the recording is of generally high quality.

The following transcript represents a rendering of the oral history interview. Stylistic alterations have been made as part of a general transcription policy. The interviewee offered clarifications and suggestions, which the following transcript reflects. Any use of brackets [ ] indicates editorial insertions not found on the original audio recordings. Physical gestures, certain vocal inflections such as imitation, and/or pauses are designated by a combination of italics and brackets [ ]. Any use of parentheses ( ) indicates a spoken aside evident from the speaker's intonation, or laughter. Quotation marks ["" ] identify speech depicting dialogue, speech patterns, or the initial use of nicknames. Em dashes [—] are used as a stylistic method to show a meaningful pause or an attempt to capture nuances of dialogue or speech patterns. Words are *italicized* when emphasized in speech or when indicating a court case title. Particularly animated speech is identified with **bold** lettering. Underlining [   ] indicates a proper title of a publication. The use of underlining and double question marks in parentheses [   (??) ] denotes unintelligible phrases. Although substantial care has been taken to render this transcript as accurately as possible, any remaining errors are the responsibility of the editor, Josephine Sporleder.

**THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF MISSOURI-ST. LOUIS**

**WOMEN AS CHANGE AGENTS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

**14 JUNE 2016**

**REBECCA BENTNETT INTERVIEWED BY DR. MALAIKA HORNE**

Malaika Horne: The first set of questions, we want you to talk about your early years, your youth: being in elementary school and secondary schools, any that you attended and anything else you want to talk about.

Rebecca Bennett: So my early years, so I am the daughter of Maybelle Bennett and [inaudible 00:28] and I was raised in Washington, D.C. and I went to a group of schools called the Peabody Cluster Schools and those were a group of schools on Capitol Hill which is sort of the trendy, center of power in Washington, D.C. because it's adjacent to the capitol on all sides. I was never able to go to my neighborhood schools because my neighborhood schools, in terms of my mother's thinking, weren't quality enough for me and so I remember being maybe about five and her having me interview schools. So she took me in to schools.

Malaika Horne: You didn't know what "interviews" was.

Rebecca Bennett: I interviewed schools. She took me into these schools to see how they felt and did I like it and I remember saying to her...I remember one building and I said, "Mommy, it's too dark in here. I don't like that." And so she ended up putting me in the Capitol Hill Cluster Schools so the Peabody Cluster Schools and they were public schools. I'm not quite sure how I got in because I didn't live there but I had to be tested and interviewed and all that kind of stuff. But they were the best schools, the best public schools that Washington, DC had. As I reflect now as someone who's really interested in public education reform, I lament that there are not as many children who can access those same kind of high quality public schools. We had looping: my 2<sup>nd</sup> grade teacher was my 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher. Miss Rose knew me and the education was

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extraordinary. And so I lament that not everybody can take their kid out of their neighborhood or has the wherewithal to do that, nor should they have to do that, so in my formative years, I went to some wonderful, wonderful schools and then I ended up in being at Banneker, Benjamin Banneker Model Academic Senior High School another great in African American history and American history, Benjamin Banneker. And that was an

exceptional school. It was the best educational experience I ever had.

Malaika Horne:

How so?

Rebecca Bennett:

Well, it was small so there were 300 students, maybe 90 in my class. The rigor was exceptional and so you had to take four years of everything. You took AP classes so I think I took five AP classes. We did four's and five's on our tests. We tested well. A couple of my APs, I didn't do that well on but we tested well. Our teachers loved us. They called us by our last names. They showed us respect: "Miss Bennett..." ...you know? They came to our houses to help us study and prepare. We went to their houses. They used the Socratic method. I remember telling my American history teacher, "This isn't American history; this is white American history," right, and he said, "Okay," he said, "Well, then, I want you all to come an hour-and-a-half early to class, an hour-and-a-half before schools starts..." ...and he added eight texts to our curriculum, the standard text and then texts on Chinese American history, African American history, women in American history, Native American First Nation's kind of people and we all made four's and five's on our AP exams because we knew more about American history than you could possibly know than was covered because we challenged. They said, "Okay, well, we can meet you in that challenge but you're going to have to do more." So I appreciated just really being loved and we had to have a talent so they cultivated your talent. You had to demonstrate your talent every year.

Malaika Horne:

What was your talent?

Rebecca Bennett:

Speaking, of course, I got to talk. And so you had to be a well-rounded person and you had to do 270 hours of community service and you had to write a freshman thesis and a sophomore thesis and a junior and senior thesis and your senior thesis was 25 pages. So that by the time you got to college, you were prepared for the rigors of college, and by the way, we were 99% black and so in my world, I didn't equate being black with academically exceptional because everybody around me was black and brilliant. So there was no sense of myself as an outlier in that way or the

sort of cultural expectations that don't think of black people being innately brilliant but in my environment, I was surrounded by brilliant young people who were supported, nurtured, challenged and who had an academic experience where we were encouraged to work together. So it didn't follow sort of a competitive academic model, although we got grades and those sorts of things. It was a collaborative academic model where if anyone in your class was struggling, the class was struggling. So I appreciated that. I subsequently went to other elite institutions, elite majority institutions but they did not follow that model whose academic model was much more oriented towards competition, not collaboration and who had had much less exposure with students of color who were brilliant and who felt as though they belonged because they were groomed to believe that their place was at the front of the class.

Malaika Horne:

Let's talk about your college. I do want to talk more about your other family members but since you are going in that direction, what college did you go to?

RB :

Well, undergraduate, I went to Swarthmore College and then for graduate school, I went to the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor, both of which were exceptional institutions and of the two, I have a stronger attachment to Swarthmore than to Michigan because when I got to Michigan, it was grad school so I got in and I got out. I met some great friends there and I did some good learning there but I didn't stay, it wasn't the sort of womb of my career and best friendships in the way that Swarthmore was, and incidentally, a week ago was my 20<sup>th</sup> reunion for college so I'm top of mind on that. But our numbers there were single digits in the percentile.

Malaika Horne:

And Swarthmore, remind us where that is.

Rebecca Bennett:

It's outside of Philadelphia, about 20 minutes outside of Philadelphia, yeah. So an exception Quaker school, progressive, iconoclastic, anti-authoritarian, encouraged us to think outside of the box. My professors were our peers, which is not something that I was used to given the structure of public schools. Your teachers are not your peers; your teachers are people who are to be respected and lauded and elevated. So that was a shift for me

but what I loved about that particular academic environment was the focus on rigor complimented what I was used to in high school and the focus on genuine learning and to think critically and deeply and not to be afraid to challenge standard interpretations so even your professors' interpretations and to offer alternatives. What you had to be able to do, though, was support your position with data, with research, with well reasoned logic, if you were going to challenge because they were going to treat you as a peer, not with kid gloves.

Malaika Horne: Training the mind.

Rebecca Bennett: Training the mind, yes.

Malaika Horne: That's exactly what it is, and your majors?

Rebecca Bennett: Political science with a minor in economics and two concentrations in black studies and public policy.

Malaika Horne: And at Michigan?

Rebecca Bennett: Public policy. I got a Master's in public policy.

Malaika Horne: Oh, okay. I want to go back because I don't want to miss information about your family: your parents; your husband; your children, their names.

Rebecca Bennett: So there were central people in my formative years. The most central people in my life happened to be my mother and my grandmother...not my mother and my father. My father and my mother separated when I was about three and he lived in Nigeria. My mother had been a Pan Africanist and active in the civil rights movement and so, as a part of that, she moved to Nigeria and Ghana and lived there for years. She and my father met there and then she subsequently came back as a result of military coups and destabilization that was happening in the region.

Malaika Horne: I've written and read a lot about W.E.B. Debois so I'm familiar with Pan Africanists, but could you just remind us what Pan Africanists is?

Rebeccah Bennett:

Well, in her approach, what she really wanted to do was to take the talent that had been nurtured here in the States, the talent, the opportunity and the resources that young African Americans primarily at that time had been able to develop and to use it in the service of helping to liberate and mature African nations that were sort of post-colonial so following the end of colonization as they were emerging as independent nation states once again, they were in need of talent and resources and all of those things that, in many ways, got stymied and hindered through the colonial oppression, quite honestly, lack of development in the talent of the people. Lots of people, like my father, if they wanted to get excellent training, ended up going to other countries so he got his education and training outside of Nigeria, in fact, in the States and plenty of people did that: in Russia and elsewhere because the oppressive colonial dynamics really didn't support as much the development of African talent and leadership in the same way. And so, for her, the Pan Africanist movement and the civil rights movements were two sides of the same coin. She was active in the civil rights movement, went to Vassar College in the 1960's, took over the school, was responsible, she and five others so a total of six non-violently took over the school and were responsible for getting African studies developed and the first set of black professors and significant recruitment of African American students and African Diaspora students and did that under very harsh and sort of ugly conditions in terms of the authorities' response to these six black girls who non-violently, by the way, shut down the school and ended up getting allies and supports from the white women who were on Vassar's campus, a number of them, a couple hundred of them who sat in and supported the efforts of these black women. But she got her taste...she cut her teeth at Vassar and in the movement there and then started thinking and then went to Ghana for a semester abroad and looking at the politics, the colonial politics.

Malaika Horne:

Then she came back to Washington, DC and eventually your father went back to Nigeria?

Rebeccah Bennett:

Right, so she went to Ghana and came back to the States, then went back to Nigeria, lived there for several years and met my

father, who had done his training in the States but did not meet my mother here in the States and he was an engineer, she was an urban planner and they worked together actually and that's how they ended up meeting each other. But the instability that often came with independence, in terms of who would be empowered... in this case it was the military coups that overthrew the civilian governance...created unstable conditions for lots of people but my mother in particular but because she had American citizenship, she decided to come back and my father, was his country and so it's a different attachment, to the country and to helping bring about stability and change and greater opportunity to this country that was in its infancy in this particular dynamic, as an independent African nation.

Malaika Horne:

Your husband and your children?

Rebecca Bennett:

So my husband I met...is a Chicago native and he and I have been together 10 years so this is a delight. We met in Miami and I was in St. Louis and he was in Chicago so that will tell you that if it's meant to be, you know, it comes together some kind of way. He's a teacher by trade but he got into teaching because he had a horrible educational experience growing up so he was a part of the programs that de-segregated Chicago suburban schools. He experienced great trauma and abuse and neglect by the public education system, was put into Special Ed because he challenged the authority and so he was labeled a behavior problem and defiant which, to me, is really just trying to defend himself and he will tell you that most of the kids, if not all of the kids that were in Special Ed with him are deceased or imprisoned. Then he managed to get out of that but he never had quality education, public education with the exception of one teacher who he recalls. I believe that was his 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher. And so he decided that he wanted to be the kind of teacher he never had and it's why he went into teaching, because he could see the students that other people throw away, black students, black boys, regardless of their intelligence or their income and he could see their innate genius and he wanted to be a part of cultivating that. And so he's done that for a number of years and then went into higher education

and is now getting his doctorate here at UMSL with the focus on education and social justice and critical race theory.

Malaika Horne: Oh, I'm familiar with critical race theory. I work with a woman and her dissertation was about that.

Rebeccah Bennett: This is his second year, Celine Kinyata.

Malaika Horne: Okay, second year, okay. I Hope I get a chance to meet him.

Rebeccah Bennett: Second year... now we have two girls, Willow Athema Modisha La Kinyata and Sage Efayoma Alu Buni Kinyata who are five and two.

Malaika Horne: Mother, wife, there's a lot...let me ask you this: When you were growing up, what did you want to be?

Rebeccah Bennett: A ballerina, fire fighter, astronaut.

Malaika Horne: All three?

Rebeccah Bennett: All three, yes, because the adults in my life said I could be anything I wanted to be and so I wanted to be a ballerina, fire fighter, astronaut. I love to dance, I've always been fascinated with the cosmos and our place in it and still am, and in some ways, in my life, part of what I do is put out fires, in a metaphorical sense.

Malaika Horne: Were you recognized as a leader growing up?

Rebeccah Bennett: Yes.

Malaika Horne: In what way?

Rebeccah Bennett: So, I had this thing that people used to say when I was a kid: "Oh, you're so articulate," and I never got that because everybody, again, in my household, in my world was articulate. That was the norm. I didn't get a mastery of language out of the ether. I came from people who read a lot and who spoke a lot and who helped cultivate those qualities in me but they got the attention of the adults around me who were not used to children who were as clear, who trusted their minds as much, but again, I can't take credit for that. I was in a household where I was asked what I thought often, where I was talked to as though I could understand and comprehend and who was asked for her perspective and so

my expectation was that I had something to contribute because I was treated as such. So when I went into the broader world, in school and other places, those qualities, which seemed so normal for me and my family, were labeled as exceptional or extraordinary outside of my home and then gave me lots of opportunities to speak and to MC and to be in special programs, from the time I was, like, five or six, having those qualities open doors. So I never thought that I didn't have something to contribute. So that leadership was acknowledged very early on and the opportunities too to travel and to be a part of special programs and all of that and the resources that came with being identified as bright that further sharpened my skill set so I got to be around lots of other bright young people and committed adults who developed us.

Malaika Horne: Right, and it's important to believe that, that you're intelligent.

Rebeccah Bennett: Yeah.

Malaika Horne: And you were exposed to it and then you heard it a lot, that's so important.

Rebeccah Bennett: Yes, and well, I came from a long line: my parents...I wasn't the first generation in that way, nor was I the second. My grandparents, my grandmother was an educator and went to college and graduate school and finished so I come from a long line of people who...and because they were educators, right, which were the opportunities for African American women in the 1930's, one of the big outlets for professional opportunities, the orientation to cultivate young people, not just to raise them, but to cultivate them was deeply entrenched in the care and the handling that I got from my family members and also from the other adults in my world, which, in many ways, is a sharp contrast to what my husband got and so it's a source of great sadness.

Malaika Horne: I'm sure he's fascinated by your upbringing and sees that that makes the difference.

Rebeccah Bennett: Yeah.

Malaika Horne: We have a question about your grandmothers and the question is, 50 years ago, what do you think you would have been doing and we kind of look at the grandmother as a comparison, but you've already told me your...both grandmothers or...

Rebeccah Bennett: No, my other grandmother was a business owner, my father's mother.

Malaika Horne: A business owner?

Rebeccah Bennett: Yes, she was a business owner and entrepreneur.

Malaika Horne: What kind of business?

Rebeccah Bennett: My uncle said she had six businesses but the one that I knew about was the sewing business...or not sewing, she had dresses so she sold dresses and I'm sure she did other things that I'm not as familiar with, but she was a business woman through and through from what I understand, a quite accomplished business woman and a social servant. She used her resources to help in the upliftment of the community so she was a community servant as well. And my maternal grandmother was an educator, science education. She taught biology, chemistry and physics for almost 50 years in segregated schools and then, at the end of her career, integrated schools.

Malaika Horne: In Washington, DC?

Rebeccah Bennett: In Baltimore so my family comes from the Baltimore area and the DC area. When the slaves' ships first came to America, the most common port was not South Carolina at that time, if you look in the 1700's; it was the port of Annapolis in Maryland and so my family has been here for a long time and came through the port of Annapolis and were enslaved in that area and then lived in the Chesapeake Bay but were able to...one branch, one significant branch was able to buy its freedom in the 1700's and so we have been farmers and fishermen and all kinds of things and we moved to the big cities, we migrated to the big cities early, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the 1800's, DC and Baltimore and set up shop. We still have our home in the Chesapeake.

- Malaika Horne: Well, I was just going to say, that's very exceptional, especially for African Americans. My husband does a lot of DNA work, those kind of activities and most African Americans can't trace their ancestry back all the way to the beginning in this country so did you do it through DNA or through just family documents?
- Rebecca Bennett: We have family historians and they have done our tree and then a lot of research to find out our history and because...this is one of the privileges of being free for as long as we have been, more of our family history and narrative is intact than would be if we changed hands as much, were moved to lots of other locations. So it was easier to trace because all of the movement that we engaged in, we chose and the roots in Dorchester County, Maryland and that area, and St. Michael's and all around there, deeply established. So so much more of the lineage and of the family history simply hadn't been disrupted in the last 200 years.
- Malaika Horne: And you still have the family home?
- Rebecca Bennett: We still have family property and folks that still live there and still have farms and all of that kind of stuff. You can see my great great great great grandparents' house still there and we still have a family church and the cemetery where I can go back five greats at least and we still have a relationship between that church and the church in Baltimore of my grandmother's parents who moved from Dorchester County up to Baltimore, Maryland. And so there's a relationship still there. So it's interesting, not as common.
- Malaika Horne: It's not common at all. The religion of the church?
- Rebecca Bennett: Methodist. We were good Methodist folk.
- Malaika Horne: Are you still a Methodist?
- Rebecca Bennett: No. Well, a number of our family members who go to Christ United Methodist Church in Baltimore and who go to our ancestral family church in the Chesapeake Bay, they're all still Methodist but my grandmother married a Catholic and in those days, you became what your husband was and so she stopped being Methodist and became a practicing Catholic.

Malaika Horne: Then you're a Catholic?

Rebecca Bennett: No, I was raised Catholic in part but then we were separated from the Catholic Church when we formed a group called the African American Catholic Congregation with Reverend Stahlings at the time that said that our cultural identity should be a more prominent role to play in our religious expression, which is, in some ways, challenging for a Catholic Church that is rooted in a sort of universality of the church and so back in the '80s and '90s, that was a real challenge and we also said that women should also be able to be priests and that gay people belong in the church along with everyone else and that divorce shouldn't separate you from the love of God and lots of other things that are things that the church is actively debating and considering now. But 25 years ago, 30 years ago, it was much more tense. But we had three Catholic priests in our family and there were only about 300 in the country. My grandfather's side, very Catholic. I'm what you would call "blended," some of this and some of that, yes.

Malaika Horne: You mentioned some of this already but I'm going to ask you this question anyway: Who encouraged you inside and outside the home?

Rebecca Bennett: Well, inside my home, I have to say my mother and my grandmother, though they didn't share the same house. My mother was in DC, my grandmother was in Baltimore but I really do consider them sort of my parenting unit just because of how close...I'm an only child of an only child so we were a very close multi-generational group. My grandmother had very clear standards around excellence. That was her only standard and if it wasn't excellent, then it was unacceptable and so the worst thing you could be in her eyes was "common" and that wasn't about your station in life or what you possessed. It was about the extent to which you developed and exercised your God-given potential and so if you were common or if you were lazy-brained, that was an issue. My grandmother had these wonderful standards and I saw her civically engaged and she really nurtured and loved me well. She called me her royalty. She'd see me and she'd go, "Oh, my royalty," and I appreciate that, not because I ended up getting

a big head, but because too many of our children are not made to feel as though they are special and have seats of honor in our lives and I got that from the time I was born. My mother is the other person who really...the most important person who contributed to my growth and development: her love, her sacrifice, her presence, her exceptional standards as well. There used to be rivers of red on my papers. If it was incorrect, I had to do it again. That was her favorite, "Do it again; do it again, Rebecca, do it again. This is not going to...do it again" and showing me how to do it and watching her lead. She was a leader in Washington, DC She was chairman of the zoning commission and I would go with her to her hearings and I would watch her sit on the Dias with four other people, the only African American woman, there with the gavel and I would hear the lawyers and the real estate tycoons call her, "Madame Chair" and I would see her staying up late on nights and Sundays and weekends, pouring over her cases and making decisions and thinking through her logic and she would ask me my thoughts... and I don't know anything about development but she engaged me so I could understand and I did and I watched her engage with people who disagreed with her and stand her ground and I watched her build consensus too and pull people together and that, just that example and the intimacy with which I could connect with that example, gave me a sense of my place and my power. I saw it modeled and that I should be taken seriously in this world and that I had something to contribute and I watched the effort, though, and that's the thing: she worked so hard to be prepared for her role. So, I got an example of the kind of investment it takes to develop a profession and to be exceptional at it.

Malaika Horne:

What about outside the home, any influences?

Rebecca Bennett:

Yeah, I was surrounded...I hear a lot of conversation about the disintegration of the social structure of the black community and what I will say is that that was not my lived experience. So our pastor at church, Reverend Logan was a woman and my mama and my grandmamma and I had four uncles. My father was in Nigeria but I had four uncles who were friends of the family or my biological uncles, my father's brothers and they were protectors

and loved us and were present for us, took me on my dates and sat outside, took me and my girlfriends to the parties and sat outside so I always had the sense of protection. My doctors who talked to me and knew me, my mother's friends, who gave me my first jobs. I was born into a sisterhood. I mean, I'm a card-carrying member of the sisterhood. I'm going to die as a card-carrying member of the sisterhood. My grandmother had a network of soarers and dear friends. My mother had a network of friends and soarers and colleagues. I was just born into that. I've always had good girlfriends so I will say outside the home, like I said, my first jobs came from my mother's colleagues, right? That's the good old girls network.

Malaika Horne:

Absolutely, I'm been trying to hold one forever.

Rebecca Bennett:

Gave me my internships and told me to talk stuff, don't take none and to be wherever I needed to be and who were champions for the community and who were just beautiful and big and cool engaged me that way. They saw in me those things and they spent hours and hours and hours with me...my teachers. I had a village of loving, caring, supportive adults. So I guess I hit the lottery.

Malaika Horne:

You did, you absolutely did, even though I was thinking about this book, *Bowling Alone* by Robert Putnam that talks about the declining civic engagement except he said, for the African American community, that's what he said and yours is a sterling example of that but I think he appointed meaning to the church and to some other groups and activities.

Rebecca Bennett:

I will tell you this: My grandmother's student delivered me. He was an obstetrician. He was the first one to graduate, first black man to graduate from the University of Maryland, Baltimore's Medical School and he delivered me in a hospital that she and her friends built for black people so that we could have hospitals that treated us with care and dignity and they raised money to help build this hospital. She said one of the few times she ever went into a bar was to go and get the money from the men who would drink it away to use towards putting the hospital together. So I was born and I was delivered by her student in a hospital that she helped to build...that sense of civic engagement, civic connection,

do your part is marrow deep and was modeled my whole life by people who were similarly oriented and who were doing the heavy lifting, not only around racial justice and social opportunity, but around opportunities for women and every imaginable issue or alliance you could consider.

Malaika Horne: Born into an empowerment.

Rebecca Bennett: I really was. You know, I never thought of it that way until you said it but that is true.

Malaika Horne: You're painting really quite an amazing picture for us. Now, in college, did you have any leadership positions in college? Did anybody influence you?

Rebecca Bennett: I did, I was head of the what we would call, I guess, the black student union, was called the Swarthmore African American Student Society, SAASS. So I was president of that and I was co-chair of the orientation committee for all of the incoming freshmen and I did that with a dear friend of mine, Dr. Andrew Marino. And so I got a chance to do the sort of general student government piece and then the African American student government piece and then participated in a number of initiatives and opportunities while on campus, yes.

Malaika Horne: Did you have any other influences in college?

Rebecca Bennett: Well, my principle influences in college were not professors, though Professor Hillard Poucy, Professor Rick Valleli. I had some extraordinary professors. My principle influences were students and so I had four best friends. There were four of us and we called ourselves KRAP, for Keisha, Rebecca, Angela and Patrice and we could have been PARK but that was just way to sanitized so we were KRAP. But those ladies were and are among my best friends today.

Malaika Horne: What are they doing now?

Rebecca Bennett: Keisha is Dr. Keisha Constantine. She's a professor at NYU. She's a clinical psychologist and she has a private practice. Patrice is a psycho-therapist and she's also an instructor at Antioch College

and Angela is deceased. She died tragically about eight years ago but she was a filmmaker. She went to law school, graduated from Columbia University Law and ended up getting into film and won the HBO Film Festival. She was just a brilliant woman who died as a result of a terrible car accident.

Malaika Horne: Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. We're getting now into your career. Who influenced you throughout your career or at any point.

Rebeccah Bennett: So, remember I said that sisterhood thing, I was born into the sisterhood. So interestingly enough, I have only worked for black women and I'm in my 40's. Now, how many people can say that? And it wasn't by design...or it wasn't consciously but my first influence, I remember working for a woman named Carrie Thornhill who was my mother's colleague. She was probably one of the most central figures to me in terms of someone who modeled community engagement, community leadership, who just wore power but wore it in a communal, loving way. It wasn't authoritarian and it wasn't hierarchical, recognized and acknowledged the value in everybody and would do battle with any system or institution that did not. So she was the, from a career building standpoint, she gave me my first jobs in college and all of that and then I got to work with the YWCA in Chester, Pennsylvania, not that far from Swarthmore and Vanessa Redgrave was the...

Malaika Horne: That's the name of an actress.

Rebeccah Bennett: It is. She was the executive director there and we had a program called Adolescence Promoting Excellent, APEX, which sought to bring educational equity to the Chester school system. And then from there, I worked with another woman named Jean Wereford when I was in graduate school. So I was in graduate school and I was doing AmeriCorps at the same time and she was doing anti-poverty youth development work in Detroit and so I commuted there and it was under the leadership then of the executive director, Jean Wereford who further cultivated me and showed me what managing an agency or an institution and taking your vision and getting funders, major funders, at the time it was the Kellogg Foundation, to support life cycle anti-poverty work looked

like. And then I left there and I came to St. Louis and post an experience of the CORO experience that I had there. I worked for two black women, Jessica Perkins and Wanda Godwin who had just started a brand new firm at the time called Vector Communications, so public policy and community engagement consulting firm. And so I did all of that before I owned my own business but these women let me see the intricacies of entrepreneurship and of being in a private business that promotes the public interest and gave me an opportunity to really participate in lots of regional decision-making. So honestly, I hit the jackpot on so many different levels. Of course, I worked with all kinds of people and often worked where there were very few people of color and very few women who were at the tables that I got a chance to grace but I worked for black women.

Malaika Horne:

So what brought you to St. Louis?

Rebecca Bennett:

The CORO fellows program which was a leadership program of public affairs, yeah, so when I finished graduate school, the first leg I had intended to go back to get a doctorate but I took a break in between. I'd done AmeriCorps and graduate school simultaneously so I had the experiential and the theoretical and I wanted a little bit more experiential before I dove even further into the theoretical and CORO was a great opportunity for that and they located me in St. Louis which I did not pick so it was not my top choice for where to put me but that's where they put me.

Malaika Horne:

I know because I've had CORO fellows and they were very impressive and they don't let you decide.

Rebecca Bennett:

No, they don't let you decide.

Malaika Horne:

I'm glad that...

Rebecca Bennett:

That's right, they pick you nationally and then they place you in whatever city and it was one of the best things and one of the people who offered a training during that was Jessica Perkins who owned Vector Communications and so following that exposure, we made a great connection and I ended up being the very first employee.

Malaika Horne: Is that right? You're going to have to brief us on Vector because it's very well known in the region and they do a lot of good work. So just tell us about that and then we'll move onto your new business.

Rebeccah Bennett: Sure. So Vector is a public engagement and communications consulting firm and that means that we bring citizens together to discuss and resolve public policy issues. That's what we do and we do so through public engagement on transportation projects, education projects, community projects, healthcare projects, environmental remediation projects, any number of projects. We are not content specialists; we're process specialists and we learn a lot about the content of any particular arena that we happen to work in. We also do community planning, strategic planning and then on the communications side, there's media relations, video productions and those things but all in the service of some public effort or initiative so Vector's not going to do your wedding for you but it will do a video about regional transformation for a regional actor.

Malaika Horne: Didn't Vector oversee when they redid the Highway I-64/40.

Rebeccah Bennett: 64/40, yes, so did public engagement for the redevelopment of 64/40, of 70, of Highway 367, a lot of highway work, also done a lot of train and light rail work and did some aviation work early on. So had a foothold in transportation in the region and actually is the largest public engagement consulting firm in the region. So quite a significant feat for those two amazing women.

Malaika Horne: They are.

Rebeccah Bennett: And so they ought to be commended for a job exceptionally well done.

Malaika Horne: I agree whole-heartedly. Now let's move on to your new project. I think it's fairly new.

Rebeccah Bennett: Well, it's 10 years old but I did it on the side for most of those years so only in the last two years...

Malaika Horne: It's called Emerging Wisdom.

Rebecca Bennett: It's called Emerging Wisdom. Only in the last two years has it been what I do principally. It is what I do. And so Emerging Wisdom really was an opportunity for me to work to facilitate change at multiple levels so at Vector, the focus was social, largely social and gender-oriented, some institutional work and I have a mind for systems and have an affinity or an ability to work with institutions but also a heart for individuals. And so I needed a way to be able to focus on personal growth, organizational development and social change because we live in all those contexts so personal, organizational and social transformation happens to be my business and consulting training, facilitation planning, coaching and professional speaking are the way in which I do those things. But I got sort of frustrated that we could help communities, engage them in conversations about transportation and we could get new highways but we still saw the same kind of rampant segregation. We still saw great community isolation, social isolation. We still saw concentrated poverty, that there were limits to the amount of change that we could really make without getting deeper into why patterns are the way they are, how people are conditioned to think, believe, choose and act and invest but I wanted to get at the underlying causes and not just move the pieces sort of symbolically and so I needed a means to do that.

Malaika Horne: I wish we could talk more but our time is going really, really fast so I do want to touch on a couple more points about work-life balance. Briefing talk about that. How do you manage that with family and work, starting a new business in particular?

Rebecca Bennett: I don't believe in work-life balance.

Malaika Horne: Okay, you don't believe in it, okay.

Rebecca Bennett: No, I don't. I think for balance, balance connotes for people a steady state, sort of stasis that I don't think is how you actually do this thing. I think it's more about juggling. I look for work-life harmony and so that is, is what I'm doing the highest and best expression of my life's purpose? And how do I live that purpose, not only in the contracts and the client relationships that I have but also how do I live that purpose in the intimate relationships

with my loves one, with my friends, with my family, with my children, and sometimes the family element will be more central, especially because I have younger children so the need for attention and intention around them. I know that there's nothing better to develop and cultivate children than loving attention, not food, clothing, shelter, protection, loving attention is the number one thing they need and then sometimes it's going to lean more towards my work. And so I don't keep those things at 50-50 because that's not how it works. There are times when I'm more intensive one place and less present others and there are times when I'm more present one place and less present someplace else but I remind myself each day that I am here to help people become aware of accepting and act upon the highest and best within themselves and create communities that sustain the best in us all and that has to include my marriage, that has to include me, that has to include my kids because if I help to do that in some project or community out there and I have neglected these other commitments and opportunities for deep love, nurturing and presence in my life, then I have failed. So I strive for harmony and when there's discord, I'm surrounded by people who are clear and tell me the truth and say, "You are not in harmony. You are not in alignment. You are not present," and I take heed to those people and I also ask for support. It's taken me more than four decades to realize I can't do it all but I finally figured it out. I can't do it all. So there's somebody who helps, I have people that help me with all of the other things that need to be done, both at home and at work because I can't do it all. What can I do? What's uniquely mine to do? Raising my kids is uniquely mine to do but laundry? Maybe not. So, really...

Malaika Horne:

You've got priorities.

Rebecca Bennett:

...I have to get real about what my abilities are, what my constraints are.

Malaika Horne:

Work-life harmony, got it.

Rebecca Bennett:

Yes.

Malaika Horne:

Your leadership style?

Rebecca Bennett: It's collaborative. That's my leadership style. I'll have to tell you, I've had a lot of investment in making me a bright bulb in the world, a bright light in the world but I will say that there is no single bright light that is bright enough to be able to help us find our way out of much of the maladaptive behaviors that we engage in, not only as a community, but as a species and that if we are to face and to address and resolve the greatest challenges of our time, it is not because there will be a savior who rescues us from our bad choices. It's because we will create a field of enlightenment, not a single bright bulb but a field of bright bulbs where people are able to contribute the knowledge, resources, understanding, desires that they have to the world in ways that are transformative. So my leadership style fundamentally recognizes the value, the innate intelligence and wisdom, usable wisdom that's all around me in lots of people and seeks to cultivate that for the purpose of being able to advance our transformation in ways that are evolutionary and a single individual I don't think can do that.

Malaika Horne: Right, I agree... Now, do you think that men and women have different leadership styles or they overlap or there's no difference?

Rebecca Bennett: I think the extent to which men and women have different leadership styles may not be a reflection of biological differences as much as it's a reflection of our social conditioning. So do I believe that men can be collaborative in their approaches? Absolutely. Do I believe that women could be hierarchical in their approaches? Absolutely, but the reality is that men are often conditioned and socially programmed to be competitive and to focus on hierarchy and status and standing and women are often socially conditioned to be more inclusive, deliberative and collaborative but I think the challenges facing our species at this time are going to require us, though, to do much more boundary expanding, not to forego competition but to engage it in its place, to learn how to work well with one another, particularly around the thorny things in order for us to get some traction so that we can see more of the whole. We all have varying perceptions and perspectives but if we want to get at what reality is, it's multi-

dimensional. It is messy. It is all of those things and so we need the multiple perspectives and touch points in order to get a decent handle on what we're really working with. And I don't think that's a function of gender. I think we're going to have to change the way in which we condition boys and girls.

Malaika Horne: How we socialize boys and girls.

Rebecca Bennett: Yeah.

Malaika Horne: Absolutely.

Rebecca Bennett: So that they are prepared for the challenges and the opportunities that they will encounter and that our species will encounter, yeah.

Malaika Horne: Well said. Any big opportunities on the horizon?

Rebecca Bennett: For whom?

Malaika Horne: For Emerging Wisdom, I guess or something else you'd like to talk about.

Rebecca Bennett: Yeah. Emerging Wisdom, right now we have, like, 40 institutional clients. I'm not quite sure how it happened. I am shocked by this because it's been referral only. So I guess I should not underestimate what 20 years of hard work and commitment, largely outside of public view, what that can do. I guess I've been surprised by the amount of goodwill that I have experienced and also good fortune. It's not to say that I haven't worked hard but I do also recognize that there's some stuff that's not just what you worked for; it is fortune: the right place, right time, both of those.

Malaika Horne: There is such a thing as luck.

Rebecca Bennett: Yes, yes, and so I will say that I have had my share of good luck. The next sort of growth place for me and what I think makes the work that I do...will make it unrecognizable in three years, is to really grow. I've done a lot of the systems work, a lot of the institutional work and I've done the personal growth work under the radar for many years but it's about to move center stage because I do think that if we don't get at consciousness, how will we cultivate human consciousness; how do we look clearly at

human conditioning and the ways in which it enables and disables us, that without having those conversations...and those conversations in the public sphere so that those conversations happen in therapeutic sessions and on couches but they don't happen as much in the public space and yet they are the driving force behind much of our policy, much of our institutional and organizational decisions and functions and dysfunctions. I am being called, I feel a magnetic force pulling me more into...

Malaika Horne: I've been picking up on it.

Rebecca Bennett: ...that.

Malaika Horne: Do you write a column? I don't know.

Rebecca Bennett: I do, I could write a column in the American...

Malaika Horne: I see it on Facebook and your yoga sessions and so I kind of picked up on that.

Rebecca Bennett: Yeah.

Malaika Horne: So, what do you look for in people in terms of their leadership potential? What do you see, particularly young people, what do you see? Like somebody...what is it, Lorna Godwin...

Rebecca Bennett: Mm-hmm, Lorna and Jessica, mm-hmm.

Malaika Horne: And Jessica saw something in you. What do you see in people?

Rebecca Bennett: They're the basics. I'm looking for strong communication skills. I need people who think clearly and can figure out how to get at what they all know. I'm looking for strong relationship skills, people who are able to navigate multiple worlds and feel themselves at home in a number of them, not to say that they won't experience challenge in them but who fundamentally have a sense of their belonging, they carry with them a sense of belonging and why is that? Because they tend to have an inclusive orientation so that when they encounter others who are not like them, they tend to be more curious than they are defensive and judgmental and that, just that difference can bring about opportunity and possibility so strong communication skills, strong

relationship skills, deep curiosity. Intelligence by itself isn't enough. Curiosity is what I'm looking for: are you interested in what's happening around you? Are you animated and excited about what you don't know and what you have the opportunity to learn? Are you picking up the scent of opportunity, much like an animal would pick up the scent of something. And that comes from being curious, that you recognize that you always have something to learn. Are you generous with what you know and that has to do with personal maturity and an intellectual security. That is to say, do you share what you've figured out because your learning isn't just for your own development. Your learning has the potential to catapult us all. That's the nature of symbolic consciousness. The minute we started creating pictograms and hieroglyphics and letters, it gave us the opportunity to transfer knowledge across time and across space and do you do that? That changed everything in terms of human civilization. And so, with whatever wisdom you are figuring out in your life, do you find ways to share it so that other people have an advantage from your learning and not just you. So I'm looking for curiosity; I'm looking for generosity; I'm looking for strong communication; I'm looking for sound and good relationship skills. Those are all the kinds of things and they are not context-specific. They are universal in their application.

Malaika Horne:

Absolutely. It sounds like that's the next question which is, what's the best advice you could give young people, in particular, who want to make a difference, but I think you've already said that.

Rebecca Bennett:

Mm-hmm, develop those things, deepen in those ways. It is not to say that technical knowledge and expertise is not useful, but it is to say that much of the technical knowledge and expertise that we thought would be fundamental to life we are discovering isn't so that our technology platforms are really allowing us to have cars that people don't have to drive. Can you imagine that?

Malaika Horne:

So who is your hero, heroine, mentor?

Rebecca Bennett:

So I hit the jackpot in poker if you have four aces and that's all I know about poker so I can't go much further. But I talked about them. My mother, Maybelle Bennett, my grandmother, Ruby Nels

Taylor, Jessica Perkins and Lorna Godwin, those are my heroines and so I hit the jackpot. I have four aces, a full deck, a full hand. I'm going to stop with the metaphor now.

Malaika Horne: So what do you usually read?

Rebecca Bennett: I read a lot of consciousness books, studies, those sorts of things that help give me some insight into the human condition and human choices. I read the newspaper, the New York Times. I've never managed to shake that no matter where I am. I read it with fidelity. Sometimes I read the Washington Post. I love the National Geographic and I do like to read romance novels, I will say. I would say it's a secret but I just said it on tape.

Malaika Horne: You're a romantic.

Rebecca Bennett: So every once in a while because it requires no intellectual heavy lifting.

Malaika Horne: It's all about the heart.

Rebecca Bennett: Yes, yes. So I do a lot of reading of...a wide variety of things.

Malaika Horne: Any hobbies?

Rebecca Bennett: Well, I love to read. I love yoga and so I have been practicing my whole life, teaching yoga probably for about 20 years. I love to dance. I love to play with my children in the artistic, creative arts kind of expression. I may not be all that good but I do enjoy it. So, yeah.

Malaika Horne: What one message would you leave about women as change agents?

Rebecca Bennett: Well, I would like to remind women, and any other group that has experienced social oppression of any kind, that oppression in all of its forms has never been a match for a fully creative human mind and a courageous human heart, that people who are creative in their thinking and courageous in their hearts have always found ways to go around, under, through, in front of and behind of anything that would get in their way and their own tenacity, daring and creativity has opened paths for everybody else. And so

I would like women to remember that everything they need they have in terms of the creative mind and the courageous heart and that if they apply those, whatever the obstacles they encounter, they'll be able to take us forward, even if only by inches because this is a long game that we're playing. It's not a short one and it's not about change in our lifetimes, although we would all love to see it, but it's the long view of evolving our species and elevating our civilizations. So, if we keep the long view and we do our part, we can't be beat, not as a collective.

Malaika Horne: Very profound.

Rebeccah Bennett: Not as a collective, maybe as an individual we may...

Malaika Horne: And the collective is so important.

Rebeccah Bennett: But not as a collective.

Malaika Horne: Right, and sometimes we overlook that.

Rebeccah Bennett: Yeah.

Malaika Horne: Any awards or recognitions?

Rebeccah Bennett: A lot of them.

Malaika Horne: Every time I ask that question, the women go "Ugh." Why don't they want to talk about awards and recognitions? Just top three.

Rebeccah Bennett: Okay. The YWCA Women in Leadership Award, the Salute to Leaders Award from the Urban League, the Exemplary Women Leader from the National Council of Negro Women, and on and on. But the greatest recognition I've ever gotten hasn't been from any of those institutions, God love them and I appreciate their awards, I don't want them to think I don't, but it's from my daughter who looks up at me and says, "You know, Mommy, how come all these people know you? What are you doing, Mommy? What are you doing? What do you do?" and she's five.

Malaika Horne: She's five years old?

Rebeccah Bennett: She's five years old and she's curious now and I said to her, I said, "Well, Willow, Mommy tries to help make people's lives better,"

and she says, "I can do that too," and I said, "You will do that more."

Malaika Horne: You're passing on the legacy of those strong women, those intelligent women that you had in your life which is going to keep going.

Rebeccah Bennett: That's the intention. I said, "You are better than Mommy. You're better than Mommy. All you need, though, to really be better than Mommy is that you have to keep learning and then you have to take what you learn and put it into service of other people."

Malaika Horne: Absolutely.

Rebeccah Bennett: So that's the greatest recognition I could ever get.

Malaika Horne: Anything you missed?

Rebeccah Bennett: No, I think the one last thing that I want to say is I want us to really nurture our children. Women as change agents, it's sort of easy to move into the maternal space but I'm going to lean there because so much of what's right with us comes from how we nurture our children and so much of what's wrong with us comes from how we nurture our children and if we can learn to look at our children as sovereign souls, people with their own innate intelligence and purpose and see them as gifts that we can cultivate, along with all of the responsibilities that we have for them but where we're not interested in impinging upon their sovereignty, just helping to guide it so that they exercise good judgment, are used to thinking of themselves as powerful and not in terms of "I have something you don't have," but in terms of, "I have something to contribute and that I am worthy of consideration and that I must consider other people." If we do that, so many of our issues would just go bye-bye. But the way we treat our children is a good indicator of the health and well-being of our species.

Malaika Horne: Well said, thank you so much.

Rebeccah Bennett: Thank you.