

Oral History of Honorable Richard Roberts

This interview is being conducted on behalf of the Oral History Project of The Historical Society of the District of Columbia Circuit. The interviewer is Michelle Jones Coles, and the interviewee is Honorable Richard Roberts. The interview took place on Monday, December 18, 2017. This is the first interview.

MS. COLES: Thank you, Judge Roberts, for making the time to speak with me today and to record your oral history for this project.

JUDGE ROBERTS: I'm happy to be here. Thank you for doing it.

MS. COLES: I'd like to start talking about your childhood and learning about some of the early influencers in your life. Can you tell me where you were born.

JUDGE ROBERTS: I was born in New York Hospital in Manhattan, and actually I was born on Father's Day. My father had his own press, a printing press, so he prepared some announcements that he sent to friends announcing my birth on Father's Day, which said "I, Richard Warren Roberts, was born on Father's Day as my gift from my mommy to my daddy." I actually brought, I thought you might find this of some interest, this is the copy of the announcement my dad printed up on his own press. He found those at some point, I think after I got married, and thought I'd find it interesting and sent me a couple of them.

One interesting thing about it, you'll see on the front, it says in capital letters, "It's a Boy," and then it's followed by, "I, Richard Warren, was my mummy's Father's Day present to my daddy." I mention that because my sisters took piano lessons. My sisters are six-and-a-half years older than I am. They are fraternal twins. The gentleman who was a friend of the family received one of these announcements and thought that

it was announcing that my name was I Richard. So he used to come to the house to give piano lessons to my sisters, and he'd greet me by saying, "Hi, I Richard."

MS. COLES: That's cute.

JUDGE ROBERTS: So I was born in New York Hospital. My family lived at the Riverton Apartments at the time in Harlem at 2190 Madison Avenue, which was at 138th Street. We lived there until I was about four, and at that time, we moved to Jamaica, New York. It was then called South Ozone Park in Queens. That was a time when my dad was interested in getting some property of his own and my mother as well and moving out of an apartment into a house. So that was when I was four years old. They found a new development right near Kennedy Airport. I think it was called the Van Wyck Gardens. They bought a house, although my dad was only half satisfied because he called it a half of a house. This was what we might call today a townhouse, so one half of the structure was our house, and the other half was our neighbor's house. He always said well this is half a house. One day I'll have a whole house.

He did eventually get a whole house because there was a set of tracts in upstate New York, in Saugerties, New York, that were offered for sale. He, his good friend, who was a neighbor in Riverton, and my uncle, who lived right around the hallway at 2190 Madison Avenue, in apartment 2B, we lived in apartment 2G, decided they'd go in and buy this particular set of tracts of property, undeveloped, in Saugerties, New York, where my

dad designed and built by hand a house, a whole house that he could walk around and call a whole house.

He was a Renaissance guy. This guy could do any number of things. He was by training an English teacher. He got his bachelor's degree at Benedict College, which is a HBCU in Columbia, South Carolina, where he grew up. He went on to get his master's degree at NYU in English and English Literature. That was in part because in South Carolina in those Jim Crow days, state higher education was not available to black people, so you learned about lots of folks who left and went to get higher education in the north, so he did that.

His training was in English and English Literature, but he was a Renaissance man who had so many skills I wished I could develop and never could. He had a penchant for woodwork, so once we got our house in Queens, he constructed a woodshop in the basement with all kinds of tools and vises, and he did carpentry. He also was able to design with his own hands this house up in Saugerties. I don't know how many thousands of square feet it was, but it wasn't just the design. He went up there every weekend with a station wagon and he carted building materials up there and took cinder block by cinder block, built half of the house that was built by cinder blocks.

MS. COLES: Did he do that by himself, or did he have brothers, cousins, someone helping him?

JUDGE ROBERTS: He did it largely by himself. When my mother could pull away for a weekend, she'd go up to keep him company, but she was not hammering nails or mixing mortar or laying cinder blocks. So he did the construction.

MS. COLES: How old were you at that time?

JUDGE ROBERTS: I think he got the property when I was still living in Riverton because our neighbors and friends and uncle were all living there, and they went to see the property together. He did the construction in Saugerties on our house probably from the time I was four or five. I remember it, and I have more of a memory of it once I lived in Queens after the age of four because early on, I think when I was in elementary school, he got our first second car, and it was a seven-year-old station wagon. It was a two-door, 1956 Plymouth station wagon. It allowed for a lot of extended room in the back to put plywood and all kinds of construction materials. I was a go-getter. I was with my dad any time he said let's go and go up to Saugerties. I'd say sure. I had no skill in construction so wasn't much of a help. He did that by hand.

The north side of the house was intended to be a garage, but he made it double as living quarters on the upstairs, so we went up there and the family did vacation for the summer, we lived upstairs. The downstairs was originally designed to be a garage once the other half of the house, which was more of the living quarters, was going to be constructed. People were always confused because he built the garage half first and the part of the property that was exposed on the south side had a fireplace exposed to the outdoors, and people said this guy must have been drunk

when he built this house. He's got a fireplace on the outside. But the plan had always been that was the wing that would be built second and would end up being the living room with a fireplace, which ultimately did go up, and we would go up there and have a whole house.

MS. COLES: Was the intended purpose always to be a second home, a vacation home? It was never the primary residence?

JUDGE ROBERTS: Yes. I think we had enough of New York City in us that nobody in the household would agree yes, let's move up to Saugerties full time. It was about two-and-a-half hours up the New York State thruway, very rural. A nice area, but it was always intended to be just a place to go relax, get away from the hustle and bustle of the city.

MS. COLES: Does your family still own that home?

JUDGE ROBERTS: Unfortunately not. I went back a year ago on a drive between Albany and New York City. I veered off the thruway just to go look at it. My parents are not alive. My mom passed in 1978, a month before I graduated from law school. So she couldn't see me graduate. My dad lived to be 92, but toward his end, he was suffering from Alzheimer's. My sisters, one is here in D.C., a forty-year veteran of the D.C. public school system, who is retired. My other sister lives in Denver, Colorado. I, obviously, live here in D.C. So our ability to get up to that house really was not great, and it did not make sense to just hold on to it. So after my dad passed, we sold the house.

MS. COLES: Going back to your dad's printing press, what was the focus of it? Was it a newspaper that he printed? What did he do there?

JUDGE ROBERTS: No. He did not print any newspaper. I mentioned his penchant for art as well. Although when he was teaching, he initially began teaching at A&T University in Greensboro, after he finished his master's, he went down there to teach. But when Countee Cullen, the Harlem Renaissance poet, died in 1946, Countee Cullen was also teaching poetry at the Frederick Douglass Junior High School 139 in Harlem, just a few blocks from where we ended up living when I was born.

The public school system recruited my father, who had finished his masters by that time and was on the faculty of A&T University, it was A&T College at the time, to come and take over Countee Cullen's poetry classes. So he did that, but while he was there, because he had this innate skill for art, they asked him to also teach the art classes to the students at Frederick Douglass Junior High School. Part of what he did was not just poetry and English, but he taught art. Some of the art that he did included sort of visual art that involved doing things on what was called back then rexograph machines. He would type up programs for some of the drama classes or type up poetry that he could pass out to the students. So the idea of reproducing was a part of what he wanted to do. Rexograph machines later turned into mimeograph machines. Those are things that probably you have never heard of, but they were stencils that you'd put into a typewriter, an actual typewriter, and you typed what you wanted to

be reproduced on these stencils. The stencils were then put on round drums that had liquid in them that would have the liquid flow through those drums and through the stencil onto paper to reproduce items that look today like what we get at printers and computer printers. The rexograph machines had ink that put purple colored items on a printed paper. Once they got fancy and got mimeograph machines, the printed paper had black print on it. But you'll notice that the press that my dad had looked closer to a rexograph print than a mimeograph print because this print is purple or close to purple.

So I mention that just to say that he had a great eye for visual reproduction. The stencil press he used then was for church fliers when we were trying to publicize events at our church in Queens. He would design different things and run them off on his stencil press. He also had the printing press. I'm not sure what you call them, they're little individualized fonts so every letter had a piece of metal that you'd line up in a printing press so you could then run off a printed material. So he had a whole set of these letters and numbers and figures that he would line up on the printing press when he would design something he wanted to run off. That's actually how he printed up this baby announcement. You see the fonts vary in size.

So that's really part of what I call the Renaissance man aspect of my dad. So many things that I realized he did, had talent for and could do that I never was able to achieve, but I give him credit for doing it.

When he grew up in Jim Crow South Carolina you really did have to do for yourself. Nobody else was going to do things for you, and so he took on himself to learn a whole variety of things. In high school, he was a violinist. He got assigned a violin solo at his high school graduation. He did not continue with music. I guess he had more of an eye for visual arts and for woodworking and for architecture and for things of that nature. I think that was all a part of his eye for visual arts.

MS. COLES: Going to his upbringing in South Carolina, what did his parents do? What did your grandparents on your father's side do?

JUDGE ROBERTS: I should have brought you a book, and I'll do that next time. My dad was born in Fernandina, Florida. Fernandina is now called Fernandina Beach. It's on the northeast coast of Florida, above Jacksonville. His dad was a federal employee in Fernandina. He worked at the post office in Fernandina. He married my grandmother, who was from Columbia, South Carolina. His wife, my grandmother, really pined for being back in South Carolina, so my grandfather, whose name was Richard Roberts, my first name is taken after my grandfather's first name, agreed to move the family at that point back to my grandmother's home base of Columbia. So when he got back to the home base of Columbia, he was able, I think, through the federal employment he had in Fernandina, to transfer to become the custodian of the federal building in Columbia, South Carolina. So his work at the federal building was the early shift, from 4:00 a.m. to 12:00 noon. So that was his sort of steady job, but it was not his passion. His

passion was photography, and I think some of that visual artistry that I was just describing to you that my father displayed probably came through the genes of his father.

When my grandfather ended his workday at 12:00 noon at the federal building where he was the custodian, he walked down a few blocks to the black business district, which was one block long, in Columbia, South Carolina. The black business district is where you had the black livery business, the cab business. I think there might have been a mortician on that block and some other black businesses, a general store and so on. My grandfather had a photographic studio in that black business district on Washington Street in Columbia, South Carolina, and that was his passion. Many of the people in the black community in Columbia, South Carolina, and other parts of South Carolina, whenever they wanted to get pictures of themselves for posterity, they went to Roberts's studio.

My grandfather had a studio on the second floor of that building on Washington Street. He did principally portraiture, portrait photography, so he had a setup where the customers would come and sit in a chair or stand in a certain area, and he would take their pictures. His promise to his customers was I will give you a photograph that shows your true likeness. The customers would often come in with their own ideas about how they wanted to be viewed. They usually came in in their Sunday best because this is how they wanted their pictures to be passed out to others,

showing their Sunday best, but they wanted to be posed in positions that they had their own ideas about. They're the customers, so my grandfather said fine, I'll take your picture posed in the way you want, but I want you to do me one favor. I want you to let me pose you afterwards in the way I think would show your true likeness, and they'd say fine. My grandfather would say I'll take these pictures, and you pick the one you like best. Invariably, the customers would say I like the way you posed me. That's the one I want you to print up for me.

So you asked what they did. My grandfather was a custodian of the federal building during the day, and in the afternoon, he was a photographer.

MS. COLES: Just to contextualize, around what decade was this? Is this the early 1900s? When is this period?

JUDGE ROBERTS: My dad was born in 1911, so he moved when he was eight or nine to Columbia with the rest of the family so they got there in 1920. My grandfather did the work I described to you between 1920 and 1936. In 1936, he passed. I believe he had pneumonia that he could not recover from. So this was a period between 1920 and 1936 where a lot of the portraiture that I told you about was happening.

It wasn't limited to that photo shop in Columbia. Many people out in what we called the country back then heard about him and asked him to come out and do portraiture or other kinds of photography out there as well. For example, South Carolina State in Orangeburg was another

HBCU. Sometimes they would have graduations or other ceremonies, and they would contract with him to come out and take pictures.

Unfortunately, the infant mortality rate was much higher then than it is now, and sometimes, parents who'd lost their young infants would have no pictures of them, so when they were in their coffins, the parents wanted to have at least a picture there, so he'd go and take pictures sometimes of deceased people.

But this was during the era from 1920 through 1936. I mention that because when he died, he had five living children of whom my dad was one, they realized that the photographs he had taken that were shot on glass plate negatives. Film that we see and think of more currently was available, but it was not the kind of medium that provided the kind of clarity and texture that my grandfather liked, so he used those old glass plate negatives that he would put inside his flash cameras. The family realized when he died that the 3,000 or 4,000 glass plate negatives that he had accumulated in his studio were really valuable, and so what they did when he died, they shut the studio down, they boxed up the glass plate negatives, and they stored them in the under-space, the crawl space underneath the house that they lived in in Columbia. They did that intentionally because they knew that the crawlspace would be dry, not moist, they knew that the crawlspace would also be dark. Those were the best conditions almost archival conditions in which to store them until

they could figure out what to do with them. Well to make a long story short, there they sat for fifty years.

The one thing that my grandmother and grandfather were determined to do, my grandfather and grandmother never got beyond elementary or secondary schooling. My grandmother was a homemaker, but both of them had such dedication to the idea that young black people should get education that they determined that every single one of their five kids was going to go to college. All of them graduated from high school. All of them went to college. My oldest uncle went to Benedict. His next youngest brother, who's my father, Beverly Roberts, went to Benedict. The next youngest brother went to Hampton. The next sister went to St. Aug's. She is the aunt that I lived right around the hallway from in Riverton, and I grew up with her. She was like a second mom. And then the baby girl went to I think, it wasn't Benedict. I have to reconstruct where she went, but all five of them went to college. These were college graduates of parents who never got beyond secondary school. My grandmother and my grandfather were also determined that the black kids who lived as we said in "the country" in South Carolina who didn't have opportunities, they would house them in their own house in Columbia to make sure they had a place to stay when they went to high school or when they went to college.

I was going to tell you, I was mentioning this kind of detail because fifty years after my grandfather died, it just so happened that

Thomas Johnson, a historian and archivist from the University of South Carolina was doing an oral history about early days of Columbia, South Carolina, in the 20th Century. Well one of the neighbors who was still alive at that time said you know you really ought to go next door to Roberts's house because Roberts, when he was alive, was a photographer, and he probably has a bunch of pictures. So Johnson found us. He found my father and siblings, one of whom was still living in the house, knocked on the door, said I'm from the University of South Carolina and we're doing a history, we heard your family might have something to say about it. My Uncle Cornelius at that time was still living in the family house and said I can show you some of these glass plate negatives. They went down to the crawlspace of the house. They began to pull out boxes to show the glass plate negatives. This historian was totally blown away. He was beside himself. He contacted Phillip Dunn, a photographer and professor of art at University of South Carolina, who came to look at them, and the photographer was just amazed. To make a long story short, they borrowed a lot of those glass plate negatives, and they produced a book of these pictures, and it's called, *A True Likeness: The Black South of Richard Samuel Roberts, 1920 to 1936*. That book went to its first publication in 1986. It went to a second printing, and I think the University Press has now contracted with the original publisher to get the rights to publish it a third time. I'll bring that book and show it to you. It's been a source of pride for our family.

MS. COLES: Were you able to identify the people that are in the pictures? Were they labeled in some way?

JUDGE ROBERTS: One of the fun things about this project was that they were able to make prints from the glass plate negatives and take them around the community and say “some of these are unidentified. Can you help identify them?” And quite a few of those pictures got identified in that fashion. Some of them, the family was already able to identify. Some of the paperwork associated with those photographs did survive. A lot of it didn’t. So there were some that were identified, and some were not. But the process of going through the oral history expanded, and it allowed for identification of a lot of people in those pictures. Some of them were fairly successful, prominent members of the black community of South Carolina. Others were regular people who decided they wanted to get their pictures taken. But it really was for them a treasure trove. It’s also a tribute, I think, to my grandfather’s children, my dad and his four siblings, that they knew some day this collection of glass plate negatives was going to be of some attention to somebody and is already of worth, and that’s why they stored it in the crawl space under the house rather than just throw it out. It took fifty years, but fifty years later, it came to fruition.

MS. COLES: That’s incredible. Your grandmother on that side of the family, it seems like with your grandfather, he died before you were born. Did you know your grandmother?

JUDGE ROBERTS: I did. It was one of the blessings of my life. You may have heard about stories of children growing up in the north going down south. I grew up in Harlem and Jamaica, New York. I did that. I was one of those who would end up going down south for the summer. My dad, as a teacher in the New York City public school system, got summers off, so we often had time to make the trip down to Columbia, South Carolina. My grandmother was still alive, so I got to know her through her 80s. Being able to connect with a grandparent down south was invaluable. We called her Granka. I think that happened because my cousin, who still lived in South Carolina, for some reason wasn't able to say Grandma, and somehow it got twisted into the term Granka. Well that became her name from then on. We didn't know her by any other name at all. Even her kids started calling her Granka. But yes, I knew Granka. Her name was Wilhelmina Pearl Williams Roberts. My aunt who lived around the hallway from me at Madison Avenue in Harlem was named after her, so Aunt Mina is short for Wilhelmina, was named after her mother. I got to know my grandmother. We exchanged letters when I wasn't down there. We sat on the front porch of her house in Columbia, South Carolina, when we went down there for the summers. My Aunt Mina's son, Bobby, who was only about nine months older than I, we sort of grew up together, at roughly the same age. We enjoyed going down south to Columbia, South Carolina, (a) because it was going somewhere different, but quite frankly, (b) because we considered ourselves to be New York City sophisticates,

young as we were back then. And to go down to that part of the country and to see the pace of life, and to see the outward behaviors of people in a way that was so different from the hustle and bustle of New York City, in one respect we thought it kind of country that we'd walk down the streets in that neighborhood and people would say "mornin'" or "evenin'" or "how ya'll doin'?" We didn't do that in Harlem. That just wasn't happening. But there was something humane about it. There was something very earthy about it. There was something I guess about it that even though at that young age we kind of cracked up because we thought it was country, there was something that still drew us to it, and so we enjoyed walking down the street. We enjoyed that people made something of a routine, sitting on their front porches at evening time to be able to speak to their neighbors who walked down the street. I sat with my Granka, my grandmother, on the front porch, in the little rocking chairs, and we'd get stories from her about how things were, and as people passed by in front of our porch, we'd say "mornin'" or "evenin'." It was an enjoyable experience.

MS. COLES: The times when you were visiting in South Carolina, is this still during the segregation era?

JUDGE ROBERTS: Yes. My memories stretch back to a time when it was still Jim Crow days. I don't have as rich a set of actual events and memories then, but I know that the time that I was going down there was still Jim Crow days. One thing I can remember, the first car I can remember my dad saying that he

had and I saw pictures of was a 1949 two-door SlipStream Nash. American Motors existed then, and they produced this Nash car, and they were one of the earliest auto manufacturers in the United States to have reclining front seats. It doesn't sound like a big deal today, but back then, those front seats just did not recline in most of the American cars. The first car I have a better memory of and riding in was a 1953 Nash Ambassador that was also made by American Motors, and it was red. It was sort of maroon, but at my young age could not distinguish verbally between what was red and what was maroon. So I called it a red car. I remember that four-door Nash Ambassador having reclining front seats. The reason I mention that is because I do remember that from New York City to Columbia was a 12- or 16-hour drive, depending, and I remember us pulling to the side of the road at night. Dad and Mom would recline the front seats. My sisters and I were young and small at that time, and they always brought blankets. For me it was a joy to go to sleep in the car. I didn't appreciate until later why we did that. It wasn't that we were being cheap and not buying a hotel room. We couldn't get motel rooms. We couldn't sleep, in Jim Crow days, in those motels. So part of my parents' genius was well let's get an American Motors car that has reclining front seats because we knew we wanted to make these trips down to South Carolina, and I'll tell you more later about my mother's grandparents in Greensboro, North Carolina. We'd make trips to Greensboro as well.

So my first appreciation for the fact that I was living in Jim Crow era came a little later after I was thinking back about how and why we made trips down south. We weren't allowed to stay in those motels, so we slept in the car on the side of the road when it got to be late at night, and Dad and Mom, tired of driving, they needed some rest.

But my first memory of the effects of Jim Crow came perhaps when I was 11 or 12. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 had passed outlawing for the second time in our nation's history racial discrimination in public accommodations. I say the second time because that had already happened back in the 19th century, but the Supreme Court's civil rights cases essentially legalized private segregation and discrimination. It took a whole nother 100 years for the Congress to do again what it had done earlier. After the 1964 Civil Rights Act passed, public accommodations like movie theaters, restaurants and so on could not bar black folks. Well by that time in Columbia, South Carolina, I have an uncle there who married my father's youngest sister. He had a deep brown complexion, and I remember him taking me, my cousin Bobby, and his two sons to the movie theater that had been segregated for years and years and years in downtown Columbia. He took us there so there were about five of us altogether. We needed someplace that had five contiguous seats. He found them as soon as we got into the back of the theater, and he led us into this set of five seats. Well, beside his seat was seated, I presume, a wife and a husband. The husband was in full military uniform. Fort

Jackson was a military base just outside of Columbia, and the couple was white. When my deep brown skin uncle sat down beside this white woman, this full-dressed uniformed white soldier stood up and bellowed to my black uncle, “YOU can’t sit there beside MY wife,” and my uncle, who had a little bit of a stutter, said, “Well, I b-b-b-bought a ticket just like you did,” and that white soldier and his wife got up and left rather than sit beside this series of black people.

So that’s I think one of my first memories of the effects of Jim Crow and the experience with Jim Crow during my time in Columbia, South Carolina.

MS. COLES: That’s interesting. I’d like to hear more about your grandmother. Do you know why she went to Florida?

JUDGE ROBERTS: Good question, and the short answer is no. I believe it had to do with being in a warmer climate or a less humid climate. I think it had to do with health.

MS. COLES: As an adult, she just made the decision to leave on her own?

JUDGE ROBERTS: That I don’t have the answer to, and I think some of my relatives might have it. I remember that either the move down to Florida or the move up to South Carolina had something to do with the climate being more consistent with her health needs. You’ve now prompted me to go find out the answer to that.

MS. COLES: Okay. So let’s go to your mother’s side of the family tree. What can you tell me about your mother?

JUDGE ROBERTS: Lots. And before I forget, I told you about the first car that I remember riding in that we'd drive down to Greensboro or Columbia in. It was a red Nash Ambassador. At the time we got it, I guess I was 2 or 3, and I couldn't articulate clearly in English my description of this car. I was trying to say "that's my dad's own red car," but it came out at age 2 as "maondawaca." And I'm going to show you a picture of "maondawaca" that I just happened to come across. After we moved from Harlem to Jamaica, that's a picture of my family, my dad, my mom, my two sisters, and God forbid, me. But this is the back of "maondawaca." The red, or really maroon, 1953 Nash Ambassador. That's us standing in front of the house that we moved into a year earlier in Queens. As my dad said, the half a house. But that is the back of the car.

My mother was born in Lynchburg, Virginia. Odd name, and we were always a little perplexed about why would someone call a town Lynchburg or why would black people want to live in a Lynchburg, but she was born in Lynchburg, Virginia. Her father was an educator as was her mother. Her mother was an educator at the secondary level. Her father was a university educator. He eventually was the head of Virginia Theological Seminary, and he was a minister. I believe he had a pastorate either in Lynchburg or in Saluda, or perhaps he traveled between those two places, but my mother was born in Lynchburg, Virginia.

Eventually the family moved to Greensboro where my grandfather became the pastor of Providence Baptist Church and remained in that

pastorate for well over twenty year. He was a man of letters. He was fairly rigid and strict. He had one of those deep baritone voices.

MS. COLES: You knew this grandfather?

JUDGE ROBERTS: I did know him. He lived to his 90s. My grandmother lived perhaps close to her 90s. So when we'd go down south to Greensboro, both of my grandparents were alive on my mother's side, I actually did go to church those Sundays when he was preaching at his church. My grandmother obviously was the dutiful pastor's wife, so she'd be there at church every Sunday as well. I couldn't wear my Harlem grubbies. I had to dress up for church when I went to this church. Although my mother's parents were Baptist and my grandfather was Baptist, my father grew up in the Episcopal church in Columbia, and so when my parents got married, eventually my mother converted to be Episcopalian to be the dutiful wife. This was the times before wives felt free to belong to whatever religion they wanted to belong to, but she converted to Episcopalianism. In any event, so we all went to church in Greensboro on those Sundays when my grandfather preached. But as I say, he was a man of letters. He had a doctorate in divinity. He studied the classics. He did not subscribe to the trend of Baptist preaching that I guess some called whooping and hollering, but he was one who wanted to infuse his lectures with some classical teaching of Greek philosophy and Roman history and that kind of thing. He wanted to be educational because he was a teacher as well

having trained at Virginia Union University, so he didn't want to just inspire emotion. He wanted to infuse education in what he did.

My grandmother, however, was a teacher at the secondary school level, and they had ten children. Think back on that now, and I don't know whether I take my hat off to them for being that courageous or it's crazy. I'm not sure which, but it probably wasn't that unusual back in those days. So they had ten children. Seven of them survived through middle stages of adulthood and beyond. One of them died in infancy. It was a boy. Joseph Walter Tynes is my grandfather's name. His second child was named Joseph, Jr., but he did not survive beyond infancy. Another of their sons was named Beryl, who served in the Navy for a while. I don't think he died in active service, but he died when he was in his 20s, so I never got to meet him. They had another teenage girl named Katherine who died, so I never got to meet her. The other seven lived into full adulthood and eventually I got to meet all of them, which also means that I grew up with a whole host of aunts and uncles and cousins, which was just wonderful. I enjoyed that. Both on my mother's side and my father's side. Only one of my father's siblings did not have children. The rest of them had children, so I had a whole bunch of cousins and uncles and aunts.

So my mother grew up as the baby of ten in Greensboro, North Carolina, as the daughter of a minister and a teacher, so you can imagine that she had certain parameters within which she had to behave and certain

traditions she had to follow. Being in Greensboro, which is the home of A&T, she followed in the footsteps of at least four of her siblings by going to college at A&T. I might be going a bit fast for you, but fast-forward, she majored in music. My dad taught at A&T, so they met each other when she had finished her studies in Greensboro and he was on faculty there, so there's actually an age gap there, but they got married and they moved to New York and my mother became a chorister in the Metropolitan Opera. So she had a lovely voice. I remember it. She sang in the Met, and I remember as a kid going to the Met, and we sat up in the balcony of the Metropolitan Opera looking down, for example, on operas like *Aida*. She was a chorister, and if you've ever seen *Aida*, which I just went back to see at the Kennedy Center a few months ago, at one point in the opera, there are some risers where singers are standing, chorus members are standing, and I have a vivid memory of going to watch *Aida* once and sitting up there in the balcony and shouting "There's Mom!" and Dad had to say "shhhhh." But I have that vivid memory of her singing in that chorus. She sang in many other Metropolitan Opera productions, *Cavalleria* and *Pagliacci* and *Aida*, and some others, so she was gifted enough a singer to be able to do that.

MS. COLES: Were there many African American women singing at the Met at that time?

JUDGE ROBERTS: At that time, I don't know what the count was, but you can imagine that she would not have been among the majority racially, but I do think if you

look at opera companies above the Mason Dixon and opera companies below the Mason Dixon, she probably had greater opportunity to join an opera company in New York than she would have in Mississippi or somewhere. I don't recall seeing or remembering many black faces in that chorus much less in leading roles. I think it was in that sense isolating, but she was such a good musician, such a good singer, they were lucky to have her as opposed to her being lucky to get in there. That's my attitude about it anyway.

Interestingly, she's the baby in the family, but music ran through that family. The next oldest person was her brother Morris. Morris H. Tynes, followed his father into the ministry. He, I think, went to A&T, but he ended up getting a doctorate in divinity, went to Yale, got a degree there, eventually moved to Chicago, reared a family there, was a pastor of Greater Mt. Moriah Baptist Church there, and talk about a voice. Uncle Morris had one of those baritone voices that could blast you out of the room, and he enjoyed employing it, both in his preaching and in joining with others who were singing.

Uncle Morris inherited great vocal talent as well as talent from the pulpit. When I was much older, I was able to go visit him in Chicago, and he was a character. He was quite a character. I visited him in his church when he was at the pulpit preaching, and he too thought it might be best to infuse what he said with some educational content, and not just sort of spiritual content, feel-good content, but boy could he blend it. He realized

that many of the parishioners had migrated up during the great migration from southern states and some of the parishioners he realized wanted to hear some of that educational stuff. Some of them wanted to get roused and feel the spirit. So he had a unique talent of doing what his father would never do. He blended some of the highfalutin sounds of Greek and Latin, but then he'd be able to get that organ playing and rouse the spirit that people wanted to hear too. He was quite a character. Very talented. He was one of the confidants of Martin Luther King. He marched from Selma to Montgomery. I have a photograph of my Uncle Morris marching in the front line right behind Dr. King at a time when Dr. King said now we have to break out in song, and I'm trying to remember if it was "Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory," so maybe a spiritual, and some photographer was right there and took a picture of my uncle with his mouth wide open, and I know he was singing with that baritone booming out right behind Dr. King.

I mention music running down through the family because the next child up in age is my Aunt Margaret. Margaret Tynes also went to A&T, also majored in music. She pursued a path first in New York on Broadway. She was cast as a singer in a Broadway play, *Finnian's Rainbow*. She was later cast with Harry Belafonte in a play *Sing, Man, Sing*. I have a picture of her and Harry Belafonte posing for a promotional picture. She tells stories about how she was in her apartment at night, 2:00 in the morning, dead asleep, phone rings. She's groggy. She picks up the

phone and says hello. The voice on the other side says Margaret. She says yeah, who is this. The voice says, this is Duke Ellington. She says yeah, and I'm the President of the United States, and she slammed the phone down. The phone rings again two minutes later. She picks up the phone and says hello. The voice says, "Margaret, this really is Duke Ellington. Please listen to me." And it turns out it was Duke Ellington. He had composed a piece called "A Drum is a Woman," specifically for her to record. So she recorded a piece called "A Drum is a Woman" that was written by Duke Ellington and did lots of other stuff in New York. But her forte was opera, and she studied with some of the great masters in New York at that time.

There was a black woman named Lola Hayes who had a studio on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan, and she was one of the great vocal coaches for many black singers in New York, particularly opera singers, at that time. So Aunt Margaret came to the attention of some of the opera impresarios in Europe, so by the late 1950s I think, she had moved over to Europe and settled in Milano, Italy, and ended up having a career that just soared. She became sort of what I'd say is the Leontyne Price of Europe. She performed in La Scala, all of the major opera houses in Europe and Budapest and Czechoslovakia and Italy, France, all over the place.

I'm using the present tense because she just turned 98 this past September. She is living here in Maryland. She had lived in Europe for about forty years in Milano. I had the good fortune when I was 14 years

old of having my parents say yes when she said please send him over. I want him to live with us for a summer. She was married at that time to a Czech-born architect who was apparently nobility. He was a baron. They met in an airport when she was traveling from one concert to another. He looked over at her and said let me introduce myself. He introduced himself, and after they chatted a while, he ended up telling her, you're going to be my wife. And she kind of did a "Bye, Felicia" shoulder brushoff at the time, but he persisted, and they started up a relationship, and they ended up getting married. They lived there through his passing in 2000. They had a wonderful forty-year marriage.

MS. COLES: Did they have any children?

JUDGE ROBERTS: No children. I think because they had no children, in 1967, I was 14, I guess, they begged my parents please send him over and let him live with us. So I became their surrogate son for two months.

MS. COLES: Just you? None of your siblings?

JUDGE ROBERTS: My sisters were six years older, they were 20, doing their thing. They were older. I was still young and impressionable and the thought of going over to Europe, that would be fancy, that would be great. It was a wonderful experience because I had never been to Europe. It was only my second time on a jet. My first time on a jet was in 1963 when we went to Puerto Rico on a four-engine 707 Pan Am plane.

MS. COLES: For vacation?

JUDGE ROBERTS: For vacation. But that was only a two-hour flight from Kennedy Airport. This flight from JFK to Milano was maybe six or seven hours. Not to get too off beat, but my stomach couldn't handle that one, so my stomach found its way into a bag on the airplane before I landed. Then my stomach repeated its performance when I got to the lobby of their apartment building in Milano. But I stayed there for two months. The blessing of it was not just to know them and feel their love and frankly to be pampered by them for two months, because they had no children, they treated me like a surrogate son, but to be able to see and travel with them when she was on concert tour. I was able to go watch this African American woman get on the stage in the outdoor amphitheater in the middle of the Danube River in Budapest, Hungary, performing the lead in Bellini's opera, *Norma*. And for me, that was my aunt. It was something not extraordinary about it until I thought back on that years later. This was in 1967 in Europe at a time when black people were being barred from opera houses in the United States in some respects. So thinking back upon it, it just amazed me that I was actually able to see this. She was doing concerts in Saint-Vincent near the Italian/French border in this grand cathedral where she was singing the full Verdi's *Requiem* for two or three hours. I saw her doing many more concerts like this or operas like this, and for me, I guess that became a normal. This was normal, whereas it really wasn't in many other parts, and to see white audiences going crazy about this black woman from the United States performing the way

she did and being able to filter it not through the racist lenses that it would have to be filtered through in our history of Jim Crow but being filtered through a pure appreciation for art, a pure appreciation for talent, and appreciation for the classics and how well she did. It stayed with me.

MS. COLES: I was wondering if you could tell me how and why your mother decided to conclude her singing career.

JUDGE ROBERTS: It's like going from one career to another. She was doing singing, and it wasn't full time. It was actually part time because it wasn't every single day, nine to five, when she was going to the Met. She also held a job at that time as what I think today is called a paralegal. There was a law firm called Greenbaum, Wolf and Ernst in Manhattan, so as I remember growing up, she was often going out and holding down that job. I remember in the evenings, some evenings, we'd know she was going to be at the Met singing, so singing at the Met obviously was one of her passions and one of the things that was a result of her wonderful musical gift, but I think she traveled a journey through multiple occupations.

At some point she decided to get a teaching certificate, so she went through what you have to go through to get a teaching certificate to be able to teach in the New York City public school system. So eventually by that time I think I had gotten to be junior high school age or high school age, she got her teaching certification, and interestingly enough, one of her first assignments as a teacher was at Frederick Douglass, Jr.

High School 139 in Manhattan where my father had spent twenty years of his teaching career.

MS. COLES: Was he still there?

JUDGE ROBERTS: No. They did not overlap at that school. He had transferred initially to the Board of Education headquarters in Brooklyn where a man named Lionel McMurren was in charge of one of the portfolios I think having to do with arts or some other administrative responsibility at headquarters.

McMurren and he were acquaintances and they had been professional acquaintances as well. So my dad was dispatched to headquarters to work on a special assignment at headquarters for the deputy superintendent or maybe McMurren was the superintendent, and I think that was around the same time that my mother completed her teaching certification and got assigned to Junior High School 139, so the two of them did not overlap.

My dad got assigned later to Junior High School 202 in Queens. That happened to have been the same junior high school his son, Richard Roberts, was attending. So I went to 202 in the 7th grade. Dad came to 202 when I was in the 8th grade. The following year, or maybe two years later, or the next year, my mother was assigned to 139 in Manhattan and stayed there for several years. My sophomore, junior, and senior years in high school was at the High School for Music and Art at 135th Street and Convent Avenue in Manhattan, which is sometimes called the *Fame* High School. There was a movie that came out some time ago called *Fame*, I think Debbie Allen was instrumental in getting it together and doing

choreography, but that was not too far away from Frederick Douglass, Jr. High School 139, so I remember as a senior I would get rides with my mom into Manhattan and get dropped off at high school. So that's when she was at 139.

So I guess she transitioned through a number of occupations. Actually early on, I think when my parents first moved to New York, I remember stories about them saying they operated a candy store in Manhattan, in Harlem. I remember Dad telling stories about how New York City police officers would help themselves to whatever they wanted to help themselves to when they came into the store, and my dad would have to say I'm so glad you enjoyed that. That will be fifteen cents, please. Because the officers just expected that they could just take whatever they wanted to, and that would be sort of the price the store owners paid for having a few extra law enforcement eyes pay attention to the safety of their store. You can imagine that a black man telling a white police officer in Harlem oh thank you very much that'll be fifteen cents please for whatever trinket he picked up did not allow the candy store to operate for too long without much problem. So that I don't think lasted very long. My Dad kept the teaching position at Junior High School 139 full time, and they closed down the store. But my mom had helped out with that store as well according to the stories.

I think she at that point transitioned into picking up work as a paralegal at that law firm but also singing at the Met, and eventually she

transitioned into getting her certification for public school teaching. She got it, and then she started teaching at 139.

MS. COLES: What did she teach?

JUDGE ROBERTS: She was an English teacher. She was a music major at A&T, but I think she wanted to teach English and got her certification to teach English, and she did teach English.

MS. COLES: What was it like having two educators as parents?

JUDGE ROBERTS: Well you know they had standards, and so when little children in the household wanted to perhaps do a little less than was required or preferred to go out and play on the street when we should have been doing our homework, they were there to remind us first things first, and once you finish your lessons, well feel free to go outside, but I want to see that paper you're supposed to be writing on the table to make sure you've done that first. The three of us, the children, I guess we each had somewhat different reactions to that set of standards they wanted to hold us to. I was perhaps the nerd among the three of us. I enjoyed it. Okay, fine. So I would do the things I had to do.

Interesting that you asked that. I saw this on my way out. This is a paper I did in the 9th grade on Archimedes, of all people. Don't ask me today who Archimedes was or what he did, but I wanted to make sure that I did a good job with it. It was handwritten. My dad had fabulous penmanship, so I made sure that when I did my paper, I did it with as

careful a set of penmanship as I could. It's not that pretty, but at least it was an effort. So I enjoyed doing stuff like that.

My sisters, depending on what it was, would do it or would enjoy doing it or would not enjoy doing it. I think there was never a time when I did not enjoy academics. That paper on Archimedes I think was the beginning of my recognition that I absolutely loved mathematics. This may be getting a little bit ahead of you, but when I finished high school, my intention was to major in math in college. I had taken an advanced course in calculus in high school, did very well in it, and enjoyed it. Why I enjoyed it, I'm not sure, but I enjoyed it, and my intention in going to college was to be a math major. I had no idea what mathematicians did, but I just knew I enjoyed doing math and I would be a math major.

But having two parents who were educators really had some benefits as well beyond just making sure that we understood there were some standards that we had to abide by. We also benefited from having not just two educators, but two English teachers so that we would sometimes be at the dinner table and we'd learn strange things that are not things you'd necessarily hear talked about at the dinner table. Rules of grammar, practices of syntax, proper punctuation. I actually enjoyed that stuff. I can't speak for my sisters, but I actually enjoyed that. And I think now back on when I was a sitting judge and when I was a trial lawyer, when it came to drafting memoranda or opinions or briefs, I was applying the lessons that I learned from my father, from my mother about dangling

modifiers and things that just aren't talked about at many dinner tables, in making sure that my written product was appropriate. So there was a benefit to being children of English teachers as well.

My dad, who did his graduate work in English and English Literature, also enjoyed poetry. Obviously he did because they recruited him to take over Countee Cullen's poetry classes at Junior High School 139, but that meant that we'd often hear him recite classical poetry. For example, the *Wreck of the Hesperus*, Coleridge's poetry, and "I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul," things like that. So I carry forward with some memories of those that I think otherwise I might not have had that exposure to or love for.

Obviously, the musical side of my mom, she didn't teach music. She taught English. But she actually was playing piano for the church choir, so I'd hear her rehearsing on the piano with some of the things she was teaching the church choir, so we had music infused into our lives. We had English grammar and literature infused and poetry infused into our lives as well. So one might suspect that growing up under the roof of two English teachers might bring with it some oppressiveness for youngsters, but I look back on the part of it that brought a richness and a wealth that I can look back on today as having benefited me in some respect in my later working career.

MS. COLES: That's fascinating. Was church a big focal point in your household growing up?

JUDGE ROBERTS: Yes. My dad grew up in the Episcopal Church in Columbia, South Carolina. His dad was one of the responsible officers, a deacon, or some other position. When we were growing up in Queens, my dad became secretary of the executive committee and had significant responsibilities. It was a fairly small parish, but I remember sitting in the back row with Dad every Sunday. We went to church every Sunday. But he was responsible for taking the head count, and the best vantage point was sitting in the back row so he could see everybody who came. He'd make a report every Sunday about how many came. The treasurer of the church would report how much was collected in the collection plates, and so on. But Dad was one of the responsible and regular members of the church, and we were just expected to come to church.

My mother, as I said, converted to Episcopalianism, and she came and she jumped in and helped play choir music for the choir after church. So yes, I went to church every Sunday. Our parish closed I think in my senior year of high school. It was just a few blocks walk, so it was very easy to go. I was very pious. Growing up, I said a blessing before every meal. I said grace, a prayer, before going to bed every night. I was actually kneeling down on my knees. Some people who saw the hellion that I became later on would find that hard to believe. Here I am marching down the aisle at Music and Art's graduation, wearing a dashiki, and I'll tell you later, we graduated from Vassar where we all had caps and gowns, but the black students refused to wear caps and gowns. We had our own

little protest. I had a new dashiki on at that time. So some might find it a little hard to believe that this later-day hellion was actually quite pious in my youth.

When I was old enough, I became an acolyte. I was the youngest at a certain point, but when the oldest acolyte, the most senior acolyte, left to go off to college, I became sort of the head acolyte.

MS. COLES: Is that like an altar boy?

JUDGE ROBERTS: Altar boy. Right. And being the head altar boy accorded you certain abilities that the lesser acolytes or altar boys couldn't do. I was able to prepare the thurible where you would light this incense and the priest would be the one to use it, but we would light it. I was the one who at a certain point of the service would ring the bells. It was very much like Catholic Church, and the differences between Catholic and Episcopalian practices were almost nil. Episcopalians report to the Archbishop of Canterbury. Catholics report to the Pope. But the practices of the Church of England really derived, as I understand it, down from Catholicism. But in any event, I was the head acolyte, expected to be there every Sunday, and I was. I think once you advance to that point, if you earn enough sort of seniority, you could become Order of Saint Vincent. Don't ask me what that means, but it was yet another sort of badge you could wear.

My cousin Bobby whom I told you about was in a much larger parish, Saint Phillips parish in Manhattan, and he became Order of Saint Vincent. I was looking forward to perhaps becoming that. I don't know if

they bestowed that on a parish as small as mine. But anyway, I was quite involved in going to church, as were my sisters, up until the point that it closed, which I think was right at the end of my senior year.

MS. COLES: Was it a diverse parish, or what were the demographics of that parish?

JUDGE ROBERTS: The parish was in a black community where we grew up. Interestingly, however, the priest for most of the time I was there, was a white Swiss immigrant. Well immigrant, I guess he came to the United States and got naturalized, but he was a white priest with a predominantly black parish. We did have from the other side, not of the railroad tracks but the other side of the highway, the highway that divided South Ozone Park and on the west side of the highway, many more whites lived. On the east side of the highway, many more black people lived, and that's where we lived. But there were still people who attended that church from the west side of the highway who were white when the minister in our church was white. So at the time we were there, it was a mixed-race, although predominantly African American, parish. And the whites that attended were older. There were not many young white children at all. The children in the church were black. At the end of my time there, the Episcopal Church sent another priest to head the parish, and he was African American. He was actually black Caribbean. I don't remember what island, but he was a black man, and I think that was the last year that we had that church open. So that was the first time I had a black priest, despite the fact that my grandfather and my uncle, and I actually had another uncle who was one

of the elder siblings of my mother, were ministers as well. He went into the ministry, but he lived in the Virgin Islands. So the parish was mixed, but it was predominantly African American.

MS. COLES: I think this sounds like a good place for us to stop and pick up next time.

JUDGE ROBERTS: Okay.