

An Interview with
Barbara Washington

at *The Historical Society of Missouri* St. Louis
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interviewed by Dr. Blanche Touhill
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Oral History Program

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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.

Blanche Touhill: Would you introduce yourself?

Barbara Washington: Hi, I'm Barbara Ann Washington.

Blanche Touhill: Talk about your youth, Barbara: where you grew up; how did you play; did you have siblings; your parents; your uncles and aunts; your grandparents, anybody you want to talk about in your family circle. Talk about your elementary/secondary school. Who encouraged you? What did they say that made you think that you really had some ability and you could be a leader?

Barbara Washington: Well, first of all, Dr. Touhill, I grew up in a hot Delta of Bourbon, Mississippi. I was born in Arcola, Mississippi and it was an extremely rural area that I grew up in and I had a sister and a brother that was with me initially and we used to have to make fun ourselves and, boy, we used to build our own tractors and make-believe big wheels that children have today and we used to pour water on floors and pretend we were swimming because there were no swimming pools and we used to do a lot of things to try to entertain ourselves. We used to sing and so, when I was growing up, I suffered the loss of my mother at an early age because she just couldn't raise us. She had some medical situation that occurred as a result of her husband who passed away and so they took her away from us. And so therefore I didn't have my father in my life and I had just assumed the role of being a leader there, with my sister and my family.

Blanche Touhill: Were you the oldest?

Barbara Washington: I was the oldest girl.

Blanche Touhill: And you were sort of in charge of the others?

Barbara Washington: I was in charge of my sister and brother and then later, my brother also had some illness. He suffered from seizures and back in those days, we didn't have any money and we didn't have family and so they put my brother in a home because the teachers and the schools couldn't handle the seizures, they were so tremendous. They called them grand mal seizures or something. And so I didn't see my brother anymore. They put him away in a home to take care of him. So that only left my sister and me. We

went through living in many, many homes with different family members, I was told they were family members. I really didn't know how they related to us but they didn't show us a lot of love at first but I still found that we could entertain ourselves, we could tell stories and we could love each other. And I knew also that my mother loved us because when she was with us, she showed us that. So, as I took care of my sisters and took on responsibility, I found out that I should have been in school and it turned out I didn't get to school until I was nine years old. I was two years behind and when I did go to school, I was older than the other kids and I felt kind of awkward. But I was already in charge and so I knew that once I stepped in school though, that I loved it. It was my second grade teacher, Miss Whitehead, who turned out to be a really nice lady who kind of encouraged me but when I got into 3rd grade, it was Miss Louise Howell and that's the lady who really told me that, "You can do anything you want to do," and so she helped me by letting me stay at her home and making a costume for me to be in a play called "March, You're Such a Changeable Chap," and to this day, I remember that I would not have been able to take part in this play without her participation.

Blanche Touhill:

Did you sing in that play?

Barbara Washington:

I didn't sing. I actually had a recitation and from that, I just blossomed and I started doing speeches and entering into contests, from the 4th grade on and then also, I developed sort of a competitive spirit while at school. I went to Abraham Lincoln Attendance Center from 1st to 7th grade and I got two doubles and I ended up being in the right class at the end. But as I was going through school, I engaged with people who really were studying hard and concentrated on being the smartest and I liked that term. So I used to just watch some of the students as they would get together and they would study. They would have lunches and things with them and I didn't have what they had because some of them lived in Leland, Mississippi and I lived in the rural area. So when I would go home, I had to farm. My sister and I had to feed the hogs, feed the chicks, pull the peanuts, the potatoes. We canned food. We did everything. So we were like child farmers, I would call it. Even though we did that, we found fun in doing it.

We used to sit and have a tub filled full of pears and we would just sit there all day long, cutting and getting those pears ready for preserve and what I found out later is that we would sell some of those preserves and make money to help take care of some of the things that we needed to have done later. Along the way, as I grew up, I knew that I wanted to be somebody and I would watch those students that were smart. I called them the “smart bees” and eventually I joined the gang and I was always competitive. I enjoyed English and I enjoyed civics and history and I would compete with them whenever there were poems to remember and all this. So I loved Latin. I loved everything about school because it was my refuge because when I would go home, there was the work and then there was the turbulence that had kind of moved into our lives as we settled in with this lady who took my sister and I in at the age of 55. She was a nice lady that did that for having done that but she, herself, had some issues and in that she was ailing, we took on the brunt of the responsibility and we carried the load for the family in farming. Then she met and married this gentleman who had some serious adjustments and family issues and he inflicted that pain upon my sister and I but what I always said was that, as I was growing up, I decided that I wanted to join church and I wanted to know what it was like to get to know God. So I joined the mourner’s bench. People don’t talk about that anymore but it’s a place where you would go to church and you would pray and you would ask to know more about God and to believe, to know what it’s about. And as a child, you were laughing, you see the adults in there crying or whatever they’re doing and you’re wondering, what are they talking about now? What does it mean, getting to know God. And so eventually it all happened to me. I prayed and prayed because I wanted to believe there was a God because he saved me from some of the abuse that was going on and He would protect me. I just felt that I wanted to know this God and I did, I became a Christian at the end of nine and I was baptized and my sister and I were baptized on the same day and we were baptized in a river. It was a muddy river with snakes in it, everything was in it. It was quite amazing but I was not even afraid and I couldn’t believe that because, even though I’m a country girl, I did have a little fear there and so,

when we were baptized, that was the first new dress I had ever owned because my sister and I used to wear hand-me-downs. A lady from the church bought us a new dress and after we were baptized in this lake...and they were singing this beautiful precious song, "Wade in the Water" and we looked up on the bank side and all these people were wearing white robes and singing. It was like the movie, "Oh, Brother, Where Art Thou." I think George Clooney played in it. Well, it had a scene in that movie that reminded me of when I got baptized and it was a precious time for me because when I looked at myself in the mirror when we changed, they washed us around the pumps on the outside. It had this little thin shield on it and they washed you and got you cleaned up and I looked at my face and it was glowing and I believed and that belief kind of guided me in my life. I started to sing and the first song that I sang when I was accepted in the church was "Sister Grace of God Found Me" and so I went on to get involved with different singing groups as I was in the church. There was a gentleman by the name of H.P. Lee. He was the music director and Mr. Lee had a big family but in those days down South, I didn't see many married couples together or men who had an education beyond high school. But Mr. Lee had gone to college and he impressed me and the way he talked, the fact that he could read music and everything really stood out for me. So he adopted me and my sister and would take us around to various places to sing and eventually we joined a group called The Traveling Angels and the lady who founded that group, I got a chance to go back and see her in Mississippi about four years ago and this woman was a dynamo. She was a very high first soprano and I remember as a child, my sister and I were the youngest two members and we were so excited because they would have these fancy dresses on when they would go and perform in a city because we traveled, not only throughout Mississippi, we went to Arkansas, we even came to St. Louis. That was a very good way to get us out and doing things and during that time when we performed, it allowed us to focus on our school work and focus on singing. Some of the young ladies that were in the South were not lucky enough to be able to do that. So I thank Miss. Cones and also Brother H.P. Lee, the guy who was the director of our choir at

St. John's Baptist Church for giving me a chance to join that choir. One of the songs they were singing was called "Traveling Shoes, Lord, I Got on My Traveling Shoes" and we did travel and they would have these beautiful pink dresses on the group, I just could imagine now, I could see it now, how the group were in unison, sort of like the Temptations and they would step together and Miss Cones would get into that music. In Mississippi, a lot of great people came from there, including BB King and Tyrone Davis who was my cousin and so many more. They had, I call, a little Cajun-suasion. Some of their music, the guitar and everything that they played and the piano, the bluesy type of influence was incorporated into our style of singing and so I just remember, that was a fun time for me and it kept me busy. When I would go back to school, I could talk about those things to the students and it gave us something that they could look at and I don't think they were jealous of it and I was not trying to make them jealous, but I wanted to let them know that I had value. Then while going to school, I met my counselor in the...I think this was in the 6th ...7th grade and they would hire students to do work and since I was older, she allowed me to work in her office.

Blanche Touhill:

And she paid you?

Barbara Washington:

And she paid me to do paperwork in her office. I had privilege and privy to looking at confidential information. It was unbelievable. I felt so in charge and so trusted and loved by her giving me this opportunity because she could have hired a senior someone else to come and work for her and she chose me. I worked there for one summer which was considered a year. Then comes along the integration and in the 7th grade, we moved from there to Dean Attendance Center and at Dean, when I got there, we had white and blacks going to school together and it was during the time when the riots were pretty hectic and as you've seen here in Ferguson now, it's a nasty thing to see. I've always been a person of a non-violent nature. I consider myself a lover of humanity and, quite honestly, my sister calls me scared because she would take them on but I've always backed off and I've always been able to use my negotiation tactics to get out of trouble. I don't like trouble or fights, violence. So when they started the riots in

school, the African American students were trying to stay out of school and boycott and they were trying to turn over buses and then some of the white kids were taunting the black kids. So I wrote a poem in school and the principal got a hold of it and he repeated it over the loudspeaker and my poem helped to save a lot of children from getting into trouble or more violence taking place on the school parking lot when we would leave, because that's when everything would start, when school was out. Then, as I went on to school, I had already made it to be in the smart group, I called it, or the group of students that were more advanced than the others. So I wanted to figure out, well, now, you got to figure out how to get in this group now because we've got everybody together. And I noticed that the students I had come to go to school with now, they had everything. The schools were different; the food was different; everything was different. So they had fathers in their lives; they had book bags; they had papers and pencils and I had none of this and I was living with a man who had beat me for getting a note from school saying I was smart. So I had a little trouble dealing with how I was going to do this. But then, I went on and I always respected the teachers and I wish kids would do that now because if you respect your teacher and you ask questions...and I was always inquisitive and if I didn't understand anything, I would ask a question. And so, by me doing that, my teachers took a real interest in me and then, as we moved on and I got into 9th grade, Miss Nanette Baker did the thing for me because I had already noticed and scoped out who were the smartest students in school. One was Anne Bassett and Mary Margaret Germany. I will never forget it and they used to sit in front of me. They were first, second and I was third. I wanted to be number one. And here comes the challenge. You know Richard Burton is from St. Louis but he had an English accent and I didn't know that he was from St. Louis but they played the poem, "The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner," and when Miss Nanette Baker announced at the beginning of school in the 9th grade in our English class, "Whichever student can remember and recite The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner will be exempt from my class for the whole semester." Well, I thought about that and I looked at that poem and I said, oh, and then I knew when I got home, we

didn't have lights in the bedroom and it was cold in the evenings and we lived in the country so we had to work and then go to bed and if we were caught up, we were in trouble. So how am I going to learn this poem? So on the bus I would try to remember what I heard the students would say when they would get up and they were doing their turns and eventually, with me being a person that I observe a lot and I was a "W," I was Washington, so I got to hear all the A's and the B's, everybody who recited the poem and when it was time for me, I stood up and I became Richard Burton that day and I recited that entire poem and I became number one in that school. Then I decided, I said immediately, "Miss Baker, I don't want to be out of school. Let me come, can I please come back?" I didn't want to be out of school. I don't know what's wrong with children today when they don't really get it; when you're in that class, grab what you can because eventually that's what helped me to make it to this point today. I mean, I went on to school and studied and then eventually things got so rough at home I couldn't stay. So I ended up getting pregnant and having to leave where I was staying, moved on to Kentucky with my children's father, stayed there, across the street from the gold mine but I got my GED and I passed it with flying colors, moved on from there and we went to Nuremburg, Germany.

Blanche Touhill:

Was he in the service?

Barbara Washington:

He was a military man. So I had my first baby and then I had my second baby in Ft. Knox, Kentucky before I went to Germany, so two wonderful boys and while in Germany, I decided that I wanted to live on the economy, be familiar with what was happening in that country. I developed friendships with the people.

Blanche Touhill:

In Germany?

Barbara Washington:

In Germany, and I learned to speak a little German fluently and when I came back here to St. Louis in 1978, I spoke it pretty well but my sons really did a great job with it. But what prepared me for Germany is my Latin teacher. I took Latin two years in a row and I wish I could have taken it forever because she was very inspiring and she taught me all the derivatives and being able to

conjugate and look at the languages and figure out what they're saying and be able to understand. When I got to Germany, it prepared me to be able to speak a very guttural language: (Gratis linches bitte...Guten Tagg, Guten Morgen, Vie Gates des Innen Haute so it really prepared me and so while in Germany also, I saw a different side of me whereby in Mississippi, if you were a dark-skinned young woman, sometimes you weren't viewed as being beautiful or if you had thick, thick hair. And so when I got to Germany, I found out that everybody loved that and they used to say how beautiful I was and that my skin was beautiful and I used to always wear really dark colors and then suddenly, they were suggesting different colors. I started to wear yellow and oranges, like I have on now, and other colors and I found it made my skin pop. So I started to get a new sense of awareness for myself and a new sense of confidence. And also, I've never been racist. I've always accepted people for who they are, even when I was growing up in the South. I had white friends at school, black friends, I worked with everybody because I think it takes that type of personality to be able to understand everybody can't be the same. You got to give everybody a chance until they show you. And so while I was in Germany, I got a chance to see people of all ethnicities working together and I really loved how brothers and sisters would walk around on the Rhine River and they would be holding hands, brothers and sisters. It showed so much love and they were so clean, the area, the Tier Gardens and the food was delicious and I just loved being there. I got a chance to introduce my children to several play moms, I call it, people who...kind of called them, they were either their play aunts or play moms because they always wanted to keep my kids if I went to work or if I did something there. And I became pretty popular as an American, unlike some Americans who were there. They were afraid to reach out or they thought because they were Americans, they were better than them or they didn't think that they would have to get along with these people. But I made myself out there and to work with the economy and that's what I think it takes all of us to do to make the world go around. So I think my upbringing which goes back to seeing my mother struggle, she was married at the age of 13 and when I look back at that, I say, wow, how could

that happen? How could a mother let that happen? But she wasn't involved in her life. And parents need to be involved with the children's lives. So, as a mother of my own two children, I have been very involved with their lives. I never let them out of my sight. They're still living here in St. Louis and they're grown men but I'm still mom, or mama, and their wives have called them "mama's boys" but you need to show your children that you're there and that they'll always be your children. So I think because I didn't have parents, sort of played that role, for me to be real...

Blanche Touhill:

But you had help from an uncle?

Barbara Washington:

I did. What really inspired me as a younger child, my uncle who I will never forget. His name is L.C. Pratt. They were a lot of initials. I don't know what were...about giving people names with initials, "L.C.," but we called him "Coot Jack," and they have nicknames too. But he was the sweetest uncle. I love him. That man, for as long as I can remember, until about nine years old, he brought me a bag of groceries from the city stores. You see, when you are raised in the country, you eat all the vegetables from the garden, the fruits from the trees, and at that time, you don't know that that's great but I was looking for stuff in plastic bags and cookies and what have you, stuff that they could buy from a store, pre-packed. And so he would bring me goodies and things and chickens that weren't plucked and killed, chickens that were already taken care of from his department store. Then later he bought me my first tricycle and after that, he knew I loved music and so he paid for me to take piano lessons and he had eight children and he did that for me. He would bring me to his home in Leland, Mississippi, in a place called "Blackjack" and I would be there and I would watch them and I would say, oh, wouldn't it be so nice to have a family like this? He loved his wife. They had eight kids and whenever he would come in from work, he would always kiss her and they would hug and she sometimes would fuss a little bit because he'd be late. But they showed so much love and that gave me a very good sense of encouragement.

Blanche Touhill:

And he encouraged you?

Barbara Washington: Yes, he did, and what he did for me is that he would say, in spite of everything because he would hear about the situations going on in my life where I lived and that man used to chase us with guns. He would do all kinds of things. He was a...the man who raised us, he was amazing and I sometimes laugh about it now because I think about how my sister and I were always...we were like track stars. I did run a little track too. I was almost as good as Jackie Joyner Kersee at one point because I could do a pretty good broad jump, but I could race is someone got behind us. So we used to catch rabbits, you know, so we were good at getting away from things. But my uncle would hear about this man and some of the things he would do and he would say to me, he said, "One day I know you're going to be somebody and anytime you want to come here, just come." He said, "You got so much tenacity and you got so much leadership and I know you're going to be someone." He says, "You're my little bobcat." He put his hand on my head and he said, "You're my little bobcat," and I just remember that and so, as I love on, I've worked in the community for many years and helped children because I felt that was my mission, to help children and in particular, to help girls. So I started a business called "Bobcat," in honor and memory of my late uncle, L.C. Pratt. And Bobcat is going to cover what I've been doing for about 30 years or so at a local non-profit here in St. Louis.

Blanche Touhill: Let's stop for just a moment and come back. Now you're coming back to St. Louis. So your sister lived here?

Barbara Washington: Yes.

Blanche Touhill: And so you had to get a job. So what did you do?

Barbara Washington: Well, when I came back here, my ex had already determined that we were going to be ex. He had processed and started things when I was overseas and I knew that it was over, and plus, he had been in the military himself and he had experienced some issues in life and our life ended as a couple. So then my children and I were living with my sister and her step-mother and her dad who was here in St. Louis. It was wonderful for a while and then things got a little rough there because there was too many people in the

house: my sister, me and two kids and they didn't have much and so eventually we had to find our own place. With that said, I was never afraid of work because as a child, I worked in the fields, I picked cotton, I chopped cotton, I served as a babysitter, I worked as a CETA worker, which meant I travelled around in the summer, kind of like SLATE here in St. Louis, and I registered children for programs and things of that nature. I worked for the counselor's office. I worked as a food prep in the cafeteria fixing the pies; I was a pie girl, and then I worked as a waitress in a restaurant, was the first African American waitress to work in this restaurant. So I was doing all that so I was not afraid of working. So I knew, though, that I needed to get prepared to enter the work world and take care of myself solely and I was not going to go to the streets. So I enrolled in the Arthur J. Kennedy Skill Center, I went on to Hickey Secretarial School, almost back-to-back, doing these things and I finished them in record time and got my certificates and completed classes, business classes. Then I ended up getting temporary jobs and I worked those temporary jobs for about maybe three to four years...actually five years or so and I did extremely well because the background I developed in working these jobs...I guess I was 23...24, I learned so much. I worked with CPA's, I worked with the Peabody Company, I worked with Gardener Advertising, advancers for the president of the company. I could type 103 words a minute. I did everything I could to achieve. I took shorthand. I was great at customer relations and eventually I got a job with the Commerce Bank which was Tower Grove Bank at the time; now it's Commerce. Then I went on to the Urban League for a brief stint. I worked for the RCGA in the Private Industry Council for a brief stint. Then I landed at General American Life Insurance Company and I was there for quite a little while. That was my real full-time job there. I met so many wonderful people there. I had so many mentors and people like Warren Goodenough and John Nedoe, the Director of Communications for General American recognized that I had great people skills, that I had great communication skills and so he used to involve me in almost every project they did. I almost became the poster child for various events. I got a chance to meet Bob Hope at the opening of the St. Louis Center. He took me there to

meet him and to talk and then they chose me to be the torch lighter for the company, to speak and raise money for the United Way of Greater St. Louis. The president had something to do with that, Ed Trusine. I worked with the blood drive there and did all kinds of volunteer work. I ran for the Women's Club secretarial position and won out of about 3,000 women, mostly Caucasian. They had just only a handful of African Americans at the time but I did it because I accepted people and worked with everybody and I became secretary for the Women's Club. I sang at different functions and then later they chose me to be the tour guide for the Million Dollars Agents conferences. So whenever the Million Dollars Agents came into town, I escorted them around and introduced them to the president's office and gave them the tour. So I did that and then I got involved with conference planning and I worked with the agency sales department and I just enjoyed that work and I got a chance to work with the agents all over the United States and also planned conferences in Hawaii and different places that they would take these agents for their Conference of Champion functions and where their families and everybody would go for their winning and doing great salesmanship. So I just used to let the agents know that "I'm there for you when you call and whatever we can do to make things work for you" and I used to get so many flowers and so many gifts and things of this nature from agents all over that I would share with the rest of the women in the department because they weren't getting them because I just...if I needed to stay late, I would. And speaking of staying late, while there at General American, I indicated that I had become a torch lighter and I was voted the number one torch lighter at the end of the United Way campaign that year in which I was quite surprised because they had some very outstanding torch lighters from various companies.

Blanche Touhill:

What is a torch lighter, the person who was the symbol of the campaign?

Barbara Washington:

Yeah. See, they had agency execs and then they had torch lighters and torch lighters was a new concept for United Way. It was like a spokesperson for the company and the company would loan you

out. It was like a loan executive but they would loan you out to go out and promote the messages of the United Way.

Blanche Touhill:

And you came in first?

Barbara Washington:

I came in first, at the ceremony...I got the picture somewhere...but anyway, so they had some outstanding people who were doing this, were vice presidents of companies and they were high level people and I was just the conference planner at the time. So I was just very happy to be selected to do this.

Blanche Touhill:

So that was an award that you really treasure?

Barbara Washington:

Yeah, it was a responsibility I was given that I really did appreciate. So anyway, as I did this, through my volunteer work and through my work and love for General American and Matthew Dickey, they decided to recognize me as a Volunteer of the Year at General American but during this same time, I had met...in giving my United Way speeches, I had written about the Matthews Dickey Club as well as Child Haven, which is a home for autistic children and the Mary Rotter Home for seniors and I was really selling those groups like nobody's business because we had taken several tours to different groups and I chose to write about these groups and speak about these groups. And why I love Matthew Dickey so is that my grandmother used to cook some of the first meals that Mr. J.E. Baer formerly of Styx Baer and Fuller, used to enjoy when Mr. Matthews had his board of directors meetings. She cooked them for the Friendship Charity Group and I didn't realize all the history that my grandmother had been involved with but she used to tell me, "You've got to get those boys up at Matthews Dickey" when I first came to St. Louis. Eventually, one day I met Mr. Matthews before I wrote about him because I was also volunteering for the club and didn't know that I would come back through as a United Way person. I had volunteered for a fashion show they were doing at the...it's a center that they had borrowed and I noticed there was a gentleman there, when we were getting ready for the event that particular day, he was in the back and he was sweeping the floors and he was getting stuff ready and that gentleman, I found out later, was Mr. Matthews.

Blanche Touhill: So he did everything?

Barbara Washington: He had the set-up, he had everything going. That's almost 34 years maybe ago because that's before I was involved with the club. And I saw him doing that so later, here I am, writing about his club because my grandmother said that she had done what she had been involved with and so Mr. Matthews kind of heard me speak at one of the events and he was, I guess, blown away because he called Dick Casey, one of his former board members and J. E. Baer and told them about me and said, "I think that young lady..." "...because our PR lady had just left..." "would be great for Matthews Dickey."

Blanche Touhill: So you got hired by Matthews Dickey?

Barbara Washington: Before I could get hired, though, General American had to allow me to receive my award as Volunteer of the Year and that was going to be shown on Channel 4. So I had to hold the announcement and guess where they showed me doing a lot of the volunteer work? They showed me with E.J. Junior from the, formerly, the Big Red Lion, walking down a hallway because he was a tutor and I was an administrative person because I wrote proposals, I did whatever Mr. Matthews needed to make connections with people I helped to get a story in the paper about the club before I was there. I contacted Julius Hunter, got him involved with some things and I was just really going forth as a volunteer. I loved that organization and I didn't think I wanted to work there though. I thought I would just volunteer forever because I loved working at General American. So then right after Mr. Matthews told me he was interested in me working for him and told me what the job was, I said, "I don't know anything about public relations."

Blanche Touhill: And he said, "You've been doing it!"

Barbara Washington: And then I went back to the office, I told Joe Nedoe, who was the director of communications. He said, "You'd be out of your mind if you don't take it." Several of the people said, "You'd be out of your mind if you don't do this," but they said I had to wait until

after the announcement. So after the film show, I decided to go ahead and accept this job and it was history.

Blanche Touhill: How many years were you there?

Barbara Washington: Thirty.

Blanche Touhill: And you started...I met you when there were no girls formally...

Barbara Washington: Exactly.

Blanche Touhill: And it was a boys' club.

Barbara Washington: That's exactly right.

Blanche Touhill: But the girls began to come?

Barbara Washington: Yeah.

Blanche Touhill: Well, they were there but it didn't say it in the name?

Barbara Washington: No, it didn't. Mr. Matthews was always sure he wanted girls to be in this organization because he had built a girls' locker room facility.

Blanche Touhill: Okay.

Barbara Washington: And that was so sweet because I saw that and I said, "Well, where are the girls?" because there wasn't as many there at the time. They had some girls' activities but when I came, luckily, we were able to form a development committee and it consisted of five people at first and we began a plan, a very strong plan. I think Betty Van Uum was involved, Betty Sims, Wendy Weiss, Delores Mars and Barbara Maley. I can remember it like it was yesterday and then one other person I can't recall, but anyway, all of us were trying to decide, "What are we going to do to get this girls program going?" So we came up with a structure of what we wanted and then we said, "Well, we've got to raise money if we're going to do the thing," and so we kept trying to figure out what we were going to do so we went for donations and got grants going but we weren't still able to do a lot and so eventually I said, "Well, we need to do a fundraiser, something like this," and

they all knew that would be good so we came up with the idea that we would do Sheer Elegance.

Blanche Touhill:

Which is fashion show?

Barbara Washington:

Which is the fashion show and I'll tell you, the idea, when I started that program, was to focus on girls, not just what they wear but the beauty inside and out and to encourage girls to do community service, to keep their grades up, but to be respectful to their teachers and to their parents and that was always prime for me. But also, to be involved in the community and you have to be able to do that in order to, I think, be acceptable in life. You have to give back. And so we wanted that to be a part of it. Then we said, "Well, you can have fun but we want you to learn," so eventually that show evolved into not only fashions; it evolved into performing, peer relationship building activities, self-esteem training, all that...learning about different topics, whether it's jewelry or different countries. We had some wonderful themes that we chose and each theme was chosen to try to get the girls to be able to learn something. One time we had a Christmas all over the world so we had outfits flown in from the countries we chose to have them study about and the girls were representing so the girls had to learn a little bit about the language, learn about the costume, learn about the country. So we try to encourage learning into that program and also for them to pair up with the older girls and the little girls so they can learn how to take care of each other and bring each other on and how they, themselves, as peers, can relate and interrelate with each other, and then how they can go to sessions with professional women to learn about hospitality, appropriate styles, dress styles, how you conduct yourself in public and things of that nature. So it evolved into a complete program but it also evolved into them being introduced in very high class fashions and I owe a debt of thanks to a lot of people but especially Wendy Weiss and Christine Buck, Anita Cornute and Helen, who passed away, the late Helen Weiss, Wendy Weiss, of course, and Pam Younger, who was the fashion director.

- Blanche Touhill: But they got the fashions? They got the dresses and made sure they fit...
- Barbara Washington: Yes, they got the dresses...yes, and made sure...
- Blanche Touhill: The girls knew how to walk?
- Barbara Washington: They taught the girls how to walk and I've had some impressive chairs: Carol Voss was a chair once and all the women...Delores Mars. They supported this event effort like it was theirs and when they would see the girls, they would get as excited as I was and because, when I was growing up, I never had any decent clothes. My sister and I used to have to wear...we had two outfits to change into and so we would wear it one day, come home and wash it and then wear the other one the next day and we did that until school was out. Then, when we would get hand-me-downs, they were women's clothes so we couldn't wear them. Some of them were too revealing or they were too big and they just weren't ready for school and so we couldn't wear that stuff. I bought the first clothes, new clothes, with my monies from my first job, for my sister and for me. I installed the first telephone in the house. We didn't have a telephone as teenagers, until I was 15...16. So I did all that. I knew that I wanted to have independence and I try to encourage that through the programs that I do for the girls. So, in addition to that fashion show, The Sky is the Limit was evolved, which is a mentoring program because mentoring is also very critical to the development of young people. So, as a child, I used to sit with the senior mothers. I was always nosey and, like I said, I thought I was a mother so I sat and I'd be listening to things and they'd be talking about issues and we could be in the fields or we could be just harvesting vegetables and I would hear a topic, my ears would perk up with me listening. I learned so much.
- Blanche Touhill: You were your sister's mother.
- Barbara Washington: Right, right. I would learn so much. We would have a lot of fun and one day I got smacked because I was listening to the wrong thing. Then, too, they used to tell some stories in the South at night because we could sleep outside on the porch and one of the

homes we lived in was directly across the street from a graveyard and I was terrified of that place and we used to go outside in the evening and be sitting out there on the porch and it was fenced in and we could imagine, if you'd close your eyes, you'd see a spirit coming up and we'd tell all these stories and then we'd get scared and run into the house. It was already dark with lamps. They didn't have lights. So we used to do that and then we used to tell the boogey man stories, "The boogey man would get you." We told stories to entertain ourselves and we were very creative. I also remember that my sister and I didn't have shoes one summer and they had just made a blacktop road and the blacktop, when the sun got hot down South, it would bubble and it was hot and we kids used to play, climb trees because we were tomboyish and run around and so one day we were running up and down the pavement and the blacktop scarred our feet and those marks are still there under my feet. So what we did was, I came back home and I said, "We're going to make some shoes," so we took yarn, cut out pasteboard boxes and whatever else we had and we made shoes and we would wear those until it rained. So we were creative in what we did. We used to have to improvise a lot on things and I never had a Christmas tree as a child and so we took a branch from a tree and we used the little Kisses, I think it was four colors: the gold, red...

Blanche Touhill:

Little chocolate Kisses?

Barbara Washington:

Yeah, the chocolate Kisses, the Hershey's, and we took the papers and then we took floral paper to make the tinsel and we made our own Christmas tree and you used to always get fruit at Christmas time, during that time, and, boy, they used to have a really nice strawberry jelly cake that was the best. So we did get a cake for Christmas and we would get two oranges, two apples and candy and a peppermint stick. That was Christmas gifts and we were so happy for that. Unfortunately, people are not happy with anything today. You can get them anything. Now, I understand that's why...we were poor, we didn't know it but if it wasn't for the other things that were going on, I would not have a complaint at all and even with that going on, it helped me to be strong and to have character and to forgive people for what they do because

the man who abused us, it turned out that he, himself, was abused. He was one of twenty children born to a woman who was a slave breeder and he had killed a man. That's what we were told, that he had been put in a place called Parchment. He had lived in this place. They treated them like they were animals. His face looked like rubber. It was messed up from the sun. You should have seen him. His eyes were tiny and beady. It's like he had lived out in the sun or the weather and that's what we saw in him and I realized when I became older, that was why he was so strange. He couldn't help it. So we forgave him. I forgave him and I forgave the lady who raised us too because she, herself, was abused and I witnessed it and, as a child, when you see someone really severely beaten and hurt to the point they have to go for surgery, it's devastating and when you've got to try to defend her, don't know how to defend her, then you got to run for your own life after you try to defend her, then it makes a difference. But it made me aware in my life and my work at Matthews Dickey. I helped a lot of children and directed them to a positive intervention because I knew the signs. I could look at a girl and tell that she was being abused or whatever the case may be, by just having conversations, or a young boy. I worked with both, but girls, I've always wanted to instill a sense of pride, confidence and independence because if you have that independent spirit and a competitive spirit, you can beat all odds. That's what I had to have and my uncle helped to give me that. That's what I'll carry with me and I practice this through my business, Bobcat, is my word is my bond. If you say you're going to do something, do it and I've always tried to do that and if I didn't, I'm not too big to apologize or to call and say, "Something has come up. Please forgive me. Give me another chance. Oh, I'm so sorry" or to admit the truth.

Blanche Touhill:

Let me change the subject for just a little bit and ask you: Is there some award...you mentioned one award, but is there another award that you got that you're really very proud of?

Barbara Washington:

There was an award I got called The Spirit of Women and Mr. Matthews nominated me for that award some years ago and during that time I got the award, I didn't realize that I would be representing the State of Missouri along with 49 other women

and sent to Washington, D.C. to receive the award again. But in St. Louis, I got it at the Chase Park Plaza and it was presented to me by actress Linda Evans and at that time, I sang a song that was a tribute to my mother which is Amazing Grace and Linda heard me sing it and so she invited me to sing it in Washington. So I sang it there before all the other representatives and it just touched my heart and brought back every bit of emotion I had for my mother because I also did a Gospel CD. I've got three Gospel CDs and working on my fourth one. I've got Calvary Lord which was the first one. That one was dedicated in honor of my mother and then I have Down by the Riverside and then I have Seasons Changing which was written completely by my son. He wrote it and all three CDs were produced by him. He's a music producer. But he wrote the lyrics to the third CD and I'm working on my fourth one entitled Love at Last. But that award was very special and unique to me. Then here lately, now that I'm no longer at Matthews Dickey, I never thought that I would be honored in such a way by Michael MacMillan and his empowerment group of the Urban League. They presented me with a Women in Leadership Award and then the St. Louis American presented me with a Non-profit Executive of the Year Award and you honored me by naming a book after me and I thought that was very special. I remember the day when you called...I think you called me. I couldn't believe it. I said, "Oh, how did I get selected?" but God has helped me to be able to get out here and work in the community to give back, to reach out and I take a lot of pride in doing that.

Blanche Touhill:

Now let me ask you another question: If you had been born 50 years later, what would your life be like...or earlier, pardon me...50 years earlier?

Barbara Washington:

Yeah. I think if I was born 50 years earlier, I would have been a little depressed, no doubt, because I probably wouldn't have been able to go as freely to do the things that I went on to do and there wouldn't have been anyone to have paved the way for me and set the example for me to be able to follow. So, I know that life wouldn't have been as fruitful because I see now that as a result of the women who paved the way and did what they did, I'm able

to mix in and have a chance to do anything I want to do. That's why, through one of my programs I do now, I taught the girls that they can do any job that a man can do and went on that way.

Blanche Touhill: Going back to Matthew Dickey, I know you were the one that probably helped the organization to include girls, boys and girls.

Barbara Washington: Yes.

Blanche Touhill: Do you want to talk about that for just a minute or two?

Barbara Washington: Well, you know, I have boys and so Mr. Matthews had girls and we had all the fixings for the girls to come. But I really was so excited through the Sheer Elegance Program, we raised over two million plus to kind of provide programming for that program and through the leadership of the development committee of which I was working with, we were able to get a fundraiser going and we thanked people like Evie Williams and others who provided continual support but they realized the importance of adding the girls to the marquee of the building. So we brought the girls on and I was so excited to see that happen. So I'd like also to say that, through my work at Matthews Dickey, in serving as the vice president of public relations and special events, I worked with the Press Club, the Job Corps, on the board of the Speech and Hearing Center, the International Special Events Society, served as spokesperson for various universities around, especially the University of Missouri and in doing so, I learned from all those people that I worked with and through the partnership that I've been able to form through the corporations, all the Fortune 500 companies, not only here, but throughout the nation, I've been able to bring that event strategy and help to start up a business that I'm now starting in my next life, my next chapter of my life, called Bobcat Event Management and Consulting, and again, Bobcat comes from my wonderful uncle, L.C. Pratt who helped me have courage to know that I could do anything and that anything is possible. So through Bobcat, I'm bringing on consultants that I'll be able to put out there through my salesmanship to do corporate partnerships, to do public relations coordination and event management, to make things beautiful for my clients.

Barbara Washington 12-18-2016

Blanche Touhill: Well, Barbara, I want to thank you for the interview and we wish you well on your new path and we know it will be exciting and fulfilling in helping particularly youth.

Barbara Washington: Well, that's really my mission. I still love that so much.

Blanche Touhill: And I look forward to your fourth CD.

Barbara Washington: All right. Okay, sounds good....Love at Last.

Blanche Touhill: Thank you very much.

Barbara Washington: Okay.

Blanche Touhill: Bye-bye.