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## Interview with Joyce Braden Harris

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Interview with Joyce Braden Harris (JBH) Part 1

Date: March 10, 2010

Interviewers: Heather Oriana Petrocelli (HOP) and Parvaneh Abbaspour (PA)

Transcriber: Heather Oriana Petrocelli

Auditor: Alexandra Hawes (March 2015)

HOP: This is Heather Oriana Petrocelli and Parvaneh Abbaspour interviewing Joyce Harris on March 8, 2010 in Portland, Oregon.

JBH: [whispers] Today's the 10<sup>th</sup>.

HOP: Oh, is it now?

PA: It is.

HOP: She's informed me today is March 10<sup>th</sup>. [laughs] It is March 10<sup>th</sup> in Portland, Oregon. I've lost two days. [laughs from all]

HOP: What is your full name including birth surname?

JBH: Joyce Faye Braden Harris.

HOP: And, is there anything you'd like to say about your name or your family name?

JBH: [pause] No.

HOP: Do you have any siblings?

JBH: Yes— I am the eldest of nine, so I have eight siblings.

HOP: Being the eldest, is there anything that informed who you are now, from being the eldest of nine siblings?

JBH: Well, let me just give you a little bit of the background. The first nine years of my life I lived with my Grandmother. And that was interesting for me because for it was like being raised as an only child. Now, I had a lot of contact with my siblings because the family was military. But I was the first-born. And, I don't know how they worked it out but my Grandmother ended up raising me. And then when I was nine the family was stationed to Madrid, Spain. And I got a call and they asked if I wanted to go. And it was one of the hardest decisions I had to make, not only as a child, but just in general. Because I *dearly* loved my Grandmother, I mean I always thought of her as my Mom. But I agreed to go. And so for two years we lived in Madrid, Spain.

HOP: Reunited with the whole family?

JBH: [finishing sentence] Whole family. Yeah. At that time there was only six of us. [laughs] And that was interesting. It was an interesting transition for me. Because previous to that, for the most part, it was just me and my grandma. One of my brothers came to live with us when I was about six or seven and... it was different. And I immediately went into older sister mode. And took ownership of my younger siblings. Because what would happen is like the family would travel a lot because of the military so I have one brother who was born in Little Rock, Arkansas, I have two siblings that were born in Tampa, Florida, I have one that was born in Wichita, Kansas, and actually the brother that's next to me he was born in the Philippines in Manila. So I just made this connection growing up that every time my grandmother and I would get on the Greyhound to go where the family was I knew there was gonna be a new brother or sister. Because my Mother was an only child so her and my Grandmother were very close. So every time it was near her time my grandmother we'd pack up and go and stay. So, I, you know ... I remember when we were in Wichita Kansas, the airbase there. I don't remember Tampa very much 'cause I was pretty young, I think I was four or five when we were in Tampa. I just remember that it was real warm. Yeah.

HOP: What do you remember about your time in Madrid?

JBH: Oh my goodness. Madrid was incredible. Because I actually became fluent in Spanish. We got there in July of 1960. And so I had a summer and the family lived in the barrio. As I later found out, a lot of the African-American soldiers chose not to live on the airbase. And so we kinda had like a little community in downtown Madrid. Where—and it's funny—one of the families had five kids and another had four and we just had this little community in Madrid. And me being the eldest, I became the spokesperson for the family. You know, because I—you know, there is something to be said about youth and acquiring a second language, and especially if you're immersed in it. So it got to the point where I would negotiate with the vendors on behalf of my mother 'cause she didn't speak Spanish. She, you know, she knew *hola* and *adios* and that was about it. And I would go down into the barrio and I would do all the marketing. You know, they had these shops, you know, the bread shops— and you could buy the freshly made bread. I mean it was just an experience. And, we went to a military school, which was another interesting experience because that was the first time in my life that I'd ever been called the n-word.

I was in the third grade. And this girl, her name was Peggy—I'll never forget. We were on the playground and she called me the "n" word. And what was interesting, even back then, is all of my white classmates. I remember them saying "Ooh," and they ran after her and chased her and took her to the teacher, and told the teacher that she had called me this bad word. And what I remember from that time is that, my teacher, his name was Mr. Potter—and he was you know, when you're a little kid like that and you have cute teachers, you know, and all the girls just... and I just remember he didn't really do anything. And from that day forward I never liked Mr. Potter. Because he really... he told them they shouldn't do that. But it was like... and even the kids, you know, they thought she was going to get into a lot of trouble and she didn't. And I remember when I was in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade, my 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher was Mr. Vahar and I just dearly loved him because he set up the kind of classroom that we would call now project-based

learning. And I remember we had a whole room that we could just work on projects. And I remember we were studying climates and geology and I did a project on the desert and we had, you know there were lizards and stuff that would run around in the yard, and I caught some lizards and brought them in and they were my Gila Monsters for the desert scene. And once again I was the only African American student in that class—but it was different in that the students in that class they had a network because they lived—most of them, their families lived on the airbase. So there was still this feeling of not being totally connected to my classmates and a couple things I can say about that period—I think Mr. Vahar was such an incredible teacher and I loved the way he taught. As I look back on it, I think he was one of the influences on me when I made the decision to get into education. That I remembered those experiences and how important it was for classroom activities to be interactive and hands-on. The other thing was just that feeling of being isolated in a classroom where people were culturally and racially different from you. And I always, during that time I remember whenever we had to study the history of slavery, how I just always felt like I just wanted to go under the desk. It was just—because the kids would turn around, they'd look at me. And, the other part was... prior to going to the military school in Madrid, I had been in Catholic schools in Harlem. So in terms of education I got, you know, the best you could offer. Okay, my grandmother was really committed to making sure that all her grans got a good education and for her it was Catholic school. She was originally from Louisiana and so, Catholic parishes and all of that, and so I went from Catholic school in Harlem, which by the way, was, it was a—both the priests were Irish and—but it was in Harlem on 126th Street. All the nuns were white and they were old-school nuns too, and by old-school I mean— [HOP motions a ruler over the knuckles to JBH]— yeah, hit you with the ruler, knock you out that kinda thing. But I got a good education and then when we came back from Madrid in '62, we ended up going to another Catholic school. It was in Harlem, but this Catholic school was run by an order of African American nuns—the Franciscan Handmaids of Mary—all of the nuns were black. And so that was—that was a different experience than the other Catholic school. Once again the priest, Father MacFarlane, he was Irish [laughs] and we actually lived right around the corner from the school—I mean the school was on 132<sup>nd</sup> Street and we lived at 131<sup>st</sup>.

And so we went to that Catholic school until the family moved to Brooklyn. And there was no Catholic school around where we lived so we ended up for the first time really being in a public school. 'Cause, the military school—Department of Defense schools—are very different from regular schools. I mean the teaching is good, the environment is very resource-filled. And, so then I ended up going to a public school and it was a totally different experience for me because, number one, academically, my skills were far superior to the students that I went to school with. And, I paid a price for that. Because... you know, there... sometimes the whole notion of to be popular or to be smart is real true. And I experienced that. Kids resented me because whenever they'd give a test I'd get 100 on it. And I mean I even had one time in my social studies class I had this teacher Mr. Feld and he would always hold me up as the example. I resented that only because I got the flak from the kids. And so one time I intentionally messed up on a test. But I got a 96, so I still was the highest score in the class.

And I remember my science teacher Mr. Peterson. When you go to Catholic school you learn how to—we used those real fancy fountain pens with the ink cartridges—so my penmanship was beautiful; I mean really, I still have good penmanship when I'm not writing real fast. And, so I would write all the notes on the board for the... and I loved doing that; I would miss recess when I was in Catholic school so I could... and we had chalkboards all around the room. And then we had to keep those black and white composition books where we had to keep notes and we had to handwrite the notes. And so Mr. Peterson, who had the worst writing in the world, he asked me one day if I'd write the notes on the board—and I said sure. So the next I came in he handed me the notes, and so before you knew I was writing the notes on the board. Kids would come in and I mean literally they would throw erasers at me, chalk, spitballs... Yeah, I mean it was bad. And I was a kid... I mean, I was always committed to excellence in my academics. I mean I was the one when you came in the classroom; I had the little papers on the wall with the gold stars on. Then when I was in Spain it almost became—you know, that was a part of who I was, and that was the way I could be competitive with my

classmates. You know, that *whatever you can do I can do and I can probably do it better*. I became this... really just dedicated to being excellent at what I did.

Then when I went to that public school in New York, all of a sudden I was victimized because I was smart. And the teachers *loved* me because I was the model student, which didn't quite go over well with my peers. And it got to point where kids would... some of the girls would pick fights with me. I was in typing class one time and this girl came by and the next thing I know she's on top of me, and me and her got into a fight in the typing room. And the teacher knew, you know, when we went and got taken to the Dean, the teacher spoke up. The thing is this girl... they sent word by noon that after school her sister was going to beat me. I mean, it was just *crazy*. And so I had to deal with that kind of environment, and the schools actually perpetuate that type of behavior in kids, because first of all, in the New York school system kids were in classes like 8-1, 7-1. Those were the highest achieving students. They had twenty-three sections. So you could be in 8-22, 8-23. And so you can pretty much imagine what went on the lower you went. You know, 8-1 we took French, 8-2 took Spanish, and after that you did not get a language. You couldn't participate in some activities, like you could only be in orchestra or band. I started playing the clarinet when I was in 7th grade. And I can't remember whether either 1 or 2 could be orchestra and the other one was band. So, you got privileges because of your academics, but what message does that send to the rest of the kids in the school? And unfortunately when I went to high school, in New York, the same thing happened, except it was worse because the school I went to was 99% African American and Puerto Rican students and 1% white—and predominantly Jewish, the 1% was Jewish. We had a school within a school. It was the Honor School program and there were three African Americans in there—me and those other two students—and the rest were all the Jewish students. And we actually traveled in like a little pack. We had classes where the best teachers taught us. When I became a junior and senior we took college level chemistry and science classes.

At that point, my 9<sup>th</sup> grade year in high school was pretty rough. I mean I did okay, I was valedictorian when I graduated from junior high school. But when I got to high school in 9<sup>th</sup>

grade I didn't feel like I wanted to go through the same experience that I had gone through in junior high when I first came in. So, I started hanging out with the regular kids and I didn't get in any trouble, but I started skipping classes. And I had always been a good math student and I started my algebra class, I flunked it. And it didn't even faze me. You know, because what I was ... I didn't flunk it because I didn't know the material. I flunked it because I wasn't going to class. Fourth period was when the juniors and seniors had lunch. So several of us decided we were going to hang out with the juniors and the seniors—so we would skip class. And, there was a counselor, Mrs. Kemper, she called me... because I was doing some work for her, and she told me, she said, you are a brilliant student. You cannot be running with some of these kids I've seen you with. And so there were teachers, I remember my French teacher, she pulled me to the side and she said [in a French accent] "*Non non non*," she said, "you are a smart student you do not want to be with this one or that one." There were adults in the building who recognized that my academics—all they had to do was look at the record—but that I was getting in with the wrong crowd. And this only happened for the first half of my freshman year, and something snapped, and I got back in gear. Retook those classes, scored high, did well, and then by the end of my freshman year was when they, you know, assign you to the Honors program. And do that worked out.

And luckily for me, I've always been able to maintain relationships with people. It doesn't matter where they come from, what their circumstance is, you know, I just, you know, have ... I know I have that ability to interact with people and not come across as "I'm so smart, I walk on water." And so I still had—was able to develop relationships with all students, regardless of whether they were in the Honors program— because in New York you had an academic diploma, a commercial diploma, or a journal diploma— a journal meant you showed up every day. A commercial meant you could be a secretary. An academic; that was the college track. And, so during high school one of the things that really affected me, just in terms of my own development as an activist, was my junior year in high school the New York Teachers Union went on strike.<sup>ii</sup>



We were out of school for a while and... we... you know, you just kinda know that something's not right— something's going on that's not right. And then, keep in mind that this was in the late 60s so, there was all this other stuff going on. It wasn't until I—many years later, that I realized that some of my classmates who were disappearing were going to Vietnam. There was one fellow, he was in the band with me and all of sudden he—and so we thought he just dropped outta school, and then one day he showed up in his Marine outfit. And so Vietnam was going on [pause] and '65 when Malcolm X was assassinated we were living in Harlem, and matter of fact we lived four blocks away from the Unity Funeral Home where his body--because I wanted to go, but I just couldn't, you know, I was a kid.

So in '68, then that's when things just really got... in '68 I remember when Martin Luther King was assassinated. I was working at a department store and I got off at ten at night. And I remember getting on the bus and there was a lady on the bus and she was saying, "I just can't believe they shot him. They shot him. They shot him." And then the bus driver said, "He died." And I didn't know who they were talking about. But I just knew they were adults on the bus who were crying, and so finally I turned and said, "Well who they talking about?" And they said, "Martin Luther King." And I just, oh my goodness [takes deep breath] and then I remember going to school the next day—because if I'm not mistaken he got killed on a Thursday, might have been a Thursday— went to school the next day and by second period all hell was breaking loose in my high school.<sup>iii</sup>

The few white kids who were there were being attacked. And, I know one kid got knocked down the stairs. So the administration decided that we gotta get these kids outta here. And most of the white kids, the Jewish kids, they would take a bus to where... they all pretty much lived in the same area. I just remember seeing them trying to get on the bus and there were kids throwing bottles and bricks—whatever they could find—at the bus. And so once they got the white kids out of the building—at least most of them—then they let school out. It was like midday.

I remember going to the train station—because in New York you got all kinds of trains and buses, see—I went to school in Brooklyn because that's where it started. My family had moved to Queens the summer before my freshman year. I wanted to stay going to school in Brooklyn. So after kinda beating them down, wearing them down, they said okay. It took me two hours every morning to get to school and two hours to get back. Because I lived in Queens, I had to take the green bus line, then I'd have to take the L train, and then I'd have to switch at East New York, and switch to another train. So every day it was like four hours of transit time. And so, I'm leaving school and as I'm going up the train to the L train there was this white kid. I had seen him around school, because, you know, I was involved in a lot of things. He was ahead of me, but I knew there was a crowd of kids coming behind me. I remember telling him, "Maybe you better go on the other side," I said, "'cause there's a lot of kids coming and you might get hurt." And he turned to me and said, "I'll be okay." And then all of those kids came and— keep in mind we're on the L, so I'm terrified that if something breaks out, someone is going to get knocked on the tracks— and they came and they attacked him. And all I remember was seeing him on the ground and his head was bleeding and I mean it just totally... I couldn't do anything, I couldn't do anything.

Then a couple months after that Robert Kennedy was assassinated—I remember—because I've always been pretty independent—I was seventeen at the time. I got up that morning and I told my mother, I said, "I getting ready to go in the City." And so she said, "Okay." She thought I was going shopping. I went to St. Patrick's Cathedral and stood in line for three hours so that I could walk past Robert Kennedy's casket. So that kinda set the tone—that was my junior year.

My senior year, New York teachers went on strike again. This time they were out for a couple of months. The first day of school I went on, went to Brooklyn, and went to school. And of course the school was locked up and teacher were picketing outside, and there were about four teachers—four or five teachers—that had a reputation for being pretty progressive. One of them was from Jamaica; his name was Frederick Douglass Watson, and there was Mr. Brooks—they were both African American. Then there was Ms. Lapan; she was white. There was Mr.

Margulies... and these were all teachers ... you know how you get teachers that all the kids like. I remember one of them came over to me and said— because at that point I had been elected as student government officer the year before so I was like the controller— so they came over to me and this guy Bill Jacobs, who was the president, and they said, "You know, we would like to open up the school. We don't agree with the strike and we would like to open it up. So that you all can go to school. But can we get you to help us get kids in?" I was all for it. I said, "Oh, sure!" It was interesting, William didn't... he kinda backed away. But opened up the school—we were the first school in the city to that was open during the strike. And this little group of eight teachers and students—we had classes—I mean I will never forget the thrill of sitting around the table with your teachers and being asked, "What kind of classes would you like to see?" I mean almost being a peer with your teachers. We keep that school open, until one weekend the striking teachers had a locksmith come and change the locks. So the teachers who were on the inside they had to pay for somebody to come open the school. And they started sleeping in the school so it wouldn't happen again. But it was just an incredible experience— it was like for two months.

Then the teachers came back in and they were there until about ten in the morning. They rejected the new contract. But I kept hearing about this community-control. You see what started it was that there was this school Ocean Hill-Brownsville, and this one of the first examples of community-control of schools. It was a junior high school and there were two white male teachers who the group that was running the school decided to fire because there were some things that they had been doing that they had been warned about. The community school board fired these teachers and that's what set off the U. F. T.<sup>iv</sup> That's really what—and this one man William McCoy—he was a part of that community school board. I didn't know all of this until much later when I really had the knowledge and everything to understand what that strike was really about—the local community controlling the school. This particular school was a state-of-the-art—it was a new school—so everybody wanted their hands on it. So they came in and by 10 o'clock they were gone again.

At that point, there was some organizing going among students, citywide. So the organizers said, "You know, we are really upset with how the teachers have been behaving." Because when they would come in, they come in with nasty attitude. They came in again, and in our school, we had started a little black student... we called it the Afro-American Society. We had put up a bulletin board on the second floor and it had pictures of Malcolm X and some other civil rights figures. Back then, you know, we embraced anybody who was revolutionary, so we had Che Guevara up there, Mao Zedong, you know, just knowing anybody who was fighting for any kind of change in society. You know, back then people looked at them. Well, teachers came back in and they weren't in very long again, but they were in there long enough for somebody to take our bulletin board down. We demanded to have it back. We knew who had taken it—there were these two guys there who—so we spread the word—second period everybody on the second floor. We took over the second floor and we said we weren't leaving until we got our things back. Well, eventually they gave them to the principal. So there was quite a bit of conflict in our building.

But the citywide group that was organized and had said that the next time the teachers go out again and then they come back—then the students are going to walk out. And that's what we did. We walked out and there was a big rally in front of the UN Building, and what was really interesting about that was, we got there and were standing outside the UN Building and speakers were up there, and we saw all these New York City transit buses lined up on the other side of the block. We didn't pay them any attention and then all of a sudden we looked and all you could see was a sea of blue: New York Police. Then they had the police on horseback and I just remember, "My mom is gonna kill me!" [laughs]. And so I started walking real fast and the only thing that saved me—because they were arresting kids—is I walked into a department store. I won't forget it there was a table with scarves and I started picking them up [motions as if lifting] and I thought it was all over but it wasn't all over. I went to get back to the subway—and we were a lot of kids—we got on the subway and all of a sudden we heard, [deepens and raises voice] "Please get off!" So they made us all get off. And what they did is they arrested the

students who were the spokespeople—they knew who they were. That contributed a lot to my political development. Then we got back into school.

We ran into some challenges from some of these teachers who didn't want an Afro-American Society, and we had to challenge that on the based on the fact—*now wait a minute—we're no different than this group and that group*. I was in a unique position of being the controller so I controlled the student government funds. So whenever we needed to vote on organizations that we were going to fund—we had one teacher, one advisor to the swimming team—who was like, *all this money needs to go... the swimming team needs new uniforms*. Well, the swimming team—now there was one black student on the swimming team—and like a lot of schools, if you don't have your own pool you'd have to go somewhere else. Swimming is an expensive sport. So he was adamant that most this money needed to go his team. Well, I'd learned a little bit about organizing. I made sure that all the representatives from each class was at that meeting when we voted— and we voted that they would not get the money that he had requested. He went ballistic, but he couldn't do anything. This was student government and these were student government dollars. That's when I first went, "Hmmm, there's something to this." Organizing and being thoughtful about it. I graduated from in high school in June of '69 and ended up coming out here to go to Reed College.

PA: How did you end up at Reed?

JBH: Another interesting story. There used to be an organization called National Scholarship Fund for Negro Students. They would advise you and when I met with this advisor and he basically looked at my SAT scores and my academic transcript and he said, "You can pretty much write your own ticket. Well, what kind of school would you like to go to?" [affecting a younger voice] "Well, I'd like to go to small kinda school like UCLA." And he said, "Ah, no, that's not quite a small school, Joyce." Then he said, "You know, hear me out. There's this little small school in OR-E-GONE." [laughter] I'm thinking Oregon. He said, "Yeah, it's Reed College and based on what you said about the kind of school you're looking for, I think this would be a great

place for you." So I ended up applying to Reed, Cornell, University of Connecticut, Oberlin, and Antioch.

And I was accepted; as a matter of fact, I received my acceptance paper from Cornell the day after students took over the administration building. What was on the front page of the New York newspaper was a student with these bullets strapped across him [chuckles and motions an X across chest] and my response was, *You know what, they got it under control out there.* I don't need to go there. I need to go to someplace where I can help build something. And then I did my homework— I actually called out here to Reed— I wanted to talk to somebody. Believe it or not, but the Admissions Director at Reed was an African American woman. I talked with her for a while and I keep thinking— she sounds like she's black— so finally I said, "Are you black?" [chuckles] And she said, "Yeah, I am." So, I'll be honest, that was one of the reasons, one of the things that kind of influenced me. [pause]

The other thing that was significant in my upbringing that I really need to share, was that when I was in the 7th grade in the public school, when I went to the public school, there was a group of African-American doctors— there were thirty-five of them. They formed this organization that was designed to support African-American students-to kind of mentor them through college. Now, they had some criteria. They wanted students who had good academic records and I was selected; there were thirty-five of us. But I was in the unique position that each one of the other students had like one doctor that was their mentor. I had the doctors' wives, they had formed a group. So I had all these women who were my sponsors. And what they did is each year they would put money into a bank account for us, if we needed any kind of tutoring or assistance... like... a lot of us struggled with geometry, so they hired a tutor and every Tuesday and Thursday I'd travel to Brooklyn and this woman would tutor us. They'd expose us to a lot of cultural activities. The first time I went to an Ebony Fashion Fair was at the Americana Hotel in New York City. I'll never forget it because Richard Roundtree, the actor who played Shaft, was a model. Since the ladies' group—they actually sponsored the Ebony Fashion Fair in New York—so our table was a part of the runway. And I remember when Richard Roundtree

came down there. You can imagine—being a high school kid, girl, and this gorgeous man... and we were like... [jokingly panting]... and I remember it was the first time I'd ever seen baked Alaska and it came out and I remember screaming *it flamed up*... I thought it was on fire... But they exposed us to a lot of things. Then once or twice a year I would go—my sponsor, the woman who was over the ladies group, her name was Mrs. Griffin, her husband was Dr. Griffin—he had a student that he sponsored but since I was connected to the ladies' group they'd invite me over and I would spend a couple days at their home. You know, you just got exposed to things that you might not have gotten exposed to.

When I first came out here to Reed in the summer, I came to an Open Bound program, the summer before my freshman year—well, the doctors' group had a function in New York, and they asked me to speak and so they flew me back home in August so I could do that. I remember they gave me a gift certificate to Bergdorf Goodman. That was my high school... and I said let me go and find me something to wear—I just remember that I had never been to Bergdorf Goodman before. So you know, to me, I have experienced the value of people giving back and nurturing young people and exposing them to things that maybe they would not normally have gotten exposed to. We weren't poor, but we were a family that had eight or nine kids at the time. So your resources—and my mom didn't work, she was a stay-at-home mom—so it was quite an experience.

My high school years—I tell people that I really cut my political teeth during the last two years with the teachers' strike. I learned a lot from the teachers who were in the building. I learned a lot about how vicious people could be. One morning we came to school and the teachers on the picket line jumped on our teachers. I mean, physically assaulted them. I saw the worst side—I mean some of the language—it was almost like they just totally disregarded the fact that these are our students that are seeing us behave in this way. I had never heard such profanity. I mean, those teachers—the names they'd call the teachers who were going inside. So, my whole thing was—once they came back in—*how I can I respect you? You have no credibility*. We kinda

had a swagger about us, because heck, we'd help run our school. So there was some animosity and some teachers who were very vindictive.

I remember the Dean of the Girls Students told me, 'cause we had this other thing—back then we couldn't wear pants to school. So we were like, "Huh? Why not?" Especially in New York weather. So we were told we need to take the pants off or we were going to be written up. So, "Write me up." Then the Dean of Girl Students called me in her office and she said, "I know you're getting ready to apply to colleges. And unless your attitude changes I'm going to tell you right now that I'm not writing you letters of recommendation." I just looked at her and said, "Well, okay." Then I had one of the counselors, when I was wanting to get my transcripts, he said, "Reed College? I don't know why you're applying to that school—you probably won't get in." Now, keep in mind I'm an honors student. The day I got my acceptance papers, I walked in his office [picks up papers and then tosses them on table] and I just dropped them on his desk and I walked out.

And the other thing about me is that I could have graduated in December of my senior year, but I decided I'd stay around. I had nothing else to do, you know, so let me just stay around, and continue to help them to understand that some of them are totally out of line. Plus I was doing tutoring with some of the lower-track students, many of whom I had developed relationships with. But it was always embarrassing for them when ... like there was this one young man who was brilliant, I mean, he knew history and culture—he was a good organizer—then I went into his classroom and that's when I discovered he could not read. He was a senior and he could not read. I knew he was humiliated and embarrassed and I just kinda took it in stride and we just started trying to do what we could do. So, you know, when I came out here I had all that background.

My first week at Reed, some of us freshmen decided that we were gonna boycott the humanities class [laughter] because when you look at it—it was based on Western civilization—it was as if no other cultures existed before Greece. So we said, "We're not taking it!" And the



administration came back and said, "Oh yeah, you're going to take it— that is a requirement of this institution, and if you don't take you cannot move forward in this institution." So we were trying to dig our heels in and then one of the professors stepped up. He said if you want to take this class, I will allow you to choose some of the topics and readings. His name was Chuck Svitavsky. About five years ago I was invited to speak at a Martin Luther King event out at Reed and he happened to show up, and I publicly acknowledged and thanked him, and it was emotional for both of us. I said, "I know we've probably never told you this before, but you were one of the people who made it possible for students like me to be on this campus and to put some meaning into our education."

One of my first papers was, I compared Dante's *Inferno* to going through the admissions process at Reed. [laughing] Yeah, it was fun. You see, at Reed we had a humanities paper due every Saturday. Every Saturday by noon you'd have to have your paper in. So sometimes we'd party on Friday night and then about 10 o'clock—oop, gotta go do my hum paper and I'd be up all night and then I'd go over there and I'd slide it under Chuck's door. Reed was interesting because, once again, there were seventeen African American freshmen in my freshman class. I think there were thirty-two students on campus, with the upper-classmen. What I found really interesting was that we were all from major urban areas. I was from New York, there was a student from Atlanta, there were two from Chicago, Houston, Fresno, L.A., Detroit, my roommate was from Detroit ... [hmm-ing] ... where else? Might been someone from Florida. But it was real obvious that the recruitment process was very strategic. Well, by December of my freshman year about six had left. And of those seventeen, only four of us ever graduated from Reed College. Most of them left.

HOP: What year did you graduate Reed?

JBH: '73. May '73. There were situations on campus where, you know, just some cultural disconnects. We had one year, it was my freshman year; there was a guy who had just gotten out of a mental institution and he came on campus and he attacked two black women, two

students. And I happened to witness it and... and... Reed was an interesting place because city police could not go on campus without being invited by the administration. [raised brows from interviewers] Yeah.

[First break]

HOP: Just for quick clarification, when you went from the Catholic school in Harlem to public school in Brooklyn, was that an actual transition from grade school?

JBH: Middle—yeah, to junior high.

HOP: ... to junior high? So junior high happened in... ?

JBH: Yeah. I did the 7<sup>th</sup>—let's see—our junior high in New York was 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup>.

HOP: Which school was it?

JBH: Junior High School 178. St. Clair McKelway School. [makes unhappy noise]

HOP: Which high school was it?

JBH: Jefferson High School; Thomas Jefferson High School.

HOP: Okay.

JBH: [pause] And, so in terms of me being at Reed College, so my freshman year I stayed on campus, at the end of my freshman year, Ron Herndon and Frank Wilson, who were upper-classmen approached me and said— well, before that, I had gotten very involved in the Black Student Union because the year before I got there the black students that were there really—

how do I put this—they protested, they took over the administration building and as a result of that Reed College had a Black Studies program. So when I came in '69 there was a Black Studies program. Mr. William McClendon was the Director, and he's one of the other people who was an incredible mentor for me. As a matter of fact, I ended up being his personal secretary, he was an author and everything. He studied under W.E.B. DuBois. So, he's whole thing was... and it kinda continued that whole commitment to excellence in everything you do. I was his personal secretary and he used to write articles for *The Black Scholar* magazine. And Frederick Douglass was one of the people who he really idolized, as a leader, as a philosopher, as an academic. I remember when he wrote this piece for *The Black Scholar* on Frederick Douglass—he used to lock me up in the office because he didn't want anybody to see it. And, I think about that nowadays, because I'm thinking if that building caught on fire I would have been burned, because the windows were those locked windows. I mean he literally would lock me in the room with the key, because he didn't want anybody coming in there to see his manuscript. That just shows the level of trust he had in me. So I would do his manuscript and I took classes from him and he was the kind of professor who made it very clear—you're gonna do your assignments and you're gonna hand them in on time. And basically—they're gonna be right, you know—that's the kind of professor he was. And I appreciate that. That was fine for me. Then we had other professors. I actually was able to negotiate, with Mr. McClendon's help, through Reed College, since they didn't have a Black Studies degree—I was able to take all of the black studies classes under the American Studies degree. So my degree is an American Studies with a major concentration in Black Studies. I think I probably only had to take two or three, maybe four, classes in American Studies—everything else was Black Studies. Which was incredible, because I was able to take several classes a year from Mr. McClendon and some of the other professors. When I did my dissertation it was titled, "Some Positive Values for Less Chance Students in an Alternative Educational Setting," something like that.

At the end of my freshman year, Ron approached me and said that him and Frank, the upperclassmen, had been watching me. They like the way I worked and they had this idea. They wanted to start this organization, and they wanted me to be a part of it. The other part to this is

that I make it sound like everything was all cool. I spent my whole freshman year trying to figure out how in the heck can I get out of Portland, Oregon. [laughter] I hated it. I absolutely hated it.

I mean imagine, you eighteen years old, you come from New York City, to Portland, Oregon. I remember my first week on campus I was talking to one of my friends and I said, "You know, the most exciting thing that they had on the news is somebody stole a little boy's bicycle?" [laughter] Man, I'm from New York, you know, this wouldn't have even made a blip on the radar. I remember I used to stand in my dorm window and I'd look toward downtown Portland and all the lights and I'd just be boo-hooing because I'd think about New York—[feigning funny crying voice] *Ooh, I wanna go home*. What kinda was a reality check for me was when somebody, I don't know; it was one of the counselors, somebody said, "Well, you know if you leave, your scholarship is not gonna leave with you." 'Cause I thought—you know, I'd gotten a full ride, I thought it was gonna go with, me. They said "No no no." And I'm like dang, I better rethink this. So, I was looking forward to going home.

It was May—end of May and everybody was leaving campus. And Ronnie and Frank—they approach me. They said they had this idea, they wanted to start this school. I said. Okay. And so they started telling me and they said, "Are you interested? We'd like you to be a part of it." I had a lot of respect for Ronnie, because he was upper-classman when I came out here in the summer and he worked hard and I just admired his, his everything. Because he was just one of those people; he was patient and he was real knowledgeable. It was an honor, to be honest with you. It was an honor to be asked to be part of this. 'Cause I'm thinking they didn't ask anyone else, you know. So, I told him, *Yeah*—I don't even think about it—I said, "Okay." So then we put together a little three-page proposal of what ideas we had, and things just starting moving real fast.

I mean, it was like the end of May, and I was thinking *when do you wanna start this* and they said, "Well, we want to start it in June." *June*, I said... "Well, we don't have a place yet." And

that's one thing about being young. You don't know what you can't do. So they had a plan and there was a lady in the community, her husband was a journeymen carpenter, and she... well, before we got to that... during my freshman year I did some volunteer work in Northeast Portland, at—kinda like the welfare office, and they would take kids on field trips. I volunteered to be one of the chaperones and we took the kids to Mt. Hood and different places. So, this lady who was running this program, when she heard that we were trying to start this school, she called Ronnie and said, "You know, I don't know if you've found a place but we've got some property, and I talked to my husband, and you all if renovate, you know, fix it up, you can have it rent-free for a year." So Ronnie and I were all excited and we up and go and look at this place.

We drove up, and I looked at this house and I'm like, "Uh-uh." Went up the stairs and the first thing we see is this big notice from the city; the place had been condemned for seven years. Open up the door: there's no stairwell. I mean it just looked like your worst nightmare. My whole attitude about houses like that, I treat them like old shoes, you just throw them away. [laughter] So we go in and I'm stuck next to Ronnie and Frank because I'm scared a spider gonna jump on me. [laughter] We went in one room that used to be a bathroom—there was a hole in the floor—I mean it was terrible. So we come out and I'm just thinking, *No, this is not gonna work*, and Ronnie talking about, "Well, we need to see... you know, I know this guy Maurice and maybe he'll help us." And I'm thinking, "Help us do what?" And the next thing I know we're meeting with Maurice and we go over there and we do a walk-through with Maurice, and he's saying, "Yeah, we can do this and we can do that." I'm thinking, "We?!" [laughs]

Well, bottom line was Maurice was a journeymen carpenter, who had helped put together some of these high-rise buildings in downtown Portland. He said to us, "I'll teach you kids everything you need to know to renovate that house." [pause] And there are pictures of me standing on a scaffold putting mud on the ceiling. I was the best sheetrock-taper in the building, because once again that orientation to perfection—you couldn't tell where that seam was.

[laughter] There are pictures off some of the women putting in windowpanes. I mean we did it all. We remodeled that house in a month. We opened up school in June of 1970. We had 120 kids, because this is what is what was interesting, so we were doing all of the renovating, getting people to come in and help, during the day they would send us two women to see if we could get donations and to recruit kids. So, I didn't drive at the time, and the woman—her name was Farida Mohammed, she's still here in Portland—she was driving and we'd drive down the street, and we'd see kids out playing and she'd stop the car and I'd get out and I'd say, "Hey, what you doin' this summer?"- [affecting kid's voice] "I don't know." I'd say, "Where you live, where's your mom at?" [laughs] And would walk up to the door and I'd say, "We're trying to start a program and would you be interested in sending your child?" And that's how we recruited.

And then we would drive around like we needed, you know, the fluorescent light fixtures, and one time when we were in Northwest Portland, and we were driving down there in the industrial area, and we saw this place that was a lighting place and we went in there and we said, "You know, we're renovating this..." We ended up coming out of there, and they'd given us all these eight foot fluorescent light fixtures, brand new. Another time we went someplace, we got the paint donated. We actually did get some money, because Ronnie's vision was if we could just get three people to donate some money that would give us seed money. So he went to some folks who actually were, one of them had been on the Board of Directors for Reed, was John Gray, who actually was one of the Portland millionaires. We went to John Gray, we went to Leland Johnson who was the Vice President at the time of First National Bank, and we went to Bob Richley, who was over at Northwest Natural Gas. And, we being young folks, at least me being young, I didn't know. Folks who got money talk. [chuckles] I just thought it was just a fluke that each one of them decided that they'd give us twenty-five hundred dollars. Of course, later on I found out that these guys had talked! [affecting man's voice] "You give them twenty-five and I'll give them twenty-five." And so we ended up with seventy-five hundred dollars—that was our seed money. So everything else was what we could get donated. We got paint

donated, we got the lights donated, just a lot of things. We fixed this building up over on 63 NE Morris, and that's where the first Black Education Center was.

And we had a program, it wasn't just a school. We started a garden because we wanted to model for people good eating. Ronnie always believed in people showing their commitment through their commitment to work, to hard work. So we would, you know, during the day we'd go around trying to get donations, get kids, and then, the men for the most part, a lot of the men would be working on the building while we did that and then in the evening around six o'clock we would stop and we would study. Because we was trying to decide what programs are we going to use with these kids. There was program that Ronnie had heard about. It was called Words in Color. Think about the time, we're talking about right out of the late 60s. So there were a lot of programs that were developed specifically to deal with disadvantaged kids. You had DISTAR that came out of the Science Reading Associates (SRA). This program, Words in Color, took a kinda interesting approach to teaching phonics. All of the phonemic sounds were color-coded. It was developed by this guy named Caleb Gattegno, and so did a little investigation and found out that his best trainer lived up in Seattle. We called him, and so we just asked if he was familiar with anything with math. He said, "Well, there's a program called the Cuisenaire rods." This was developed in France and, once again, it was a very interactive approach. What we found is that with this program you can use it to teach algebra to little bitty kids. So we were excited about that. So after to talking with the fellow in Seattle he agreed to provide us with the training. So we went up there one Saturday morning—I mean, we left at four in the morning. Drove up there—and I mean, we were in training all day and almost all night. When we were done, I mean he took us through all the Word in Color stuff, he pulled Ronnie to the side and he said, "You know, I'll tell you who of your group has this, who has just picked it up." [Snap.] He said, "That's Joyce." So then I became the trainer.

We came back to Portland. So when we opened up... we counted the Cuisenaire rods it was easier, cause you could kinda follow that stuff through the manual. So when we opened up that's what we used, the Words in Color and the Cuisenaire Rods. And it was just fascinating,

because with the Words in Color you teach the kids the five short vowel sounds and they are all color-coded. So like the "ah" sound, which was white, is the "a"; then you have the "eh," "uh," and "oh." And basically what you have the kids do—they read in color. And then you put the symbols and then you introduce them to the consonants, and it was very multi-sensory. The brown sound was "puh." So if I'm teaching you the brown sound, and I say brown sound, and you say "puh." And then the white sound "ah." Then "puh"-"ah." We would always have to tell the kids that it is not [harshly] UPUH!-"ah." Because when you say "puh" you're doing the p and the u. So its [softly] "puh." And then you say—take a deep breath [takes a deep breath] and you say "puh" [snaps] say it fast—[snaps] say it fast and then you add the "t"—and then p-ah-t. Pa-t. Pat.

So you had the kids reading, so conceptually I could just call out the colors and the kids could read words. That was the basics for learning the phonics. And the same things with the Cuisenaire rods. It was conceptual. You take the red rod and the green rod and it equals the yellow rod. So  $r + g = y$ . So it was fascinating for the little kids and we teach them that and we tell them, "You just did algebra." And so they'd be writing algebraic equations. Yellow subtract the green equals the red. And you can imagine what it did for the parents. They'd see that, "Oh, my baby can do algebra."

And then, of course, Black history and culture was a very important part of... we use that as the content. So we ran the school as a summer program from '70 to '74. And we had other things, we had classes, we'd have study group. Study group was a Monday night and Friday night, and then we'd have meetings at 8 o'clock on Sunday mornings. Then the second year we started a bookstore as a way of supporting the school. So at first it was the Black Educational Center bookstore focusing on black literature. And we had always said we would not go full-time as a private school until we had gotten our credentials, so I graduated from Reed in '73.

[Part 2 continues with interview by Parvaneh Abbaspour]



- i. *New York Times* article from 2001 about Harlem's Franciscan Handmaids of Mary:  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2001/10/13/nyregion/dwindling-numbers-constant-faith-mostly-black-order-nuns-harlem-celebrates-85.html>
- ii. *Time* magazine article from 1968 regarding the strike:  
<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/O.9171,841534,00.html>
- iii. Mrs. Harris is correct. Dr. King was assassinated on a Thursday. For more information, see the Walter Cronkite CBS new report from April 4, 1968:  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cmOBbxgxKvo>
- iv. U.F.T. is the United Federation of Teachers. See <http://www.uft.org/> for further information.
- v. Follow-up question needed to get the name of organizations (both of the doctors and their wives).
- vi. Science Research Associates (SRA).

Interview with Joyce Braden Harris (JBH) Part 2

Date: March 10, 2010

Interviewers: Parvaneh Charla Abbaspour (PA) and Heather Oriana Petrocelli (HOP)

Transcriber: Parvaneh Abbaspour

Auditor: Alexandra Hawes (March 2015)

8 *[Note: This transcript covers the second half on an interview with Ms. Joyce Braden Harris,*  
9 *conducted on March 10, 2010, at her office in downtown Portland, Oregon. This transcript*  
10 *continues from Part 1, transcribed by Heather Oriana Petrocelli.]*

11

12 JBH: So, I graduated from Reed in '73. The other thing that I also did my senior year  
13 at Reed College, I happened to stumble on a flyer in the grocery store. Oregon State [University]  
14 was doing a Portland Urban Teacher Education Project, where it was going to be based in  
15 Portland through OSU. And if you were accepted into the program, you could transfer in any  
16 credits you had from any other four-year institutions. And you were 8/10 time in a Portland  
17 Public School. You'd be enrolled as a student at Oregon State. And if you stayed in the  
18 program, you successfully completed your credit hours and your internship, at the end of that  
19 year you would earn a four year degree from OSU in education plus your teaching credential. So,  
20 I enrolled in it. I mean I applied to it and was accepted. So actually, my senior year at Reed I  
21 was concurrently enrolled at Oregon State. So I completed the dissertation at Reed, plus I  
22 completed all the other stuff. So I have two Bachelors, one in Elementary Education  
23 from OSU.

24

25 HOP: What year did you complete that?

26

27 JBH: June '73.

28

29 HOP: They were both concurrent.

30

31 JBH: Yeah. Yeah.

32

33 And so, we started the school. And I ran the school. I mean I, well, Ronnie [Ron Herndon]  
34 was administrator for one point, and then you know, I was in the classroom. At the end of our  
35 first year, we had been asking around, 'cause we wanted to get as much as we could with the math

36 program. Because we wasn't totally satisfied that the math was as strong. We knew the reading  
37 was [snaps] right there. And there was a professor at Portland State [University], Mildred  
38 Bennett. She was a math guru. And we had met with her several times. Matter of fact, it was  
39 Ms. Bennett who told us about the Cuisenaire rod program. Well, she called us that summer,  
40 the summer of, was it '74 or '75 ... And she said, "I have this grant from the National Science  
41 Foundation to run a summer program for teachers in math. Two of my teachers just dropped  
42 out." She called us ... I mean she called us on a Sunday night. She said, "It starts in the morning.  
43 Are any of your teachers interested?" And I'm always gung-ho for learning new things. So I  
44 said, "I'll do it."

45

46 Well, it was a full summer, five days a week. It was a math lab. And, I got all into it. I mean,  
47 because, the previous year I was like the reading person. But I got all up into the math. At the  
48 end of the summer program, we had been meeting all summer; I told them I'll be the math  
49 curriculum coordinator because I'd gotten so hyped up. What I didn't know about this grant she  
50 had, she came to me last week of class, she said, "You know part of my current grant includes  
51 being able to pay for graduate level classes in math." And she said, "I'm sorry to say I'm not  
52 getting very many takers on that." She said, "Are you interested?" I'm, "What the heck?" So, I  
53 ended up taking graduate level math classes and *passing* them, doing good in 'em!

54

55 So, once again that was another transition. And what I tell young people, "Don't ever cut off  
56 your options." And, so I set up the whole math program for the BEC. One of the things we  
57 learned our first year, where we were like kindergarten, I was the first grade teacher, another  
58 teacher was second grade. We were constantly coming at each other saying, "Well you know,  
59 this student here, they really know more than first grade stuff." And so at the end of the first  
60 year, that's when we made the decision that we would focus on specialty areas. So being the  
61 math person, and knowing math as a discipline, if both of you came into my class I could  
62 immediately prescribe, or diagnose what deficiencies you might have, and then I could prescribe  
63 what you needed to do because I knew math.

64

65 What I tell people today is, you know I train teachers; my job is I'm director of a training and  
66 technical assistance center. And I used to hear, teachers would say, "Well, I don't know what to  
67 do with these kids. They didn't learn this and this in the grade before me, so I don't know what  
68 to do with them." And one day I just found myself listening to what they were saying. I said, you  
69 know, they're absolutely right. Because, if you've been teaching out of the fourth grade book for

70 ninety-nine years, you haven't taught the first grade, you haven't taught the next two grades up,  
71 you really don't know. All you know is this is what they supposed to know at the fourth grade.  
72 But if you know the discipline, then you know that if a kid comes to you and they're having  
73 problems trying to conceptualize multiplication and division, then you know what you need to  
74 do to get them to be able to do that. The approach that I liked about the work that I did with  
75 Ms. Bennett and just got all excited about it is how important it is to make it *conceptual*, not  
76 abstract. You know, what does a two mean? What does *half* of a two mean?

77

78 And so, that was the approach we used. I mean our classrooms were always just rich with  
79 resources that we had to make. Cause we didn't have money. So that was the other thing. As a  
80 young teacher I spent most of my weekends making materials for my class. And so, you know,  
81 developing products, developing learning materials, being able to conceptualize. How do I get  
82 *you* to understand this? What examples do I have to use? Do I have to take all these tissues out,  
83 spread them across the table, and tell you to group them? [Ms. Harris touches the packet  
84 of tissues on the table next to her as she speaks.]

85

86 And I think that has transferred into how I train. When I'm in a session with someone, and they  
87 are not quite getting it. Being able to break it down in a way, into the simplest form, and not  
88 make people feel you that you think they're stupid. Because that's not what you want to do.  
89 You just want to help people to understand, and come to the understanding. I mean, I can't make  
90 you understand, but I can certainly affirm when I see that the light bulb is going off in your head  
91 and say, "Okay now, let's think about this. Let's think about that." So, all of that to me is a part  
92 of what I have been able to do.

93

94 And then, all along the way I've been very involved in social justice issues. Because I can't  
95 separate that from who I am. Being involved and speaking up for this recent shooting of this  
96 unarmed African-American man is part of what I've done.<sup>iv</sup> In the 70s, I tell people we had  
97 formed this Black Justice Committee because within a two year period of time, six African  
98 American men had been killed by Portland Police. One of them actually was the uncle of one of  
99 my students. And every Monday when the kids would come back to school you know, we'd  
100 have circle time. "What did you do over the weekend?" And we get to little Joe, and he said,  
101 "My uncle was shot in the back of the head by a police." And I'm like, "Huh?" And I knew the  
102 family because we had that kind of a relationship with our students. The thing is I remember him  
103 saying it, and you know how little kids can be, it was so matter-of-factly. I had to regroup. And

104 I had to leave the room and go call his mom. It turned out it was his dad's brother. And so, as a  
105 result of that, I mean that kind of galvanized people, and we formed this Black Justice Committee  
106 and called for the Department of Justice to investigate. And along the years, you know, there  
107 have been other killings where we've had to protest march, demand inquest, and all of  
108 that. And I've been involved in education, and just a lot of things. I just feel like part of my  
109 being is to speak up, speak out, and stand for justice.

110

111 Throughout all of this, a lot of people don't know, I was sick as all heck! But, [Laughs] you  
112 know ... One day there was going to be a rally, over here by the Justice Center, and I had been in  
113 bed for three days. I just said, "I've got to go down there." I got off the bed and my husband  
114 was sitting in the living room. When I walked past him, I gave him this little weak smile. He  
115 said, "You're getting ready to get out of here aren't you?" And I said, "I got to go." And he  
116 said, "Ok." He said, "Just don't overdo it." And then the next couple of days there was  
117 something else, and I had to get out of bed. I told him. I said, "I'm gonna be good. I'm going to  
118 just stand for justice. I'm not going to yell, I'm not going to march. I'm just gonna stand." I  
119 was feeling so bad that day that's all I did. I went to the rally, [exhale] and that was it. You  
120 know.

121

122 HOP: Can I ask a question, for the Black Education Center, so you run a summer program from  
123 '70-74...

124

125 JBH: Then we were full time, as a private school.

126

127 HOP: From K through...

128

129 JBH: We started K-3, and the plan was to add a grade each year and we did that. Once we got  
130 to the fifth and sixth grade then we realized, it's not the best idea to have fifth and sixth graders  
131 all running around together. We always kept it a small school.

132

133 And one of the things that we did just to make sure people would understand that we were a credible  
134 institution, we would have our kids tested through Portland Public [School District]. And they  
135 always tested off the charts. One year it got so bad. They called us and said, "We've got some  
136 questions about the accuracy of three of your students' scores." Cause the kids had tested off  
137 the charts. I told them, "Well you know, if you want to retest them, you are free to do that."

138 And so they retested them, and two of them even did better. They got all of them right. They  
139 were just fascinated. And I said, "I hate to really blow you away, but you tested them on the  
140 fourth grade test." I said, "they're not fourth graders." And they said, "They're not!" "No,  
141 they're not fourth graders yet." It's funny because one of the students they tested was my  
142 daughter. It just tickled me, because they just couldn't believe that these children could test, get  
143 everything right on the test. I mean, that's not typical.

144

145 One time there were a couple [Portland] Trailblazers that were meeting in a building next door.<sup>v</sup>  
146 And I happened to be outside, and I invited them to come over. So I had this one little fellow go  
147 to the board; he was a math whiz. And I said, "Give him a problem." And they would give ... I  
148 think it was Jerome Kersey and Buck Williams.<sup>vi</sup> And they would throw a problem at him, and  
149 he'd kinda think about it, and he ... [gestures which imply the boy successfully solved math  
150 problem]. And they would look at each other, and they'd look at me. And I'd say, "He's the real  
151 deal." So I mean, we always had ... our kindergartners were reading by mid-year and everybody  
152 got homework. And parents were required to sign homework every night. So, it was a... it was a  
153 wonderful, wonderful time.

154

155 And, I left the school, the organization in 1993. And I actually came to work down here, because  
156 the CEO of this organization at the time, it was Northwest Regional Educational Lab, was Dr.  
157 Ethel Simon-Mc Williams. <sup>vii</sup> She was African-American. Brilliant. And she had been kind of  
158 trying to court me. And a couple things happened for me that year that were like a transition. I  
159 was accepted into the American Leadership Forum, which is a national group, but Oregon has a  
160 chapter. It's a leadership organization that brings diverse leaders from across different spectrums  
161 and you go through this year long experience, and you go through this wilderness thing and all of  
162 that. And then I said, "You know, since I'm doing this transition let me go ahead and enroll in a  
163 doctoral program." And so there were a lot of things going on for me. And she had asked me the  
164 year before, "We're applying for this grant, and if we get funding, would you be interested in  
165 coming on as one of my trainers?" "Yeah, sure, yeah!" She called me that February. "We just got the  
166 word, we think we've gotten it." "Got what?" And then she said, "So, are you still with me?"  
167 And I said, "Gulp." So it was really a year of major transition for me.

168

169 And I came into the program July '93. The program, it's a training and technical assistance  
170 center that was created under the 1964 Civil Rights Act as a desegregation assistance center.<sup>viii</sup>  
171 And it was created during a time when districts were either refusing to or not doing a good job in

172 desegregating schools. And so we cover issues of race, gender and national origin. We are  
173 regional. And we're funded through a grant from the U.S. Department of Ed. Which means that  
174 when we work with districts, for the most part, it's at no cost to them. And my region, when I  
175 first started here was Oregon, Washington and Alaska, Idaho, Hawaii, Guam, American Samoa,  
176 Palau and Saipan.<sup>ix</sup> Two years ago—and we have to compete every three years, it is a competitive  
177 grant. So three years ago, we re-competed and we won our region again, but this time they added  
178 in the four Federated States of Micronesia and the Republic of the Marshall Islands. So now I  
179 have all of that.

180

181 We work on issues related to English language learners. We do a lot of sheltered instruction  
182 training. We often work with districts who've been found out of compliance with federal anti-  
183 discrimination laws. Cultural competency. You name it, anything related to race, gender or  
184 national origin. Looking at the disparities and disciplinary referrals ... that impact students of  
185 color. The overrepresentation of minorities in special-ed and the underrepresentation in talented  
186 and gifted programs.

187

188 The other thing ... Oh, in the late '80s, the Portland African-American community was very  
189 concerned about the fact that African-American children didn't have a middle school in the  
190 community to go to. And as a result of that there was a lot of activism and Harriet Tubman  
191 Middle School was created as a result of that.

192

193 We also had Asa Hilliard become the chief desegregation consultant for the district.<sup>x</sup> He was from  
194 Georgia State [University]. Just brilliant. Just brilliant. And one of the things he recommended  
195 to the district was ... and it's really interesting because now, people talking about cultural  
196 responsive teaching and all of that. Well, this would fit into this, but this was back in the 80s.  
197 And what Asa said to the district is, "You all need to develop a baseline of information that all  
198 teachers should know about different cultural groups." And so he proposed what he called  
199 "Baseline Essays."

200

201 And the community wanted to make sure they could monitor this process. So, I was asked to be  
202 the liaison between the district and the community. And they went to the district and they said,  
203 "And this is not... we don't want this to be a volunteer position; we want this to be a consultant  
204 position." So, I became the consultant that was the liaison between the community and the  
205 school district. And also had the responsibility of helping to interact and interface with the

206 office who would write the essays. And there'd be an essay in each academic area: science, math,  
207 reading, language arts, music; I can't remember the sixth one.

208

209 And the consultant that Dr. Hillard recommended for language arts was Clyde Taylor, professor  
210 out of University of Massachusetts, Amherst.<sup>xi</sup> Well, Clyde had come out here a couple a times,  
211 and he and I had worked together on some presentations. He went back to Asa and said, "You  
212 know, I know literature, African-American literature, at the college level." He said, "I don't  
213 know that K-12 stuff." He said, "But you got somebody right there in Portland who has that  
214 knowledge." And he told Asa, "Joyce Harris should do that." And so not only was I the  
215 consultant to the district, I became one of the authors. So I wrote the essay on language arts.  
216 Oh, oh, look at there! [Joyce reacts to a copy of her Baseline Essay we have with our  
217 bibliographic notes. ] You have a copy! Oh, my goodness!

218

219 That was an interesting experience because ... I would be the first to say that it was a challenge,  
220 because there was internal resistance within the district, among not only teachers but some  
221 administrators. I also think that... there was variance in some of the presentations with the  
222 essays, because each one of these scholars had their own approach. And I remember with the  
223 music one, we actually went through almost three consultants before we got to a consultant who  
224 gave us something that was credible with music. You know musicians, what do musicians do?  
225 They play music! They do music. And so one of the musicians that was tapped ... brilliant  
226 musician, not an academic writer. And I had to acknowledge that, and be very honest with the  
227 community and folks and said, "This is not what we need."

228

229 It really opened up a door for me, because all of a sudden people were calling me from around the  
230 country. I'd go places, and people would be buzzing about the Baseline Essays. We were in  
231 Detroit one time looking at some museums, cause we were thinking about trying to start a  
232 museum here. And it was a team of us, and we went to this museum, which was incredible. And  
233 this guy said, "Oh, you're from Oregon!" He said, "That's where they did those baseline essays.  
234 Man, those the best thing!" And he's just going on and on and on. And I'm standing there. And  
235 one of the people in the group said, "Well, if you have any questions, you need to talk to her,  
236 because she wrote one of 'em." And oh my goodness, he just, he said, "Can I just hug you!"

237

238 And then another time I ran into someone who had been teaching in Liberia. And she called, and  
239 she said, "I'd really like to meet with you, because I'm doing this work over in Liberia and one of



240 the things that we've been looking at is these Baseline Essays and da da da," she is just going on  
241 and on and on. And she said, "Do you know where I can get a copy of them." I said, "Well, I  
242 might be able to get you a copy." And then when we met, and then I told her, she said, "Why  
243 didn't you tell me on the phone?" "I don't know." And so that was ... that was an interesting  
244 time.

245

246 HOP: What happened with the Baseline Essay project?

247

248 JBH: Good question. Well, eventually the district developed... they had other cultural groups  
249 developing ... different, very different ones. Some of them didn't have essays. Some of them, I  
250 remember when they did the one for Hispanic culture. I was very concerned about that, because  
251 it seemed to me like it really got short-changed. My understanding is that they can still be  
252 accessed, but there have been periods of time when people have not been able to get copies. So,  
253 I don't know. It's rather disappointing that this is a resource that could be used, and it's not  
254 being used. Because I've often thought about updating mine, just because there is so much  
255 literature that has come out and the genres are ... different things have happened within the  
256 literary genres that I would like to include. But I guess if I did it, I would have to do it on my  
257 own, which I wouldn't mind doing, but I just frankly haven't had time.

258

259 [Ms. Braden Harris whispers indicating she'd like to take a break. The tape is stopped.]

260

261 JBH: One of the things that also had an influence on me is, I had my daughter in 1979, and had a  
262 pretty difficult pregnancy. Had to stay in bed for the whole year, whole time I was pregnant.  
263 But I knew that once I had a child that I was going to kind of take a little time off. Well, so I  
264 thought.

265

266 So, what happened at the Black Educational Center is when I stepped out of the classroom, we  
267 had another person who had been running our bookstore.<sup>xii</sup> Basically, it was like, "OK, so  
268 you're going to leave the classroom, I will move in and teach math; so, you run the bookstore."  
269 And so I actually ended up running the bookstore starting in '75. And was real exciting because  
270 we had bought this property up on 17th and Alberta and I got a chance to design the bookstore. I  
271 mean I just totally revamped it. I renamed it. And it's interesting because there's a bookstore  
272 now that's in our community and they've taken "Talking Drum Bookstore."<sup>xiii</sup> So we were the  
273 first "Talking Drum Bookstore." And that was based on a newsletter we had in the early 70s. It

274 was called, *Eelu Gangan*, which meant, "talking drum."<sup>xiv</sup>

275

276 So, I was able to totally re-conceptualize the bookstore, it was Talking Drum Bookstore. Design  
277 the interior. Got to order all the books. And I am a book *fanatic*. I mean I collect, I've got... my  
278 personal library now I know has gotten, must be about ten thousand books. I've got books  
279 *everywhere*. I tell people, "When you look at the hundred or so resources that I cited in there  
280 [Ms. Harris indicates the photocopy of her Baseline Essay lying on the table] I own  
281 every one of them." I told somebody, "I didn't have to leave my house to do that."

282

283 And I continue that to the day. I'm a lover of books, particularly African-American literature  
284 and African literature. And I studied from ... and I just love children's literature. My daughter is  
285 thirty years old now, and I still buy all kind of children's books. I realized that when she got  
286 older I went into Reflections Bookstore and the guy was, he said, "You know..." 'cause I go in  
287 and buy four, five children's books, and he knows I don't have any grandchildren. And finally he  
288 told me he said, "You know what? You have a passion for children's literature." And I said,  
289 "Absolutely." Because during the time Chris Poole was the media person for Portland School  
290 District she brought a lot of authors and illustrators in.<sup>xv</sup> So when I look at children's literature in  
291 particular, I look at not only the quality of the writing and the messages in the writing, I look at  
292 the artistic quality. So, illustrators like Tom Feelings, Ashley Bryan, Jerry Pinkney, I mean all  
293 of these illustrators who bring such richness to African images.<sup>xvi</sup>

294

295 Then when I look at African literature one of the things, and I think it's in my essay, I had two  
296 different versions of this book by this author Camara Laye, it was called, *The African Child*.<sup>xvii</sup>  
297 The original one is *The African Child*. And then once it started getting more popular, the  
298 publishing company changed it to *The Dark Child*. And the introduction changed. And so then I  
299 started saying, "Wow, this would be interesting to look at." So, I would look at different  
300 iterations of a book, where publishers would often make decisions, publishers and editors, and  
301 would change the whole context of materials.

302

303 I got into a little bit of a tinkling match with Steve Duin at the *Oregonian*, behind the *Adventures*  
304 of *Huckleberry Finn*.<sup>xviii</sup> It was not just with Steve Duin. But one time I hadn't read the  
305 newspaper over the weekend. Somebody called me and they said, "Joyce, did you see the  
306 editorial in the *Oregonian*?" I said, "No." They said, "Well, you need to get a copy." And they  
307 had taken me to task because in my essay I have some serious issues with *Huckleberry Finn*.

308 And one of the reasons is that the use of the n-word is just... and I made myself... one year, I  
309 said, "I'm just going to read it, and count how many times the n-word is used." It's over four  
310 hundred times. But then as I was re-reading, because I hadn't read it since high school, there were  
311 other messages. There's one passage in there that just struck the heck out of me. There was an  
312 explosion on the waterfront. And Huck comes running, "Aunt Polly, Aunt Polly! There's been  
313 an explosion on the waterfront!" And she asked him, "Has any body been killed?" And he said,  
314 "No, just some *n*'s." And so then I begin to look at it; the lens I used was a little more critical  
315 than just counting the n-word. There were several exchanges where black people were just not  
316 human; they were dehumanized. And I don't care how classic something is, I have not seen  
317 anybody promoting books that refer to women consistently in derogatory terms and keep  
318 holding it up as a model of literature.

319

320 The other thing that began to really bother me: I would go in to do trainings and inevitably  
321 people would say, "Well Joyce, what do we do about the use of the n-word, 'cause the  
322 black kids use the n-word a lot, and we don't know how to handle that." And so, you know I'd  
323 tell 'em what my feelings were about it, and how they could handle it. I said, "But there's  
324 something I want you to consider. On the one hand you're saying you don't want the n-word  
325 used, but then on the other hand you'll hold up a piece of literature that uses it in excess of four  
326 hundred times." And I said, "And I know from just personal experience being in the classroom,  
327 that if you have that being read inevitably somebody's going to say the n-word. And you could  
328 either have a mess, cause if it's a white kid that uses it and the black kids are not feeling it, you're  
329 going to have a mess." I said, "And we know how kids are." I said, "So you have to decide. You  
330 can't have it both ways."

331

332 So anyway, I was accused of being a censor. And they went so far as to call an African  
333 American professor in Texas to refute what I had said in my essay. And I'm thinking, "My  
334 goodness!" And Steve Duin and I actually had an exchange one time, because he, you know his  
335 little column, his little commentary piece, he had written something about the essays. He took  
336 me to task for a few things, and I called him up. And I just told him, after we went back and  
337 forth, I said, "Well Steve," I said, "you know, you're entitled to your opinion." I said, "And  
338 that's fine." I said, "The only thing, you can challenge me on my interpretation of the  
339 facts," I said, "but I guarantee you, you are not going to be able to touch the scholarship [taps  
340 table in time to words emphasizing point]." I said, "So there's no point just to continue this  
341 conversation, cause I have seen we disagree."

342

343 It was a big mess around the essays. It took on a national mess, because there was a guy at the  
344 Oriental Museum in Chicago who just blasted us.<sup>xxix</sup> Arthur Schlesinger wrote a piece called *The*  
345 *Disuniting of America*.<sup>xx</sup> It was a book, and I believe it was funded by FedEx. It was sent to  
346 every CEO in the country. And in that, he blasted us. I mean by name. [laughs briefly] Saying  
347 that we were revisionists, that we were writing revisionist history. And it was interesting  
348 because the guy from the University of Chicago, he wasn't as tough on me because... 'cause my  
349 stuff was documented I guess. I mean he really didn't like me comparing... talking about *The*  
350 *Negative Confessions* and looking at that and the Ten Commandments.<sup>xxi</sup> I mean if you read  
351 those, you can't deny that there had to be some influence. And since they predated the Ten  
352 Commandments, you know it's fair to assume that perhaps they influenced the Ten  
353 Commandments. And, so those were interesting times, you know. I found myself involved in a  
354 lot of interesting times.

355

356 Was very active in the Free South Africa Movement. Black Educational Center, we used to  
357 sponsor the African Liberation Day March *every* May, the Saturday before Memorial Day. I  
358 remember it well, because we would march up the street, the public street, then we'd have a full  
359 day program and rally at the park. And I remember when Nelson Mandela was released from  
360 prison.<sup>xxii</sup> One of the members of the BEC, Kamau Sadiki, he had been very active in the Free  
361 South Africa movement.<sup>xxiii</sup> Avel [Gordly] had been very active.<sup>xxiv</sup> And we had said, "When  
362 Nelson Mandela is released from jail, we're going to do something." And we were on the phone.  
363 I remember I called Kamau, then I called Avel, and when Nelson Mandela walked out of prison  
364 the three of us were on the phone together in tears. It was such an overwhelming moment. And  
365 it was overwhelming for me because, for all of us because, we knew that here in little bitty ol'  
366 Portland, Oregon, we played a role in helping to free Nelson Mandela and to end apartheid in  
367 South Africa. That was a heck of a feeling. And then that next, that Friday we had a celebration  
368 down at Matt Dishman.<sup>xxv</sup> And, you know I like to dance. And we did the *toyi-toyi*, that's the  
369 South African dance that the freedom fighters did.<sup>xxvi</sup> We *toyi-toyied* all over that room at Matt  
370 Dishman. I mean it was amazing! It was just amazing.

371

372 And when I talk to young people I share that story with them, because you think you don't have  
373 the power to make a difference, but we know that our voices and our activism joined with  
374 thousands and thousands of people around the world to end that system of apartheid. Talk  
375 about being a witness to history. I was very involved in the Barack Obama campaign. Once again

376 I had that feeling that "Wow, I've helped to make something happen just by being and doing."

377 To me that's what, what it's ultimately all about is using whatever gifts you have, using

378 whatever time you have, to make a difference.

379

380 And that's, I think that's kind of what's guided me. You know I don't even ... it's like it's on

381 automatic pilot. Like when this young man was killed, I was actually just getting back from a

382 trip.<sup>xxvii</sup> I'd been in Hawaii doing a training, and we got back that night and caught the very last

383 end of the news. Didn't know what had happened, but knew something had gone down. And then

384 over the weekend I found out what it was, and then of course you know I was like, "What in the

385 heck?" And then I remember when the young man's funeral was that following Saturday. I

386 didn't know him. I didn't know his family. Not directly, but he was a member of our

387 community. And so I went to the service, just to be there to support the family. And then

388 whatever needed to be done, I was on automatic pilot. When Katrina happened, I was on

389 automatic pilot.<sup>xxviii</sup> I took three weeks off work, and you know became the community...

390 organized the community welcome events for the city. And I mean I was just like on automatic

391 pilot. Just like, "this is what I have to do." And, that's what I do.

392

393 HOP: Speaking of this activism, you once wrote, "Hard won changes are not sustained or

394 comprehensive without ongoing advocacy and civic engagement."

395

396 JBH: Mm hmm.

397

398 HOP: So could you please discuss Portland's current state of advocacy and civic

399 engagement in education, equity and in community?

400

401 JBH: Mm hmm. Mm hmm. You know...

402

403 [Ms. Harris whispers indicating she would like to take a break. The recording is

404 stopped.]

405

406 JBH: So, when I look at civic engagement and advocacy currently, I almost feel as if we're in a

407 mode that's kind of like the war of the flea. You know, flea bites you everywhere. [Ms.

408 Harris pinches spots on her upper and lower arms, mimicking fleas biting.] That's from Che

409 Guevara.<sup>xxix</sup> And there are so many issues. And you kind of have to, sometimes you have to

410 pick and choose, just because you can't be everywhere. Sometimes you have to be reactionary,  
411 like unfortunately when these police shootings happen, we're always being reactionary. And I  
412 think we're trying to get a handle on that now and understanding that we've got to sustain this,  
413 because if we don't, it's going to happen again.

414

415 And when I look at education, it's disheartening to see that there are children who go through  
416 systems of education and they come out; they can't read proficiently, many can't write.

417 Something's wrong.

418

419 When I look at health care, and I just lost my grandmother about a year ago, and then two years  
420 before that, my mother. And one of the experiences I had my ... they were both in New York.  
421 One experience I had with my grandmother, I went to New York and I ended up pretty much  
422 staying in that hospital, demanding that she get the type of care that would keep her alive. And I  
423 know, and even they acknowledged that, had I not been there to be an advocate for her and  
424 consistently say to them, "I know she's ninety-five, you know she's ninety-five, but I'm not  
425 going to allow you to use that as an excuse to let her die." And all of a sudden when I began to  
426 raise my voice, they were bringing in specialists from other states, you know. And that was a  
427 real personal example for me about the importance of advocacy. Because you know I advocate  
428 for other people, but this was a situation where, once she kind of came through it, she knew.  
429 You know, because I think at one point she had given up, but I let everybody in that hospital  
430 from the top down know, "You going to treat her." And they did.

431

432 So that was kind of like... an affirmation for me of the importance of advocating for people. And  
433 I've had situations over the years where we've advocated for people or for change, and it's  
434 happened. But it feels really different when it's real up close and personal. Which made it very  
435 hard when she passed away a year later, and all the advocacy just couldn't, [tears forming in  
436 eyes] couldn't save her.

437

438 [Pause. Ms. Harris wipes away tears, sighs]

439

440 But I, but I just think that everybody needs to understand that change doesn't come easy, and  
441 those of us who have the voice, who can influence people to make change, that's our  
442 responsibility.

443

444 [Tape stopped.]

445

446 PA: I'll just ask you a couple more... Okay, what are you most proud of?

447

448 JBH: Oh, [exhale and pause]. I think what, not just one, I mean it's not something really  
449 tangible. What I'm most proud of is when I have young people, or they're not so young now,  
450 people who I have taught, or people who I've influenced, come up to me and say I made a  
451 difference in their lives in some way. I had somebody come up to me at one of the rallies, and I  
452 never met this person before, and she said "I just want you to know that I have always admired  
453 you for the work that you do for the community". And she said, "And I grew up with a picture  
454 of you in my house." And I'm like, "You did?" And she said, "Yeah!" She said, "It was  
455 something that my dad was at and they took a picture of you standing with my dad." And I said,  
456 "You sure it was me?" She said, "Yes Ms. Harris, it was you." And so she said, "I'm just glad I  
457 finally had an opportunity to tell you this." And I'm like, "Wow!"

458

459 It's things like that, that behind, under the radar. Cause even though people might see me in the  
460 media, I really like to be a behind the scenes mover and shaker, you know. I like to do things,  
461 first of all because they're what needs to be done, and then just go on.

462

463 A couple of months ago I was at a conference and there was a young woman there who was a  
464 speaker. And she, I mean she was young. She had just had a baby. Baby's daddy had gotten  
465 killed a couple months before the baby was born. This woman has had a hard time. And when  
466 she came in she had the baby in the stroller. She came to the registration desk, and I just  
467 happened to be standing there. And I turned to her and I said, "Oh." I said, "Are you here for  
468 the conference?" because basically the folks who'd been sitting there really weren't paying her  
469 much attention. And so she said, "yeah," she said, "I'm the speaker, I'm one of the speakers."  
470 And I said, "Oh." I says, "What you going to do with the baby?" 'Cause, you know, I love  
471 babies, I was wanting to keep the baby while she spoke. And so we started talking and she had a  
472 person who was a mentor. And when she got up there and told her story, it was just incredible,  
473 you know, the things she had gone through.

474

475 So when she got through, I went over to where she was sitting, and I told her, "I just want to tell  
476 you." I said, "Your story was fantastic." You know, she's going to college now. She wants to  
477 go into law. I mean I was just totally fascinated by her. But I was also sensitive to the fact that,

478 you know here's a young woman, she's probably got some financial needs. And I had written  
479 her a little note as she got through speaking. I just, I just feel it's important to affirm people,  
480 especially if they're struggling. So, I had written her this nice little note. And then as I was  
481 walking over there I said, "Let me put a few little dollars in here." You know just, just because.  
482 You know, she had a baby. I know you can always use things for babies. And so I kind of  
483 wrapped it up. And when I went over to her, we started talking again. And I just said, I said,  
484 "Here this is for you." And I said, [hushed voice] "Put it in your purse." And so then I got  
485 ready to walk off. And she turned to me, and she said, "You're not leaving are you?" And it was  
486 one of those kind of, you know, "I just met you and I don't want you to leave yet." You know,  
487 it was, it was amazing.

488

489 And the next day, the adult who was there, her mentor or former teacher, sent me an email. And  
490 she said, "I just want to thank you for what you did for her." She said, "You have no *idea* what  
491 your words and your attention to her did for her because she was really..." She shared some  
492 things with me about some things that were happening to this person. And she said, "You just  
493 have no idea, you lifted her up so high." So that's the kind of thing, that's what I like doing best,  
494 is being there, you know. Some people come to your life, into your life, and they're there for the  
495 long haul. Some people just come, and they're there when you need them.

496

497 She had another situation she was dealing with, with the institution she was attending. She had  
498 been treated very poorly by someone in that institution who made some decisions that resulted  
499 in her financial package being withheld. When she told me the story ... "Well, I know the  
500 president of this institution," I said, "and as a matter of fact I'm in a meeting with this person  
501 over the weekend- this next Monday." And I immediately pulled him to the side, and I told him  
502 what the deal was. And he said, "Oh no." He said, "I'll, I'll get on this." And he did. And she  
503 got her stuff, you know.

504

505 And to me that's what... what's the sense of having some ability to influence people if you can't  
506 use it to benefit people who may not have the access, who may not have the voice. That's the  
507 way I see the world is I have been fortunate, in that I have gifts, and I have access to people that  
508 other people don't have access to, so I feel it's my responsibility to use that access to benefit  
509 people. It's not about me wanting to sit up and have lunch with a college president. I could care  
510 less about that. But if having lunch with that college president is going to put me in a position  
511 where I can pull that person off to the side and say, "You know, there's something that's



512 happening with a student on your campus that you need to pay attention to, because it's  
513 inappropriate." Then, then I feel good about that. Cause I can always buy me a lunch, you  
514 know. Yes, yeah.

515

516 So, I just think the advocacy and the civic engagement ... you never stop. You know, you just  
517 never stop. There may be ebbs and flows, because there going be times like with this shooting  
518 where things kind of reach a crescendo, that you have to—you have to respond, you have to be  
519 quick to respond, but you just never stop. You can't ever keep your eye off what's happening  
520 or not happening.

521

522 And then, you have to support other people. I'm involved now with a group of young people.  
523 By young, you know, thirties, late twenties, thirties, some of them early forties. Who just say  
524 they need some mentoring. Because, they said, "we're looking at you all, and we're saying you  
525 all aren't getting any younger! And we need to know what you know." And so, and I think you  
526 see that with one of your professors, Senator [Avel] Gordly. We're all from the same school.  
527 We're looking at the fact we've got to engage young people and begin to teach them what we  
528 have experienced, to help them come into their own so they can continue the advocacy. So *they*  
529 can take the role of leading civic engagement discussions. And any of the young folks that I  
530 interact with, they will tell you. A lot of them call me Mama Harris. They say, "Yeah, Mama  
531 Harris. We know you will keep it real with us." And I said, "Like I've always told you, there are  
532 going to be times when I'm going to sit back and I'm going to allow you to move forward and do  
533 what you want to do, because you need to learn." Sometimes the best lessons are the ones where  
534 you get knocked on your butt. And I tell 'em, I say, "But you can be assured, I'm never going to  
535 let you break your neck and kill yourself." I said, "But I am going to let you learn," and that's  
536 how I learned. I didn't, you know— and I still— none of us always do everything the right way,  
537 or call it the right way. But, having the benefit of having been through things, you know, there  
538 are mistakes that you don't make.

539

540 And so, I'm kind of feeling good about that too. I meet with these young folk every other week.  
541 And I try to, I encourage them to read and study. Because I said, "You know one thing, you  
542 cannot be an effective leader if you haven't studied effective leadership... and ineffective  
543 leadership." You have to study all of that, and you have to know your history, because there are  
544 things that happened in the past that can instruct how you proceed in the future. And so I  
545 recommended some books to 'em for Black History Month. I gave 'em some books. I found

546 some books that were real powerful, and I bought a copy for everybody and gave it to 'em. And,  
547 will continue to insist that they study.

548

549 So ... I don't know what else I can tell you, except you asked about my accomplishment, what I  
550 am most proudest of is, I have a daughter who, I was one of those woman who had a very  
551 difficult time, having a child. And when she came, and she is just, just wonderful. And [exhales]  
552 I often just sit back and just kind of exhale and say "wow," because it was one of the toughest  
553 challenges in my life. And so the other part of this is you know, the love I have for children.  
554 And when I was having trouble, you know it just seemed like such a cruel twist of fate that I had  
555 devoted my life to children and then I had such a hard time. And... so...

556

557 PA: Just two more questions...

558

559 JBH: Oh, okay!

560

561 PA: ... just to fill in a couple things, a couple snapshots I guess of your young life. You  
562 mentioned how much you liked books, were there certain books that really meant a lot to you  
563 when you were younger? Your favorite books?

564

565 JBH: [whispers] Wow, that's a hard one. [normal speaking voice] One of the ones that at  
566 least now, and it's one that I suggest to the young folks is called *Life Without Context* by Walter  
567 Mosley.<sup>xxx</sup> It's about a forty-five pager, and it's just incredible, you know, in terms of looking at  
568 leadership, looking at inter-generational things.

569

570 When I think about books, the first memory I have was when I was about four or five and my  
571 grandmother took me to the library in Harlem and I got my first library card. And I remember  
572 my grandmother used to take me to the library. I remember the first time I was able to check out  
573 the library books and I can just, I just remember me walking down the steps with my little books  
574 and how tickled I was about that.

575

576 I don't know. There are a lot of books that... what can I say? Langston Hughes is one of my  
577 favorites. I get different things from different books, you know. There are some books that I  
578 reread... But like I said, children's books, I have a passion for children's books— I will not deny  
579 that.

580

581 I also have a passion for anything related to the African American experience. I collect stamps, I  
582 have an incredible stamp collection from around the world on African themes. I got started back  
583 in the early '80s. One of the things I set out to do, I saw an article in *Ebony* magazine that had  
584 Martin Luther King stamps that had been printed in other parts of the world. And I set out to  
585 start collecting them, and I pretty much have that collection. And what really ticked me off, you  
586 see, he was killed in '68, and there was some countries that printed, minted stamps in '68. This  
587 country didn't do a stamp to King until 1979.

588

589 And then I collect artifacts, African American art. I found for me culture is nourishing. And it  
590 nourishes my spirit. Books do the same thing. If you all got a minute I'm going to take you up  
591 to my office. We just moved into another floor. They remodeled, we are in the open space. But  
592 I'm still in the process. I have to make my space reflect me, and a place where I feel good. And I  
593 have the advantage that I do travel a lot in my job. So I am always able to get to places where I  
594 can you know, just get that cultural nourishing in. And my house, I walk in my house and I feel  
595 like I'm in a museum. And I like to share that, I like to share that with young people.

596

597 The other thing we haven't talked about Kwanzaa.<sup>xxxii</sup> You asked about things I'm proud of, I'm  
598 proud of the fact that I've been coordinating community Kwanza activities in the city since the  
599 early 70s. Gotten to the point now, one of my dear friends Adriene Cruz, one year she started to  
600 call me "The Kwanzaa Queen."<sup>xxxiii</sup> So now that's what people say, "The Kwanzaa Queen."  
601 And so every year we do a Kwanzaa program, I participate in other programs, help plan  
602 programs. And once again the pride comes from the fact that this was a holiday that was created  
603 in 1966. We have been able to sustain that holiday in this city for all that time. [Ms.  
604 Harris taps finger on the table while speaking to emphasize words] Well we started here in...  
605 first Kwanzaa celebration I went to was in 1971... was it '70? No, it was '70! And then in '71,  
606 we started doing it at Black Educational Center. And we were doing Kwanzaa at a time when a  
607 lot of people didn't know about Kwanzaa. And then I just said, "Okay, I'll do the organizing."  
608 And we just every year we'd do Kwanzaa. And we used to do it seven nights, 'cause it's a seven-  
609 day holiday. And then finally about fifteen years ago, we were like, because every year, I would  
610 get sick two times in the year. Kwanzaa, around the forth night of Kwanzaa, I'd get sick, and the  
611 Saturday of African Liberation Day. By the end of the day I would not have a voice, and by  
612 Monday morning I'd have bronchitis. Every year. People, I mean, it got to the point where  
613 people would say, "It's the fifth night of Kwanzaa, Joyce is sick ain't she!" [Laughter].

614

615 You know just to think... I mean when you think about being able to help sustain something, and  
616 then teach other people about how to do it; I get a charge out of that. You know, it's like passing  
617 it on. Yeah, so, that's one of the other things I'm kind of proud of. When people see me they  
618 think Kwanzaa. Or they think Black Colleges. I also do the Black Colleges Conference here, we  
619 do that once a year. It's an annual conference to introduce students to educational opportunities  
620 at historically black colleges and institutions. So see I just kind of engage myself in things that  
621 allow me to share information I have, and also share the pride, share the culture, and... get  
622 people to think differently about what's possible.

623

624 HOP: Well, in 1969-70, when you were like, "Get me out of Portland."

625

626 JBH: [exclamation]

627

628 HOP: You're still here ...

629

630 JBH: [quietly] Yeah, I'm still here. [normal speaking voice] Well, what kept me here was the  
631 Black Educational Center. Make no mistake about it. When you create something, and you  
632 nurture it, and you watch it grow, you help it grow; that's what kept me here. Because I tell  
633 you, I think we met like on a Thursday and my flight was scheduled out of here that next week.  
634 That's what kept me here. The Black Educational Center. Then I never went back home for the  
635 summer. I went one time, and it was because there was a Council of Independent Black  
636 Institutions had a summer long training in Brooklyn. And that was the summer I went home.  
637 But other than that, I have never stayed in New York for a summer.

638

639 HOP: Is the Black Education Center, any iteration of it, still in existence?

640

641 JBH: As a thought it is. And we're actually thinking, I've been... people and especially former  
642 students are saying, "You know, we need the BEC back, 'cause I've got a child." So, technically  
643 it's still... an entity, but we are looking at what we might do.

644

645 And I told the young folks, "I'm tired!" I mean, keep in mind I've been doing this since I was 18.  
646 I just turned 59, on the 22nd of February. I've still got a lot of spunk in me, now don't get me  
647 wrong. But you know, now it's time for another generation to move it forward. And if you

648 want to make sure your child gets a quality education, you need to fight it on two levels. You  
649 need to try to hold the institutions, the public institutions, accountable. But then, that can be a  
650 slow process. Create your own.

651

652 One of the proudest days for me was when my child was able to walk up the stairs of the BEC.  
653 Wasn't the greatest thing for her, because the next year I became her teacher. And she was like  
654 "Mom!" But I mean it was fine. That was special to be able to... see a child everyday and you  
655 know... Yeah, that was special.

656

657 HOP: Anything you would like to add?

658

659 JBH: No, no.

660

661 [Tape ends amidst hushed discussion of signing off.]

662

663 *Ms. Harris telephoned on the evening of March 10, 2010 and requested the following*

664 *statement be added to her interview:*

665

666 JBH: I have been married to Paul Harris for thirty-five years. His support as a caring husband  
667 and father to our daughter has made it possible for me to do the work I have done in my  
668 community for over thirty-seven years. Young men in our community have said that he is a role  
669 model for them of commitment and how to respect and stand by one's spouse.

670

i Ms. Braden Harris also earned a Bachelors of Arts degree in American Studies from Reed College in 1973.

ii In the summer of 1970, following her freshman year at Reed College, Ms. Braden Harris founded the Black Education Center with fellow Reed College students, Ron Herndon and Frank Wilson.

iii. Dr. Mildred L. Bennett worked as a professor at Portland State University. She was born in Portland on September 23, 1921, and passed away February 8, 2009.

iv. On January 29, 2010, Aaron M. Campbell, an African American male, was fatally shot in the back by a Portland Police officer. Controversy surrounded the use of deadly force in this altercation.

v. The Portland Trailblazers are a professional basketball team in Portland, Oregon.

vi. Jerome Kersey and Buck Williams both played for the Portland Trailblazers, during the years 1989-1996.

vii. Dr. Ethel Simon-McWilliams began her career as a teacher and administrator. She worked with Northwest Regional Education Laboratory for 22 years, retiring in 2001 as the as the executive director.

- viii. Title IV of the 1964 Civil Rights Act encouraged the desegregation of public schools.
- ix. Saipan is now considered part of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands.
- x. Dr. Asa Grant Hilliard III (August 22, 1933-August 13, 2007) was an African American professor of Educational Psychology.
- xi Dr. Clyde R. Taylor is currently Professor Emeritus at Gallatin School, New York University.
- xii In Part I. of the interview Ms. Braden Harris explains that in their second year, the Black Educational Center opened and operated a bookstore as a way of supporting the school.
- xiii The contemporary Talking Drum Bookstore and Reflections Coffee House are located at 446 NE Killingsworth St., Portland, Oregon.
- xiv The 'talking drum' is a West African drum whose pitch can be regulated to the extent that it is said the drum "talks." *Gangan* is the word for "talking drum" in the Yoruba language. Yoruba is language widely spoken in West Africa. It is the official language of Nigeria and is also spoken in Benin, Togo, and parts of Brazil, Sierra Leone, northern Ghana, and Cuba.
- xv Chris Poole-Jones worked as the Administrator of Educational Media for Portland Public Schools. Previously, she worked as a librarian.
- xvi Tom Feelings, Ashley Bryan, and Jerry Pinkney are all acclaimed African-American illustrators of children's books. Tom Feelings passed away on August 25, 2003. In the following quote he describes his work, "When I am asked what kind of work I do, my answer is that I am a storyteller, in picture form, who tries to reflect and interpret the lives and experiences of the people that gave me life. When I am asked who I am, I say, I am an African who was born in America. Both answers connect me specifically with my past and present ... therefore I bring to my art a quality which is rooted in the culture of Africa ... and expanded by the experience of being in America. I use the vehicle of 'fine art' and 'illustration' as a viable expression of form, yet striving always to do this from an African perspective, an African world view, and above all to tell the African story ... this is my content. The struggle to create artwork as well as to live creatively under any conditions and survive (like my ancestors), embodies my particular heritage in America."
- xvii Camara Laye (January 1, 1928 - February 4 1980) was an African writer, from Guinea. His first novel, *L'Enfant noir*, which can be translated as "The Dark Child," was published in 1953. In 1954, an English translation of the novel was published under the title *The African Child*.
- xviii Steve Duin is a columnist for the newspaper *Oregonian*. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is a novel written by Mark Twain and first published in 1885. It is commonly recognized as a classic of American literature and has at times been included in public school curriculum.
- xix The Oriental Institute Museum is associated with the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.
- xx Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. (October 15, 1917- February 28, 2007) was an American historian. He served as a special assistant to President John F. Kennedy from 1961-1963. In 1991 he published the book *The Disuniting of America: Reflections of a Multicultural Society*. In this book he critiques the Baseline Essay project as he lays out his opposition to multiculturalism. He makes specific reference to the essay authored by Ms. Braden Harris.
- xxi In her essay, Ms. Braden Harris notes the similarity between the ancient Egyptian text *The Negative Confessions* and the Ten Commandments of the Judeo-Christian religious traditions. Excerpt from Ms. Braden Harris' essay: "*The Protestations of Innocence* also called *The Negative Confessions* were the deceased person's affirmation that he had lived a good life on earth and was worthy of immortality. The *Ten Commandments* which appear much later in history are very similar in content to *The Negative*

*Confessions.*" Her essay continues to compare the content of the two in detail and suggest "the African origins of the *Ten Commandments.*"

xxii Nelson Mandela was released from prison on February 11, 1990, after serving 27 years. He was elected President of South Africa in the first fully representative democratic election in 1994.

xxiii. Kamau Sadiki, a Portland-based black education activist, and not the former member of the Black Panther Party.

xxiv. Senator Avel Louise Gordly was a member of the Oregon Senate, representing the 23rd District from 1997 to 2009. She was a member of the Oregon House of Representatives from 1991 through 1996.

xxv The Matt Dishman Community Center is located in northeast Portland in a historically African-American neighborhood. In the late 1960s, the local community lobbied to name the center after Matt Dishman, the first African-American Multnomah County sheriff and police officer in the city of Portland.

xxvi The *toyi-toyi* is an African dance originally from Zimbabwe that became famous for its use in political protests in the apartheid-era.

xxvii. Again Ms. Braden Harris makes reference to the recent shooting of Amon Campbell by a Portland Police Officer; see note iv.

xxviii. In late August 2005, Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast of the United States causing severe damage from central Florida to Texas. The levees surrounding the city of New Orleans, Louisiana failed following the storm causing flooding over 80% of the city and neighboring areas. Many lives were lost and thousands of residents were displaced. The scale of the disaster overwhelmed local emergency services, and following the flood a number of displaced residents relocated to other States.

xxix. Robert Taber, an investigative journalist, traveled to Cuba in the late 1950's to cover the country's burgeoning revolutionary movement, led by Fidel Castro and Che Guevara. In 1965, he published the book, *War of the Flea: the classic study of guerrilla warfare*, which provides an analysis of the guerrilla fighter's means and methods and begins with the line, "The guerilla fights the war of the flea, and his military enemy suffers the dog's disadvantages: too much to defend; too small, ubiquitous, and agile an enemy to come to grips with."

xxx. The exact title of this book is *Life out of context: which includes a proposal for the non-violent takeover of the house of representatives*, by Walter Mosley, published by Nation Books in 2006.

xxxi. Kwanzaa is an African American holiday established in 1966. Kwanzaa honors African heritage and culture and is celebrated for a week, December 26 - January 1.

xxxii. Adriene Cruz is a visual artist residing in Portland, Oregon, acclaimed for her use of color and textiles.