

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, January 22, 2018. This is the second interview.

MS. COLES: We're going to start back with the high school period in your life. I think we covered your early childhood in the first session. Can you tell me about your high school experience, where you were at the time and where you attended high school?

JUDGE ROBERTS: Sure. When I finished my junior high school, which was Junior High School 202 in Queens, Robert H. Goddard Junior High School 202, my parents urged me to try to apply to one of the specialized high schools in New York City. You had to take a test to be able to get into one of the specialized high schools. I wanted to go to one of the specialized academic high schools. There were three of them. One was Stuyvesant High School in Manhattan, Bronx High School of Science in the Bronx, and Brooklyn Technical High School in Brooklyn. The purely academic high school among those was Stuyvesant. That happens to be where former Attorney General Eric Holder applied, passed the test, and got in. I took that test, but unfortunately did not pass the test and did not get in. So my first year in high school was spent at my "neighborhood high school." I say that in quotes because it really was not in my neighborhood. My neighborhood high school was walking distance. It was the Woodrow Wilson High School. However, when this period of public education in New York City came about, there was a great deal of effort to make sure

they desegregated some of the high schools. They did that by taking black children from the black neighborhoods and busing us into other white neighborhoods to achieve some of the integration that had not been achieved by normal residential patterns. So I was bused to John Adams High School. John Adams High School was a bus ride away. That high school was large enough that it had an annex. The annex was essentially the top two floors of a public elementary school that was able to use the top two floors as the ninth grade of John Adams High School. So I went to John Adams High School. It was on the top two floors of P.S. 109 in Queens, in Ozone Park, and it was on 109th Street, interestingly. My first year there, my parents said don't give up, you have some music in you. You can always try to apply to the High School for Music and Art. That's a test that you have to take, but it's more of an audition. You go and you perform on your instrument, your piano. I had taken piano lessons for several years before that, although piano students also had to do either a second instrument or sing in order to get in. They had so many pianists that they weren't going to just let you come in and do nothing but piano.

My mother, who I think I told you was a chorister in the Metropolitan Opera in New York City, had music in her blood, and so she urged me to practice a song that I could sing for my audition. I think her thinking was a little strategic. Music and Art High School had a wonderful, wonderful music faculty. There were many more Jewish musical faculty in that school than otherwise. She picked for me "Fiddler

on the Roof” as the song that I should sing during my audition (a) because she thought I could sing it. It had a range that I could sing, and she was confident that I could remember the lyrics, but (b) she also thought that my audience might appreciate this black kid coming in and singling “Fiddler on the Roof.” Well somehow I must have fooled them because they said you’re in. I passed the test. I played a piece or two pieces on the piano. I sang that song, and I passed the test. So John Adams High School, bye bye. I’m going to Music and Art High School starting in the tenth grade.

MS. COLES: Around what year was this?

JUDGE ROBERTS: I started at Music and Art in 1967. I graduated from junior high school in 1966, so my first year in high school at John Adams Annex was 1966 to 1967. It was that year that I auditioned for Music and Art, and was accepted. So I started in the tenth grade at Music and Art High School, which was located on 135th Street and Convent Avenue in Harlem, which meant that I had to commute. I had to get up pretty early every morning, leave my house at about 7:00 a.m., walk about six blocks to the local bus stop, take a Green Line Bus Service Q41 bus, from my neighborhood to the subway station about a half hour away. We took the E train. It was part of the Independent line of the subway system in New York. The subway system had the BMT (Brooklyn Manhattan Transit), IND (Independent), and the IRT (Interboro Rapid Transit) lines. The E train stopped at the station called Sutphin Boulevard in Jamaica, and that was

the closest subway station to me that I could take to get to Music and Art. I had to take that into Manhattan. I changed to the D train at the 7th Avenue station, and then I took the D train up to 125th Street, and I got off the D train and switched over to a local train and got off at 135th Street. So that commute one way was one-and-a-half hours. I got to the 135th Street station at 8:30 a.m., but it wasn't over yet because that station emptied out at the bottom of Saint Nicholas Park. That park was on a high slope, and you had to walk up steps to get to my high school building, and I remember counting the steps. It was 128 steps.

Now my senior year, my first period class was on the seventh floor of the high school. It was either solo voice class or chorus, but it was in the choral room in the tower, on the seventh floor. We had an elevator in the building, but we were not allowed to use it unless we had some physical disability. Alright, so after having done the walking, the bus, subway, the 128-step climb through the park, I get to the building and first period, senior year, I had to walk up seven flights of steps. So I was in pretty good shape at that point.

It might sound a bit taxing when I recount it today, but back then, I was young. I loved the school. I had a wonderful experience there. I probably have the greatest amount of school loyalty of all the schools I've attended to that high school, the High School of Music and Art. And I didn't know any different. It was just what you had to do, and it was something I did. I had terrific relationships with kids there. I had a

wonderful experience at the school, a lot of experiences that expanded my horizons.

MS. COLES: Like what?

JUDGE ROBERTS: For example, I was able to audition for the All City High School Choir. The All City High School Choir was directed by a musician named John Motley. John Motley I think was also a music teacher at one of the New York City high schools, but on the weekends, he conducted the All City High School Choir. You had to audition for it. You had to get accepted into it. It was a competitive audition. Happily a lot of the colleagues of mine at Music and Art competed and got in, so I had a lot of classmates with me who were in the All City High School Choir. The choir must have been in excess of 60 or 80 singers.

Motley, by the way, was the uncle of Superior Court Judge Thomas Motley here in D.C., and when I met Thomas Motley after he graduated from Harvard Law School in the same class as Debra Lee, who was the CEO of BET Network, we started talking, and I asked him about the last name Motley. We discovered that that's the same Motley family of John Motley, who was my choral director in the All City high school chorus.

In any event, it's the chorus that allowed high school vocalists from all over the city to audition and join, so I got to meet people from all over the city who were singing in the All City High School Choir. These were not just black people. These were white people, Latino, Asians. So

when I talk about expanding horizons, it was also in a cultural sense. Also it was in the sense that I got to meet people from the Bronx or from Brooklyn. I was fairly Manhattan- and Queens-oriented. I even met people from Staten Island.

I think we were recommended at some point to, for example, American Airlines. American Airlines had funded a concert in Carnegie Hall, and they wanted to get some vocalists from New York City to be the American Airlines choir, and they had an orchestra of professionals and a choir of young people, and we performed in Carnegie Hall, and they recorded on vinyls our concert. It was called "American Youth Performs: A Musical Night to Remember." They had a professional conductor come, and they had professional people in the orchestra, but a lot of the people who were singing in the chorus were local New York City types who got to sing on the stage in Carnegie Hall and they took pictures of this concert, American Youth Performs.

MS. COLES: This was a one-night event?

JUDGE ROBERTS: There was a one-night event, but we had to rehearse quite often. We performed there, and I think we also performed in Rockefeller Center. But I remember a picture that they took and put on the cover of the album. It was a two-vinyl album, and it showed the young people who were singing in the chorus, and it was never too hard to find out where I was. You saw this sort of a lollypop sticking up in the back with all of this hair. I guess I had the largest Afro among the choristers at the time. That experience is

something I don't know that I would have had if I were at John Adams High School. So it exposed me to, the guest conductor was Louis Campiglia and Carmen Dragon. Carmen Dragon had made quite a name for himself at that time. We were singing a mix of classical and spirituals, so it was a matter of having that kind of musical and cultural exposure that really did expand a lot of aspects of my life that I greatly appreciated.

MS. COLES: Did the choir travel outside of New York any?

JUDGE ROBERTS: That choir did not. I think the contract was for a couple of performances just in New York. I suspect that American Airlines had arranged to have similar performances in different parts of the country with different people, and we happened to have been lucky enough to be selected to be the New York group.

I was not very much of an athlete. I was a serious cyclist. I grew up on my bicycle. Some of the other guys grew up on the basketball court. Some of the others grew up on the handball court. We had different kinds of activities. We played handball a lot. Sometimes it was called Chinese handball. I'm not sure if that's a racist slur or not, but it was a variation on the kind of handball that's up against the large wall where you hit the little pink ball up against the wall and let it bounce before you hit it again. The Chinese handball we played, you hit the ball down onto the ground, let it bounce off the wall up against which you played, and then you hit it again. I had a lot of fun doing some of the less strenuous athletic activities like Chinese handball. We did stickball out on

the street. Some of the Spike Lee movies that he made about life growing up in Brooklyn where you saw young girls jumping Double Dutch, guys playing stickball in the street, it's really quite accurate. I did a lot of that stickball in the street.

MS. COLES: Is that like hockey?

JUDGE ROBERTS: It's not like hockey. It's more like baseball, but instead of using a baseball bat, the stick you use to hit the ball was thinner and perhaps a little longer, and the ball was not a baseball. It was a round punch ball, Pency Pinky I think was the name of the company. It was soft rubber, and it was pink. So you would have a pitcher who would pitch to you standing at a home plate, and you'd use this stickball stick to take a swing and hit the punch ball, and you would run bases. So it was much more like baseball.

I was a cyclist. Once I got a bicycle, I was hooked. When I lived in Manhattan at age 4, it was not quite as easy to have a bicycle and use it whenever you wanted to because you couldn't bring it up into the apartment very easily, up the steps or in the elevator and up and so on. You had to leave it in a storage room in the basement, and there was limited access to it.

When we moved to a house in Queens, I had unlimited access to my bike, didn't have to haul it up the steps. My dad built a shed out in the back where I could just keep the bike. So I was on my bike all the time. My best friend named Billy Samber lived down the block, and he was a serious biker too, so we were out on our bicycles all the time.

MS. COLES: Were you riding in city traffic, on trails?

JUDGE ROBERTS: In Queens, back where we lived, the residential area did not have a huge amount of traffic all the time, so we were able to ride on our little city streets in our neighborhood without any fear of a lot of traffic. There are some places where those city streets led to major arteries, and we generally avoided those because we didn't need to ride on those major boulevards. We had North Conduit Boulevard, which was at the edge of the Kennedy Airport. We had Rockaway Boulevard, which was the northern edge of the neighborhood, but we didn't ride on those because there was a lot of traffic. We'd have to abide by stop lights and so our, maybe 20-square block area, was quite enough for us to be able to ride. There was one park land off 150th Street, but they did not have developed bike trails. There was another park called Baisley Park, which was across from Woodrow Wilson High School that did have bike trails, so if we wanted to go a little bit of distance, we'd go to Baisley Park and ride the trails there. But we really did not have much worry about competing with vehicular traffic.

MS. COLES: Are you still a cyclist?

JUDGE ROBERTS: I was up until recently. When I was working my first job, and we'll talk about that if you want to, in 1978, when I finished law school, the gift my sister Toni gave me was a ten-speed. Hallelujah. Because when I got to Washington, that was my method of transportation all around town and to and from work. So I rode my bike to work well before the current biking

craze where everybody's asking for bike lanes now. We didn't have bike lanes in D.C. back then. I don't even think I wore a helmet. But my style of biking when I was starting to work in 1978 in Washington was much more cooperative. I didn't compete with cars, I guess for good reason. I didn't want to have two tons of metal crashing into me. When I got to an intersection, if there was a car already there, I yielded. I didn't insist upon roadway supremacy. Sometimes the cars would appreciate that I was yielding and they'd wave me on, and I'd go. We didn't have very much problem riding at that early hour on sidewalks, so sometimes I'd avoid conflicts with motorists by just riding on the sidewalks. If ever there were pedestrians on the sidewalk, I'd make sure to give them plenty wide berth so that there was no friction there. Rock Creek Park existed, and it had plenty of bike trails, and I got a lot of exercise on the bike trails in Rock Creek Park. So I got back into biking here in Washington when I finished school. I still have that bike now, and I just took it to City Bikes to have it reconditioned hoping I can get back on it.

What I ended up doing once I started working was using the gym at work. When I got on the bench, for example, the U.S. Marshals had a fitness center. I'd go maybe three times a week to keep up with some level of exercise because being on the bench, you sit so much either on the bench or in your chambers writing opinions, revising things, and so on. They had a recumbent bike there, which actually was a lot less uncomfortable than riding a ten-speed where you bend over and the seat

has this jutting front part right in a place where you'd expect men would find it uncomfortable sometimes. I still don't know why they designed those seats that way. The recumbent bike, quite differently, does not contain that kind of potential discomfort and can provide as much aerobic exercise for you. So I did a lot of that, which sort of substituted for my on-street biking. So for quite a while, my on-street biking or in-park biking, just didn't happen.

MS. COLES: I want to go back, rewind a little bit, and go back to high school. So you mentioned you were involved in the choir. Were there any other activities that you were involved in?

JUDGE ROBERTS: Yes, and I'm glad you rewound because part of what I was going to get to was athletics. I believe in my junior year, or maybe the beginning of my senior year, I joined the track team, a seemingly unlikely thing for me to do, but I did. It did not last very long. I was training on low hurdles. At some point during the season, before we got to our first major competition, someone had broken into my locker at high school and stolen my uniform. Now as best I recall, the uniform I had to buy for \$12, and that was no small amount back then. To know that someone had stolen my uniform from a locker, and that I had to go ask my parents for another \$12 to go buy yet another uniform and store it in that locker, that was the end of my track experience.

MS. COLES: Did your uniform have your number or name on it?

JUDGE ROBERTS: You know, it did not have my name on it. It probably had some emblems on it, but they were not necessarily specific to me, so whoever stole it might have been able to use it or sell it themselves. It was really a questioning experience because I did enjoy working out with that team. I enjoyed the exercise of it, the team-building aspect of it. I had not been on a formal sports team before that. Despite my height, I was terrible at basketball. My father built a net in the backyard of our house and encouraged me to practice. His encouragement might have waned when he saw how bad I was, so when I had the chance to join a track team and use my long legs to a different advantage, I think everyone tried to encourage that, but that was cut short.

It still was another example of how my own horizons were expanding in that high school. One of the other activities involved the semi-annual concert that I told you about. Performers, the instrumentalists and the vocalists, put it on every year, coordinated by the music faculty and the instrumental faculty. But in 1969 and 1970, at the height of the Black Power movement, the height of a lot of discussions about African nations fighting for independence, a lot of discussion about African Americans reconnecting with our ancestral roots, we black students in the high school at that point who participated routinely every half year in the semi-annual concert decided it's not enough to present to these audiences nothing but European classical music. So we banded together, and I guess we demanded of the administration, that they let the African American

students have ten or fifteen minutes during the semi-annual concert to put on part of the semi-annual. So someone, I'm not sure who, went to actually learn some African dance movements, and lyrics in one of the languages, I can't remember which one, and we practiced on our own.

MS. COLES: How many students was this?

JUDGE ROBERTS: It must have been about at least 25 students, and it could have been more.

At a certain point toward the middle of the semi-annual concert, after European classical selections were played by the orchestra or performed by the chorus, we rushed backstage and changed into our African garb, dashikis and abubas and geles and so on. Then we started in back of this auditorium which looked out toward the front stage, and you heard the African rhythms played on the drums [making sound of drum-playing]. The audience wondered what's going on. And then we filed down the two aisles, one aisle at a time, singing some songs that we had learned and did some African boot dancing, down the aisle, and that introduced our own African performance at this semi-annual concert.

MS. COLES: Your class was the first to originate this?

JUDGE ROBERTS: I remember being there for the first time it happened, and I can't say it was just my graduating class.

MS. COLES: You were a senior at the time?

JUDGE ROBERTS: I was either a junior or a senior, but I do remember doing it during my senior year. So it was not limited just to the people in my class; it included people behind me as well. All black students in the school were

encouraged to participate, surely those who had some either musical training or dance training. We even had some students who were more on the art side. You went to Music and Art and you focused on either music or art. A few combined both if they had both talents. So we had mostly music students who were performing the African part of the semi-annual concert. And again, that's not something that would have happened at John Adams High School in Ozone Park, New York, with an administration and a student body that was overwhelmingly Italian and Jewish. It just wouldn't have happened. At Music and Art, on the other hand, probably one-third of the student body was students of color, African-Americans, Latinos, Asians, or more. It might have been 50/50, but it was a kind of gathering in New York City that you just wouldn't have had any other place both artistically and culturally. Those are some of the reasons I think some of my loyalty to the schools I've been to is highest at Music and Art High School.

MS. COLES: Do you know if they continued that tradition after you graduated?

JUDGE ROBERTS: I certainly hope so. I think that did happen in the years immediately following when we left. A lot of the people in my class moved on to colleges and graduate schools that were some distance from Manhattan, so we were not able to get back as often as we wanted to, to the semi-annual concerts to find out how things were going. But I'm pretty sure one of the organizers was a year behind me, so it probably continued at least the next year. I am certain that he organized another black part of the semi-annual

concert for the year after I left. I've been back a few times in the 45 years since I graduated, and the ones most recently did not include a black part of the semi-annual, but we did see at least additional numbers of people of color in the faculty. We continue to see diversity in the student body. So those students make their own decisions about what they do and how they engage and enjoy their own diversity.

MS. COLES: I remember last time you mentioned that math was something that you really enjoyed when you were young. Did you keep that up in high school?

JUDGE ROBERTS: Oh yes. I think I probably began to enjoy math even in junior high school, but by the time you got to high school, I don't remember the precise sequence in 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th grade, but you had at minimum algebra, geometry, trigonometry. If you wanted to, you could then take calculus. I took all the three basic ones I mentioned and took 12th grade calculus because I enjoyed and did very well in the 9th, 10th, and 11th grade math courses. So I did take calculus in high school, did very well in it, and it was that that led me to conclude that when I went to college, I would major in math and become a mathematician. Now I had no idea what a mathematician does. I had no clue what I would do with it, but I had hooked onto some academic area that really brought out some passion in me. I enjoyed it. It was fun. So yes. I kept up with my math studies in high school.

It's interesting how you set standards for yourself and you pursue them. Again, this is sort of the expansion you experience. One of the other students with whom I shared a thrill of math, I also shared a thrill of foreign language with. He and I were both in the same math classes with the same math teachers. We were both in the same French classes with the same French teacher, so we would often sort of compare notes or enjoy camaraderie of learning and advancing and doing things. The French teacher, for example, did not want us to just have a classroom teaching experience. She took us up to The Cloisters. It was a garden up in northern Manhattan that had a great deal of French architectural influence. So that was a field trip that she took us on. It was the kind of thing that I wouldn't have had if I had gone to John Adams and stayed there.

In any event, this other student I mentioned was named Paul Olson. Paul Olson's father was a union leader in Local 1199 of the hospital workers union in Manhattan. Very progressive politically, and he and I shared a lot of experiences and continue to be good friends to this day. We share emails about language issues that come up in foreign languages that we like to share with each other that anybody else would kind of look at us and say what are these nerds talking about. We share emails about political developments, cultural developments. He came out to me, I guess in his college sophomore year, as gay and as an atheist. He's Jewish. His background culturally is Jewish. But we shared the kind of open communication with each other that allowed us, despite lots of

differences that you would see if you looked at him and his life and looked at me and my life, and we also found a lot of points of convergence as each of us grew and experienced and lived different lives. So he and his partner came down six or seven years ago to Washington and my wife and I met them for dinner. He invited me to his 65th birthday last year. I wasn't able to go up. But that kind of a relationship, the guy is a white Jew, atheist, liberal, son of a union leader. Here I am an African American, reared in the Episcopal church, parents from the South, not Eastern Europeans like his, were able nevertheless to navigate experiences and find lots of ground of commonality. It didn't mean we enjoyed all of the same stuff. The guy loves Balkan folk dancing. I have no interest in Balkan folk dancing, but I'm happy to see him in pictures he sends me of him in his Balkan costumes doing Balkan folk dancing. And I share with him pictures of me doing some of my stuff that really is not his interest. I mention that, I guess, as another example of how my loyalty to that school and the experience I went through is really quite strong.

MS. COLES: Do you have other close friendships that you still maintain from that period?

JUDGE ROBERTS: Yes, although it's not necessarily tied to high school. My neighbor across the street from me, Carol Samuels, when I was growing up in Queens, got into Music and Art the year before I did, and we grew up together on the same block. We were born within a month of each other, so we were quite friendly before Music and Art. In fact, she and I started elementary

school, kindergarten, on the same day. We were in the same class. As we progressed through the 6th grade, we were always in the same class. We both skipped the 2nd grade. We were in 2nd grade for about two weeks before they pushed us up to the 3rd grade. When we graduated from 6th grade in that elementary school, and again, this was basically a white school that they bused black kids into, in a Jewish and Italian neighborhood, she and I finished number one and two in the class. So our friendship goes way, way back. She took the test for Music and Art and got in at the time that I took the test for Stuyvesant and didn't get in. So she got into Music and Art the year before I did, but once I got in the following year, she and I rode the train together, went to school together. She was a vocalist and a pianist.

MS. COLES: Went up all those steps together.

JUDGE ROBERTS: Went up all those steps together. Our senior year, my mother began teaching at Junior High School 139, Frederick Douglass Junior High School in Manhattan, which was probably nine blocks away from Music and Art, but we were able to get rides in to school with my mother. Carol and I would ride in with my mother to Manhattan. We'd have to take the train home. My mother's schedule was different from ours on the way back, but she is one person whom I've maintained contact with. She ended up going to Wheaton College in Massachusetts, and after she went there, she went to Howard Med School, and she just retired two years ago after a career as a pediatrician here in this area. So she lives now right in

Silver Spring. We've stayed in touch like brother and sister. We've been very tight for I guess as old as I am minus four. We both moved into Queens. She moved in from Brooklyn, and I moved in from Manhattan.

There are other people. A black woman in my graduating class from Music and Art was the top-ranked black graduate in my class. She ranked academically 12th out of 587 graduating. I was 22 out of 587, so I was the top-ranked black male graduate. But she, Paula Washington, went on to continue performing on viola. She went to Smith College. She got her PhD later on and came back to Music and Art as a teacher, and she just three years ago was conducting the semi-annual concert. So lots of people from my class came back because that was going to be her final year conducting. She was on the faculty of Music and Art, Paula Washington. We've stayed in touch mostly through email. I don't get to see her that much.

So yes, there are friendships that have continued over time from that high school.

MS. COLES: At this time, did you ever think you would have a career in the arts or you were kind of set on going the math route?

JUDGE ROBERTS: I had no clue that I would have anything to do with the arts other than continue to enjoy playing the piano for leisure or joining vocal groups that might sing in different places, which I enjoyed. But I never thought or assessed my skill level as being adequate for performing professionally. That was probably an accurate assessment. But that's okay because I

enjoyed it just doing it for fun. Certainly by the time I graduated from high school, I thought math was my future. How things change.

MS. COLES: I also want to rewind one more time because I don't think we really hit on your elementary school experience that much last time. What was that like, being bused to a predominantly white elementary school?

JUDGE ROBERTS: I started at age 5 in kindergarten, and left there six years later because we skipped the 2nd grade. I did not at that age know enough to realize, hey, this is an experiment in putting one or two black kids in a white environment. It was sort of a normal, because that's all I knew. I went to kindergarten. There might have been three black students in my kindergarten class out of, what, 25 students altogether. And that pattern tended to continue through 6th grade, but for me, that was sort of a normal. My parents didn't make an issue out of it with me when I was that young. They were simply making sure that I would do my homework, I got in after my play time, hit the books. They held me to high academic standards. I rather enjoyed it. I did well. We had some experiences in the school that were encouraging. I guess I learned at some point and appreciated at some point that both Carol and I, the woman I told you about, skipped the 2nd grade apparently because the teachers and administrators there thought that we were sufficiently progressing academically that we didn't need to go through 2nd grade, we could tackle the 3rd grade curriculum with ease, and we did. It was interesting, I guess in hindsight, to learn that the top two academic performers in my class in

the 6th grade by the time of graduation were two black kids. I didn't try to look around to see if any of the white kids or their parents were unnerved by that because, again, there was nothing that triggered, "oh this is unusual. You really need to pay attention to this." But having us there was not totally free of signals that there was something not quite right with all of the others.

I remember a somewhat embarrassing act of naiveté on my part. I think it was in the 4th grade. There was a young white woman, well she was a girl, an Italian girl, who I thought was just, to me, to my eyes, was just beautiful. I think I was looking much more, for whatever reason, at her beautiful legs. The girls had to wear skirts, and I guess I had a real attraction to her because she had pretty legs. I didn't know what that meant, so I wrote her a little note. She was sitting in front of me, and I said I love you, put it in a note, and handed it up to her. She was sitting in front of me. I saw her open the note, and then she threw it down on the floor and sucked her teeth in disgust. I guess I was crestfallen a little bit because I was just trying to express some closeness to her or appreciation for her, using clumsy language I suppose. But thinking back on that, this young girl was Italian-American, lived in an Italian-American community that I later learned, did not appreciate having these black kids shipped into this Italian neighborhood. I was able to infer from that that she probably would have been horrified if she had to take back to her parents any story that some black guy was expressing interest in her. So there weren't all

that many opportunities to appreciate some sort of subtext going on in this experiment in educational integration.

But I guess I sort of sailed through my elementary school years without the kinds of conflicts that, for example, the Little Rock Nine had to confront back in the 1950s when marshals had to escort the black kids into Little Rock's Central High School to ensure their safety against a very violent crowd that didn't want to see them there. So the elementary school, I just went through it. I apparently did well academically. Carol and I got the medals for the top two students, and I guess I did not begin to appreciate some of the nuances and levels of complexity that this experiment in racial integration in public education presented until later on.

MS. COLES: Did you develop friendships at the time with the other students in your class, or did the black students just mostly gravitate towards one another?

JUDGE ROBERTS: In class, I developed friendships with some of the other students, white students, that were friendships that were really confined to the class or confined to lunch break or confined to recreation break for a half hour outside.

MS. COLES: Not birthday parties.

JUDGE ROBERTS: I got invited to zero birthday parties, to zero bar mitzvahs, to zero bat mitzvahs, to zero beach houses if they had them. I don't know if they had them. There was nothing in the summertime. And again, I didn't know enough to appreciate that that did or didn't mean something. So the

friendships, I guess thinking back on it, were fairly superficial, but they were adequate to sustain me in what I was doing, and I always had my friends from back home who rode the bus with me to school, so I didn't feel like I was lacking in anything.

MS. COLES: You didn't have to deal with open hostility.

JUDGE ROBERTS: Except for that event I told you about. I didn't really perceive that. What I learned about later on wasn't from elementary school. It was from junior high school. The junior high school that I went to was Junior High School 202 in Ozone Park, in Howard Beach, actually. The year before I went there, it was a brand new school, but they too had black students bused in from my neighborhood to this Howard Beach area in Queens. I learned while I was still in the 6th grade that at this brand new junior high school that had opened that I would be going to, in the early days when it opened, not only did students but their parents, the white parents in that neighborhood, picketed outside the junior high school, waving placards, waving Garrison belts with huge buckles waving those signs angrily saying send those people back. We don't want them. Keep the school just for us. So there was a great deal of opposition to having black students bused into this brand new junior high school. By the time that year ended, I think they realized their protests were to no avail, and these black folks were going to be coming into their school whether they liked it or not. So the year that I started junior high school, we did not have to confront that, the picket lines and the picket signs and the parents, but it was clear that

the attitudes were still there. I learned enough to know that in some of the communities where the students were living, Howard Beach area, there was an apartment complex called Lindenwood Village, highly Jewish and Italian, but the entire area politically and culturally speaking was very conservative. You may have heard of a reputed mobster called John Gotti. John Gotti lived in Howard Beach. Those were his people. So I began to appreciate that we were in an environment that was not terribly welcoming because of what we looked like amongst some of those students and their parents. I didn't have as full an appreciation for that, and it may not have existed quite the same in elementary school because the neighborhood was one neighborhood over from the neighborhood where I went to junior high school.

MS. COLES: As you were finishing up high school, what were you thinking about in terms of your next steps in college? What factors were playing into your decision to continue your education?

JUDGE ROBERTS: Two main factors. One was money, and the other was where could I get a good education. In New York City, we had, and perhaps they still have, what's called a New York State Regents Scholarship and Scholar Incentive Award. I don't think we had to take a test for that. It may have been based upon our academic performance in high school.

MS. COLES: Like your GPA?

JUDGE ROBERTS: Possibly. I'm sure that factored into it. There may have been something else we had to do. We may have had to take an exam or write something.

I don't fully remember, but the New York State Regents Scholarship and Scholar Incentive Award is something that went to a select few, but it came with some money. Not a huge amount, but every nickel counts. So I won a New York State Regents Scholarship and Scholar Incentive Award to help me financially go to college. That also was money that you could spend only at a New York school.

MS. COLES: Public or private?

JUDGE ROBERTS: Yes. It didn't have to be in the New York State university system or the City University of New York system. It could be used in private college as well. So that had me focus on what good schools are there in New York that I can go to that will give me a good education. So those were the two factors, money and quality of education. I did have I guess the advice to apply to a range of schools, and you probably would apply to five or six. You applied at the top of the ranks to perhaps somewhere that might have been a stretch for you, someplace beyond what you might be able to get into, and at the bottom of the range, you apply to safeties, and then everything else sort of in the middle. I did do that. The top ranked school I applied to was Cornell University. I don't want to characterize any schools at the bottom of the rank, so I applied to other places. I applied to State University of New York at Binghamton, which uses the name Harpur College. It was one of the highest-ranked academic schools in the State University of New York system at the time. I applied to Vassar College because they had recently gone co-ed and had a great

reputation for quality education and they were now accepting men. I applied to Queens College. So I ended up applying to a number of schools and the two main factors were money and a good education.

The school I really wanted to attend was Cornell University. Cornell accepted me, and I remember the name of the Director of Admissions and Financial Aid, Carson Carr. So I went up to Cornell. They had allowed admitted students sometimes to come up and spend a weekend in order to have them get better exposure to the school and perhaps to persuade them this is really the place you want to be. I was able to spend the weekend with some actual students there, black students in North Campus where they lived. One of them was from St. Louis and had been one of the leaders of the takeover of one of the administration buildings at Cornell. They were demanding a black studies curriculum and other kinds of programming for black people on a white campus. So it was very thrilling for me. I met another woman who was an admitted student, a black woman from Lorain, Ohio. I had never even heard of Lorain, Ohio. Her name was Beverly Bragg. After we left that weekend, we actually corresponded with each other. Those were back in the days when you'd actually put pen to paper and write letters in longhand and put a stamp on an envelope and mail it.

MS. COLES: These were admitted students?

JUDGE ROBERTS: These were admitted students that were allowed to come up and spend a weekend on campus. So I was very excited about having gotten in and

had made friends there, current students and potential other students, and Beverly Bragg ended up going to Cornell. But what I found out in a subsequent letter from Carson Carr, the Director of Admissions and Financial Aid, was that I was not going to get any financial aid, and the tuition at that school at the time was probably roughly what it was at many other schools, maybe \$4,200 a year. I think that's the complete package, not just tuition. My parents were public school teachers in New York City. That was just not affordable. We had to have some kind of financial aid on top of the New York State Regents Scholarship and Scholar Incentive Award that I got. So that was the end of that. I wasn't going to Cornell, even though I got in and wanted to go.

The bottom line is that Vassar admitted me, gave me financial aid, and I went there, essentially sight unseen. I knew it was in New York. I knew I could apply my New York State Regents Scholarship and Scholar Incentive Award to that school. They had given me some financial aid. It ended up being affordable, and that's how I ended up at Vassar.

MS. COLES: How long before you got to Vassar had they begun admitting men?

JUDGE ROBERTS: Vassar admitted men in 1969 in the spring. The men who came in were exchange students. That meant they came essentially on loan for a semester and then they went back the next year to their home schools. By the Fall of 1969, Vassar admitted some transfer men. That means they were at another school, and they transferred to Vassar.

MS. COLES: They were upperclass.

JUDGE ROBERTS: They were all upperclass. By the fall of 1970, that's when the first freshman class of men came to Vassar and was able to stay the full four years. That was my class. I was in the class of 1974 that came in the fall of 1970.

MS. COLES: What percentage of the class was men?

JUDGE ROBERTS: We had a total population in the school of 1,600 students. Fourteen hundred women, 200 men, a 1 to 7 ratio. I suspect that the classes of 1971 were 90% women and maybe 10% men. The class of 1972 began to shift a little bit. I think my class was an entering class of roughly 400. I don't remember specifically the numbers breakout of men and women in my class. I do remember the numbers having to do with black students at Vassar at the time. We had on the campus 63 black women and 79 black men. So that was a ratio of 1 to 9. My dormitory was the black house. It was an African American cultural center and residence. In it lived 36 black men and 2 black men. That was a 1 to 18 ratio.

Outsiders will say you must have been in heaven, but I did not come there to be any pioneer in coeducation. I had a girlfriend when I was in my senior year in high school. I was still dating her. We were still very close. I was wildly in love with her, so I was not going up there to engage in any fun and games like everybody assumed I must have been going to Vassar for. It didn't happen.

My freshman year I was very devoted to my girlfriend. I had a picture of her on the ceiling that allowed me every time I woke up to see

her smiling face, or every time I went to bed, the last thing I saw before I went to sleep. There was another picture of her on my desk. There was no dispute about the fact that I was committed to her. I stayed committed to her and was loyal to her the whole first year. I was not going there for that. The bad news is that once I got back home after my first year, she was interested in somebody else and said thanks, but we have to move on.

MS. COLES: Did she go to the same high school as you?

JUDGE ROBERTS: No. We met actually in piano school. I was taking piano lessons from an African American woman named Mrs. Franklin, Shirley Franklin. -She was a music professional and taught in the public school system. She had the Shirley Franklin School of Music in St. Albans, Queens. So I was one of her students when I was taking piano lessons. The woman who became my senior year high school girlfriend was also taking piano lessons there. We met, and we ended up dating. But she was going to a private school out in Nassau County, but she lived about a mile from me in Jamaica, so I was able to walk to her place. So that's how we dated.

MS. COLES: Back to Vassar. What was that experience like being a double minority, a minority African American and a minority male in a predominantly female environment?

JUDGE ROBERTS: Well, pretty odd. My first year with that ratio being what it was on the campus generally and the ratio being what it was in my dormitory, an 18 to 1 ratio, it created some fairly interesting and unusual dynamics. I guess on the upside, I was visible and the college perceived me as being

academically serious and perceived me as being able to explain what Vassar was in a way that might be useful to them. So the admissions office asked me to go to New Orleans where they had a Latina who was part of the alumni association. She had graduated from Vassar in 1961. Her name was Olga Smoak. She lived in New Orleans and was very, very keen on trying to attract a lot of black students, particularly men, in the New Orleans public school system to look at Vassar, her alma mater. The admissions office persuaded me to go down to New Orleans and connect with Olga Smoak to visit some of the schools, Catholic schools and public schools, to talk with black students there and try to increase some of the recruitment. I remember that a couple of the students that I had spoken to ended up coming in following years to Vassar. I hope they don't blame me now for whatever happened there. It was odd. I'm just a student, a young kid, my freshman year in college. I had never been to college. I had no idea what recruitment was. I had never been sent out to speak to people about a school, or at least Vassar, but they asked me to do it. I had never been to New Orleans. I had heard lots about it and thought it would be a great opportunity, so I went. But thinking back on it now, there may have been some risk that Vassar was taking sending this young kid.

MS. COLES: Where did you stay?

JUDGE ROBERTS: Olga Smoak had a very nice French Quarter place, and she put me up in one of her spare bedrooms that she and her husband had in this, I don't know quite what you call it. I don't know if you call it a townhouse. It

was a connected house in New Orleans right in the French Quarter, which I'd heard a lot about. I was thrilled.

MS. COLES: Did you go out? Did you experience New Orleans when you were down there?

JUDGE ROBERTS: Sure. She made sure that I could have an experience that I would be able to talk about coming back so that others would not only hear about the wonders of New Orleans, but the great opportunity to connect with this alumna to try to do some recruiting. I had my first experiences with some of the New Orleans cuisine. I'd go past some of the New Orleans night clubs. I wasn't a drinker.

MS. COLES: You were of legal age in New Orleans.

JUDGE ROBERTS: I don't know what the legal age was then.

MS. COLES: It was 18.

JUDGE ROBERTS: I wasn't 18 yet. I had just turned 17 when I went to Vassar. So I had to actually wait a year before I could legally drink in New York State anyway. The New York State legal drinking age was 18. But I did get a chance to see some of New Orleans. I think she might have driven me around places, particularly when we went to some of the schools. I remember a Catholic high school, St. Augustine, and there was a fellow named Bernard Cornin who agreed to come up to Vassar. He enrolled in the class of 1975, a year behind me. I think he was one of the people that I had spoken to. There was another woman named Valera Francis. She was a class even behind that, but I think she heard me talking to somebody,

and she came from New Orleans the year after that. It was interesting because her first husband ended up being a black man who I had met at Columbia Law School later on who was from New Orleans who had gone as an undergraduate to Columbia University. So I think when Valera got to Vassar in Poughkeepsie, New York, and Ron Mason, who was at Columbia University as an undergrad, they met because of this road trip between Columbia and Poughkeepsie, Columbian guys going up to visit the Vassar women, just like the Yale guys would come up to visit the Vassar women. Which itself was a little interesting for a Vassar guy, seeing all these guys from these other schools coming to Vassar to meet the women. But, you know, I had no problem with that.

MS. COLES: Do you feel like you got any additional insight into women's issues or philosophies from that experience?

JUDGE ROBERTS: The short answer is yes. The longer answer is absolutely yes. And it started with this. Vassar in 1968 did not have a full-time curriculum dedicated to the study of people of African descent. It was an entirely euro-centric curriculum. They had begun to try to bring black students to that campus. As with many other higher educational institutions in the United States, they stopped with the idea well we should bring more black people here without thinking what does this really mean for those students coming here. What else should we be thinking about to give them a full experience. What intellectual pursuits are going to be useful to make sure that they have as full and challenging an experience here. What kinds of

social tensions might we have to think about in having black students who may predominantly be living in black environments at home coming into a very euro-centric and mostly white environment out in the suburbs somewhere? So that kind of thinking had really not progressed very far. When you did have for the first time a significant body of black women coming onto this Seven Sisters campus, the black women at that time began discussions and negotiations with the white administration about those very issues. And not surprisingly, many of the faculty or administrators who were quite accustomed to what they had been doing for decades and decades at Vassar, with a very euro-centric curriculum and all the other social things they had been doing, felt these black students should feel lucky to be able to experience some of this. These black women essentially put their academic careers on the line. This ranged from freshmen who had just gotten there up to seniors who could lose four years of their investment in this college and not get a degree, when the negotiations had broken down to the point that talking was not getting them anywhere. They put their careers on the line and took over the administration building with a list of demands on the issues that the administration had not genuinely addressed or come forward to try to meet them on.

MS. COLES: This is while you were there?

JUDGE ROBERTS: It was the year before I got there. But by the time I got there, I got to meet those women. Some of them were still there. It's the stuff of legend that

you can read in a newspaper, but on paper it's very two-dimensional. When you get there and you meet these women, and you see how intelligent they are, these are not some fly-by-night, let's have some fun, let's go break some windows and go take over a building and then let's go get high. These were serious people. These were smart women. These were dedicated people who said we are here because we want to improve not only ourselves but the lives of black people, people of color, and we can't do it just following the traditional euro-centric approach that Vassar and these other schools have been following. So they put their careers on the line when the administration had not been in good faith negotiating with them. To me, it was eye-opening to see that these were women doing this. At Cornell it was mostly men who had taken over the administration building; at Columbia, it was sort of a male-dominated experience when the administration building there was taken over.

MS. COLES: When you say taken over, I'm not familiar with this, do you mean they did a sit-in or did they have guns, were they holding people hostage? What does this mean? What is a takeover?

JUDGE ROBERTS: I'll tell you the Vassar experience. These women decided enough is enough, they're not listening to us when we talk, they're going to need something to jolt them. They met among themselves and got a detailed, very detailed, almost paramilitary plan, that had them meeting up at certain locations throughout the campus, 3:00 a.m. in the morning. They had planned to have certain tools and lumber and dressed in black and had

lookouts and all that. So they met at 3:00 a.m. in the morning. They walked into the main administration building where the switchboard was located. In those days, all calls on campus had to go through the switchboard. The President's office was upstairs on the top floor, but the main elevator to go up and down was also near this entrance. So they had scoped out all the strategic locations in the administration building that they were going to shut down so that the college could not continue to function the way it normally functions until and unless they addressed the demands that these black women came forward with. They told the switchboard operator, thank you very much, but we're taking over this building now. You have the option to stay and cooperate with us, or you may leave and we'll run these things nicely. The switchboard operator said what, you can't run this thing. It took me two years to learn how to do that. One of the black women said, well just show me what you mean, and she showed her in maybe five minutes, and said thank you very much, why don't you leave so your family doesn't miss you and nobody's afraid. They escorted her out. They boarded up the front door in a way that nobody could just break it in. They disabled the main elevator up to all of the other floors. That's how the takeover went. Nobody could come into this main building and the main sensitive parts of the building that allowed Vassar administration to continue. They had communicated with other people in the Poughkeepsie community who were supporters, mostly men, who were outside and they acted as sort of bodyguards in case the sheriff

or state police would try to barge in and storm the building. But it was really an act of combined foresight planning, intelligence, and grit to go into that building, take it over the way they did. The college wasn't able to function the way it did.

MS. COLES: How long did it last?

JUDGE ROBERTS: I believe it lasted two-and-a-half days. I'd have to go back and check the history. But appreciate that these were women who very easily could have been subject to a call from the president to the state troopers. To come in and storm this place or the sheriff's office might have just barged in and taken these women and arrested them and they could have gotten kicked out of school. I say all that to say that by the end of the negotiations after they took the building over, not only did they end up having an African American cultural residential center for housing black students, they ended up with a commitment to a black studies curriculum that would not just be experimental or one teacher once in a while. That curriculum exists today as the Africana studies program. They ended up with commitments to increase recruitment and retention of black students, of black faculty, of black staff, and a number of other demands that the students had made. This was not wild crazy hippie stuff that a lot of the conservatives at that time were trying to brand black radicals as trying to foment. This was principled, it was intelligent, and these were women I was actually able to meet and to live among and to study with and to play with and to enjoy relaxation with and to party with. But to see the steely reserve they all had

as a common denominator was something I had not anticipated. It was something I learned from, particularly since all of them were older than I. There is in our culture that you look up to elders or people who are ahead of you. Many of them have gone on to pursue their avocations and their commitments in life. One of the women is an urban planner right here in Washington, D.C., affiliated now with Howard University and is very involved in the issues of how best to have communities, particularly communities of color, develop and preserved. We had one woman who became the first African-American female orthopedic surgeon in the nation. She was one of the main ones in the takeover, and at the time, she could have lost her whole opportunity to go to Johns Hopkins med school. A woman who is a publicist at the National Museum of African American History and Culture. I can go down a long list of PhDs, psychologists, oncologists, pediatricians. These were serious people and they put it all on the line, and to be able to live and work with them at a time when I'm still a little kid, what do I know. I'm a little freshman and later a sophomore and junior and so on, but to see their leadership was to me something I'd never trade.

MS. COLES: That's incredible. One thing I did want to go back to is in your high school experience, you were mentioning some of the different things you did with your music and you brought here a pamphlet that I'd love for you to talk about some.

JUDGE ROBERTS: In Music and Art High School, every year, the students were responsible for publishing what's called the *Three Lively Arts*. It's an annual publication of creative literature and art and music by the students of the High School of Music and Art. I brought with me this magazine which includes a combination of two things that I'm very proud of. When I was a senior, I was able to take a music theory course that required the students to compose pieces. I composed a fugue, a classical fugue, for the piano, and the manuscript of it, the score of it, they published in this magazine. It just so happens that also in that year there was an art teacher who asked me to pose, perhaps me because of my height or perhaps because of my big Afro or because I was skinny or something. She taught a class where the art students had to draw sketches of models who were posing. They used pen and ink or charcoal and ink. She got a collection of some of the drawings that her students did when I posed for several classes as a model sitting still for forty minutes while these people drew me. They superimposed the score of my fugue over some of those sketches, and published it in this *Three Lively Arts* magazine. I think I might have been one of the only people whose fugue or other composition was published in this *Three Lively Arts* magazine that came not just with the musical score but also drawings of the composer. That was something that I've kept with me for now forty-some odd years. But it was another opportunity to, as I say, expand your experiences as a student in that high school and I

don't think I could have done that at John Adams High School, my local high school.

MS. COLES: Okay. That's going to conclude our session for today.