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Jennifer Vaughn-Blakely

Wilmer Amina Carter Foundation

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The Bridges that Carried Us Over Project

Interview Summary

Interviewees:
Jennifer Vaughn-Blakely

Interviewer:
Carol Ann Tillman

Interview Date:
August 2, 2016

Location:
San Bernardino, California

Interview Summary completed by:
Kimberly Morales, 2020

Topic:
Jennifer Vaughn Blakely talks about her childhood in the Southern United States and being put on a train at the age of sixteen to go live with her uncle in California because of integration. She also discusses her life story including her college experience, career, family heritage and dynamics, and African American culture.

Keywords:
- Segregation
- Family dynamics
- Personal experiences
- African American culture
- Southern United States
- California
- Inland Empire
- Jennifer Vaughn-Blakely

Comments:
None

Interview Index:
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Part 2: https://youtu.be/FoET8qOHLUY
Part 3: https://youtu.be/WXkzxkvT0fs
Part 4: [https://youtu.be/p6rrVe-fxX4](https://youtu.be/p6rrVe-fxX4)

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**Related Materials:**
Additional oral history interviews are currently being worked on in collaboration with the Wilmer Amina Carter Foundation from the Bridges that Carries Us Over Project.

**Full interview transcript can be found below.**
Start of Interview:
[00:00:00]

Part 1
[00:00:00]

C: Good morning.

JVB: Good morning.

C: Today is August the 2nd, 2016. My name is Carol [inaudible] and I am interviewing Jennifer Vaughn-Blakely for the archiving black history in the Inland Empire Project. Her name is spelled Jennifer Vaughn-Blakely. We are interviewing here at the San Bernardino County Superintendent of Schools Office in San Bernardino California. Thank you, Jennifer, for taking out the time to conduct this interview with us.
JVB: And thank you Carol, I am so happy to be here.

C: We are happy to have you. So I want to begin with just giving us a perspective of where you started out in life and how you ended up here in San Bernardino?

JVB: Okay. I started life in Vicksburg Mississippi. I was born August 10th, 1948. How I got to San Bernardino was in 1962, my father’s brother, Harry Vaughn, came to Vicksburg for his annual family visit. He and my father sat in our kitchen and planned my life.

I was devastated because my uncle told my father that I would have to come and live with them before I graduated from high school and that way, I would not have to pay out of state tuition when I went to college.

That meant, when I turned 16 which was the age that I could go out someplace [hand gestures] supervised by boys and really have a little bit of independence. My parents were going to snatch me up and send me away.

On August 14th 1964, they put me on a train, alone in Jackson Mississippi and my mother told me, “Don’t you say a word to anybody on that train. If you get into trouble, talk to the porter.”

And I thought, why would I talk to him, I don’t know him either. I later learned that pullman porters escorted and took care of black people as they travelled around this country.

My Uncle Harry, had gotten out of the army after WWII [World War Two] at what later became March Air Force Base but it was called Camp [inaudible]. And he settled in Riverside and then moved to San Bernardino and worked just up the street from here at [inaudible] and that is where I believe he heard the discussion about out-of-state tuition and told my father about the plan.

That was the plan, that’s how I landed in San Bernardino. Lived on Ninth Street between what was then called Muscat and Mount Vernon. Graduated from San Bernardino High School, went to San Bernardino Valley College when you could go for five dollars and the cost of your books. Transferred to Cal State San Bernardino and received both a bachelor’s and master’s from there. And married a local San Bernardino person whose family roots are very deep in the City of San Bernardino.

C: And his name?

JVB: His name is Tony Blakely.

C: Well that’s exciting and I just can’t wait to kind of get your feel of what happened once you got here. I’m sure there are many stories connected to the matriculation of
high school and Valley College. But I'm going to try and tie them and if you can, weave these stories for me. Let's start with churches, were you a member of a local church here?

JVB: Yes, I've only belonged to one church in the 52 years and that's New Hope, Joy New Hope. The Sunday after I arrived in San Bernardino at the train station down on Second Street and I still belong to New Hope.

C: You came under the pastor ship of?

JVB: Reverend David Campbell was the pastor and Reverend Cadell who was the pastor before him, was still alive and still came to church [inaudible] [nods head].

C: Awesome, very good. And being that it was in the 1950s? —

JVB: —60s.

C: 60s?

JVB: [nods head].

C: Then we are definitely in the Civil Rights struggle at the time. What did that look like in San Bernardino?

JVB: Well, [laughs] it's kind of funny. One of the reasons that my parents and my family decided that we should come to California to go to school was because of integration. One of the things I discovered after I got here, was that San Bernardino was not the most integrated places in the country.

As a matter of a fact, somewhere between 1966 and 1968, I remember being a part of a march down Ninth Street and over the bridge. The march was led by Frances Grace and Valerie Polk Ludlum and Bonnie Johnson, those were three of the people I remember.

Or the desegregation of schools in San Bernardino and even as a young woman, I thought, why am I doing this. And I always found that ironic that I came from a place that was known for its staunch segregationist ways and laws, to a place that was supposed to be the exact opposite and it wasn't. So that was ironic for me.

C: Yes, certainly it was. So you were engaged in that struggle, how did that relate as you might recall in terms of work and jobs and accessibility to other areas of the city?

JVB: I guess my engagement in those activities was very limited because from my parents in Mississippi and my uncle in California, the rule was you do not go out there getting involved in anything controversial or that was going to get you put in jail.
C: You were so concentrated on your study—

JVB: —Exactly [nods head] —

C: —get your piece of paper.

JVB: Right [nods head], that was it. My direction was very clear so I only did those things when I could sort of sneak and do them. And I remember once when I was at Cal State, a group of [laughs], at the time there were only 50 students of color. Period. We were [hand gestures] planning some takeover of the president’s office and I sat there and thought, you know I’m not going to be here at four o’clock, I know that.

And I stood up and said, “I can’t come, my uncle will get me out of jail but I will never [shakes head] hear the end of it. And so I’m going to let you know now” —

C: —They put their hopes and dreams in you and [inaudible] —

JVB: —Yes [nods head].

C: Do you ever, have you ever had an opportunity to go back and talk to them about their fears for you at that time? About what things were going through their head when they created that strategy for you.

JVB: Well yes, I have however my mother just said, “Oh well”, you know.

And my uncle who really got this whole thing started, never really talked about it. He and I really only talked about how much I loved him when he was dying and his approach was, “You know I love you and I know you love me” and I said, “but I’ve never told you and I did.”

My Uncle Harry was a, our family you could count on him for anything. Even when you blew it, even when you done something dumb and stupid, he was always there. And he showed his love by taking care of his family. You could be the biggest screw up in the family and if you were a Vaughn, he was going to do—

C: —[inaudible] —

JVB: —yeah and we all always knew that.

C: Did he have any children?

JVB: No [shakes head], he had no biological children. My aunt had a son and then my aunt and uncle raised her sons, one of his daughters, and so we were like, Helen and I were like their children [hand gestures].

C: Okay so I want to kind of back up because you do have brothers and sisters.
JVB: [nods head].

C: And you are number what?

JVB: I’m number one, I’m the oldest and there were eight of us, well yeah, eight of us. And I say that because I have a cousin-sister in the South and a part of African American culture is people didn’t go in the foster care system.

C: Speak on it, speak on it.

JVB: Your family, if somebody couldn’t deal with child-rearing, somebody in the family just took that child and raised her.

I have a cousin Gwen, that’s what my mother did. My mother’s sister had a child, she really wasn’t ready or able to cope with another child. And my mother started babysitting and when the weather changed, she said, “Leave her here, come pick her up on the weekends.” Well 18 years later, Gwen left my mother’s house and so that’s my family.

My sister Carolyn, who is now deceased, was my hero. She was three years younger but she was the most courageous person I’ve known in life and she was not afraid of anything or anybody including my parents. She was the spokesperson for us, she negotiated everything for us and she was very successful at it. She was a nurse and she took care of people but with my sister Carolyn, [points finger] you paid the price.

C: [laughs]

JVB: [Laughs] Which made you think, do you really want her help or do you want to figure it out yourself. But I admire and I still admire my sister. And I talk to my sister [nods head].

C: Awesome. Jennifer, if you are the oldest, then I want to bring a little more focus on it. This plan was made for you to come to California, did other of your siblings come later on doing the same thing?

JVB: Yes [nods head], yes. There’ a gap [hand gestures]. Shortly after I came to California, schools and colleges integrated in the South. My sisters didn’t come, my brother went to join the military because also my father died when I was 23.

So then my brother went into the military and he’s the next to the youngest. And then my youngest sister came to California and she and her family still live in California.

C: Very good. Well that’s quite an awesome heritage there. Can you talk a little bit about the value of education? It seems the story is circulated around making sure all of you all were educated. Were your parents educated or what was the value system at the root of the—
JVB: —Well I think the value system was my parents knew what and it wasn't just my parent’s system but my families on both sides [hand gestures], they knew the opportunities that in education provided in terms of making life better.

My mother was a high school graduate and she understood—

End of Part 1:
[00:16:23]

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JVB: —that with the more education, the better things could be for you and they always encouraged that.

The other interesting thing about my childhood is that, even in the state of Mississippi, I did not have a black teacher, a teacher who looked like me until I was in the third grade because we went to Catholic School. And the nuns were white and all the students were black. I didn’t see a black priest until I was about 12 years old and I fell in love with him because he had a beautiful voice. And I prayed every night [hand gestures] that I wouldn’t die and go to hell because I loved a priest.

C: [laughs]

JVB: And I [laughs and smiles] didn’t see a black nun until maybe I was 13 in New Orleans which is a large African American Catholic population and I remember just staring at her.

So I had kind of an [hand gestures] interesting life for a Southern person because nuns were my first educators and they did a good job looking at it now, I didn’t think so then. However, I know differently now [nods head].

C: Very good. Okay, let’s talk about love and marriage. You said you came to San Bernardino and you met and married a San Bernardino man. Was that while you were getting your college education or did you—

JVB: Kinda sort of, kinda sort of. In the early 60s, Norden Air Force Base was real big and a lot of young women dated guys from the base. And a man that everybody knew and loved Wilbur Brown, said to me one day, he used to call me Vaughn, he said, “Vaughn, you can’t go around dating those Airmen.”

And there was some friction [hand gestures] between San Bernardino guys and military guys in those days. He said, “I know what, you’re going to date my friend” [makes face expression and hand gesture]. Like I’m going to date your friend, right.
And so he arranged a date for us and I knew Tony [hand gestures], I knew his name, his reputation, all of that. When we first dated, I was like, _eh right okay_ [makes face expression]. It was sort of on and off.

When I graduated from Cal State and I wasn’t finding the job I wanted, I thought _well maybe I’ll move out of the area_. And then our relationship changed and became a little more serious. Then I graduated from Cal State in 1971 and we were married in 1973.

And I had this list [hand gestures], partially comprised by my family. Get an education, then you get married then you [points finger] buy a house, then you have a baby. I remember being pregnant and our son was born premature and we still lived [points finger] in an apartment [forms a fist and shakes fist] and that just made me crazy.

It’s like that’s not the way this is supposed to go and a little bit of that is still in me but I’ve become more [hand gestures] flexible [smiles] in life. As a part of that flexibility, you learn to [hand gestures] to give and take in a relationship too [nods head].

C: Absolutely. How many children do you have?

JVB: One. We have one son and he turns 40 next month.

C: And his name?

JVB: His name is Anthony, he’s Anthony the Second. Yeah, we call him Anthony, my husband is Tony. That is was one of the conditions, I did not want this, “Little Anthony, Big Anthony” you know, all of those names that people create. And he’s a wonderful young man [nods head and smiles].

C: Any grands yet?

JVB: No [shakes head], no grands.

C: Now it has “Elks” checked off here, I saw, I am assuming either Tony or—

JVB: —My Uncle Harry—

C: —Okay—

JVB: —was one of the exalted rulers at the Arrowhead Elks Lodge and that was something he loved more than many things in life. I remember one year, he always [hand gestures] went to the National Elks Convention and one year he went in and came back and we were talking. He said, “You know I felt a little uncomfortable. Most of the men there were so educated and I’m not.”
I told him, what you have to realize is many of them have that because of the sacrifices made by men like you so don’t sell yourself short on that. And as you can see, my Uncle Harry was a major part of my life because of him and my Aunt Alice, there were things I had an opportunity to do and my life changed and was so affected in a positive way.

C: Yeah [inaudible], that’s wonderful. Okay so the job must have eventually come for you and what was your work, how did you keep yourself employed back in those days?

JVB: Well in 1971 when I graduated from college, there was a, I think the first time you started hearing of a freezes, hiring freezes [laughs] and here I was I had done what I was supposed to do [hand gestures] and I couldn’t find a job, I looked and looked.

I was offered a job at the California Department of Corrections working at California Institution for Women. And I thought—

C: —Give me your degree—

JVB: —Oh. I have a Bachelors in Sociology and a Master’s in Education with an emphasis in Counseling. I’ve never worked anywhere where I was a [hand gestures] counselor but working as a manager and administrator, [hand gestures] that’s what you do [laughs], a lot of. So I did not feel comfortable that I could do the job because I was a naïve young woman from Mississippi, came to San Bernardino, led a very sheltered life, went to Cal State, a very small institution at that time and I just thought I don’t think I’m ready for prison work.

The same time previously I worked at the Home and Neighborly Service in San Bernardino, another opportunity I was introduced to by Wilbur Brown. And one of my job responsibilities was being the Girl Scout leader woman. The woman who was the professional staff person talked to me about being a professional Girl Scout person and I thought, ehh I don’t know I don’t want to be a Girl Scout person.

However, I chose Girl Scouting and [hand gestures] although later, I went into Government where I worked nearly 25 years, the foundation, what I do today as a trainer, I learned with Girl Scouting. What I do in terms of community engagement, I learned in Girl Scouting. Girl Scouts were doing diversity way back in the 60s and so I credit them with a lot of the skills I have today as a professional trainer.

When I got a Master’s in Education at Cal State, I thought ehh I don’t think that’s for me [laughs]. I discovered along the way I do better educating adults than I do children [nods head]. One on one small group of kids, I’m fine but [shakes head] —

C: —You got to know your niche.

JVB: Right [nods head] and I discovered it early. It wasn’t after 20 years of teaching [laughs].
C: That’s wonderful [laughs]. Now they have railroad underlined, you shared with me that that was your—

JVB: —Yeah. I think that’s a no, that’s in reference to my husband’s Uncle Benton PK Blakely who lived in San Bernardino for a very long time and worked in human resources for Santa Fe back in the early 70s. He provided or took the initiative and the leadership in providing many young African American men in San Bernardino with [nods head] good jobs, good benefits, long-term employment.

Some of those guys are just within the last five to ten years [hand gestures], retired from those jobs in PK. Played a great role in that he was one of the, I believe, original members of [inaudible]. He and Willie Robertson, Hardy Brown and Wesley Jefferson, black men [hand gestures] started that organization and black men are still [nods head] leading that organization.

Although now women [hand gestures] are participating, I still see it as a black male organization and it’s always been successful and it can be a model for the United States. Yes, so that’s where the railroad reference comes from.

C: Very good. That’s such an inspiring story.

C: When given a position where you can bring somebody up.

JVB: And he did and brought them up [hand gestures] into jobs that provided them with opportunities to buy homes, to educate their children, to travel. That’s a—

C: —That’s a model.

JVB: Yes [nods head] and he was a part of creating that.

C: If we could just get more of that.

JVB: Yes.

C: Talk to me about your entrepreneur ventures.

JVB: Okay. I mentioned that I started out in Girl Scouting and working for a non-profit there’s lots of discussion about raising money. And I thought, you know what [laughs] I am tired of this, I’m going to go somewhere where I don’t have to ever worry about raising money again. I’m going to work for the government [laughs and smiles].

C: [laughs]

JVB: An opportunity opened up in Riverside County in 1975. I went to work with Riverside County Probation Department as a Volunteer Services Director. When I look
back on my career, practically all of the jobs I had in government were jobs that it was the first time they created it. So I am not afraid of trying something new.

My husband says and he’s probably right, that a lot of that comes from when my parents put me on the train alone when I was only 16. And so things that are not known, I am not afraid of them, I will go into that.

C: They call it a pioneer spirit.

JVB: Yeah, [nods head] yeah exactly. And so I started there as a, it took my experience working in Girl Scouting and sort of moved into that position in government.

Then I went from there to at the time when the federal the [inaudible] money was coming in [hand gestures], and it’s still coming but it’s totally different now, for developing and working in low-and moderate-income neighborhoods. And doing housing, community centers, fire stations, sewage treatments and sewer lines and I didn’t know anything about those things. But I figured if there’s a book I can read it and figure it out and I did.

I went from there to, my mentor called me one day and said, “Are you ready for a change?”

And I said, “Yeah, you know after four years you either get tired of them or they get tired of you.”

End of Part 2:
[00:16:11]

Start of Part 3:
[0:00:00]

JVB: And he said, “There’s going to be job opportunity opening up in Fontana and I think you would be good for it and you should apply for it.”

And I said, “John, you know what I look like. You know who I am. Why would you suggest that I apply for a job in Fontana?”

He said, “Fontana’s leadership is ready for a change. If you make the top three, the job is yours.”

And that’s how I got to Fontana. When I told my aunt I was one of the final candidates she said, “Do you all need the money that bad?” [laughs and smiles].

C: [laughs] What job was it?
JVB: Well it started out and this is the ironic part of it. I took a job; they were forming a new Department of Grants and Community Development. I took that job which evolved into an assistant city manager position—

C: —Oh my—

JVB: —because in the early, the mid 80s was when Fontana went through all kinds of things with people public, not elected, but public officials being indicted [hand gestures] and going to prison for illegal use of public funds. Sometimes the opportunity shows up in the strangest places.

When they checked me out and what I had in my bank accounts, it was what two government employees would have. And there was nothing strange about my purchasing habits, nothing could be tied between me and any developer. And so then I have the history [hand gestures] and I knew about the city and I had a reputation for being honest.

C: Absolutely.

JVB: And so at one point in time at Fontana, I held every department head position expect for police chief. I always used to tease the cops that they remain stable because the thought of me with a gun—

C: —[laughs] —

JVB: —was overpowering for them [laughs and smiles]. But it provided me with opportunities and experiences that without all of that [hand gestures] crime and corruption, I never would have gotten it.

It also taught me that being in the good ol boys clubs, isn’t what it’s cracked up to be.

C: Yes.

JVB: That it’s the things that [hand gestures] your parents, your grandparents, and your family tell you growing up [hand gestures], that really come into play on the job. You know, it’s not [shakes head] your money, don’t touch it.

C: Right.

JVB: Don’t lie for people. Very simple [shrugs shoulders and hand gestures].

C: Joseph and the Daniel and modern government [laughs]—

JVB: —Exactly and it works.

C: Yes.
JVB: It still works. And so after being in Fontana for 10 years straight which was longer than I’d ever stayed at any job. However, I had almost 10 different jobs in 10 years.

I decided it was time for me to try something new and at the time it was on the path and I thought I wanted to be a city manager somewhere and I knew I needed more experience and more exposure.

So a job opened up in the City of Riverside and I applied for it and I got it. I was real excited, it was a [hand gestures] new department, new position.

C: What was it called?

JVB: It was called, I don’t, it’s been so long. It was assistant city manager for Grants and Community Development. They were merging a lot of things and then they merged the Parks and Recreation Department as part of that.

It was very challenging in that [hand gestures] I could sense things but I couldn’t really put my finger on it. And then they started to allegedly have financial problems and you need to tighten your belt. Anyway, I got laid off and they eliminated the department.

At first, I was very upset and I looked at being an interior designer through a program at UCR and I took classes there. Then I thought, maybe I’ll be a conservator.

And then a woman who is a very dear friend and who works for me now, said to me one day, “Why don’t you do what you know how to do?”

Well [laughs and hand gestures].

C: [laughs]

JVB: And I started to look at that and I talked to my mentor about being a consultant. He said, “You’ve worked with consultants, you’ve hired consultants. How many of them were smarter than you?”

I thought, Eh, okay.

As a woman of color, I had never seen a lot of consultants who looked like me. So I thought, Oh well if it doesn’t work, I know what I can do.

I told my mother I was thinking about that and she said, “Are you sure?”

And I said, yeah [nods head].
I remembered and reflected on my parents always taught us: get an education, get a good job. They never said, [taps table with index finger] do it for yourself. She knew that would work.

C: Yeah.

JVB: And 18 years later, I’m still working for myself. And although I’m in about four or five protected classes, I would have a hard time working doing what I did [hand gestures], because many folks in the work force have a different value system than I do. And I don’t have the political correctness that I had 30, 40 years ago.

So I do well on my own [smiles], with my team and I love what I do.

C: Beautiful. And you do it well.

JVB: Well thank you [smiles]. I would like to think so. I have several retired friends and family, people who say, “What, when are you just going to retire?”

And I said, I’m not. As long as I enjoy what I do and I truly do, I’m going to do it because I think I found my niche with teaching. I cannot teach children, I can teach adults who deal with children.

C: Yes.

JVB: And I understand how government works, especially local government. And I can [hand gestures] teach people how to be their own advocates. Groups and folks who have advocates do better but if you don’t know you need an advocate and you don’t know how to be an advocate, you’re not even a voice in the wilderness. So that’s my career in a nutshell.

C: Yes. I love it. I love, I love it. You mentioned a mentor, John.

C: Who’s John?

JVB: John is a guy I worked for when I went to Riverside County which at that time the department was called Community Development. It’s now called the Economic Development Agency.

I worked for him and he was always, John’s kind of sit-back-guy and watches and then he quietly gives his opinion, thought, advice. And I watched him and often times he would be the smartest guy in the room. However, he would not intimidate or bully the other guys in the room and most of the time there, it was guys. I got to watch those dynamics and it sort of [hand gestures] just happened.

I didn’t go to him and say would you be my mentor? It just happened.
C: Like an adoption of sorts.

JVB: [Nods head] And it was so amazing. I just saw him, we emailed and talked. His wife and I are very good friends and I met her for lunch and she’s on the phone talking to him. She hangs up and says, “John said hi.”

And then I could feel [hand gestures] somebody standing behind me and I turned around [smiles] and it was him. I was so excited to see him because in terms of my career and my career choices, he has always encouraged me and supported me. He’s always just guided me in the way that he guides people without saying things like, “Are you crazy” or “Nah, you’re right, don’t try that” [laughs]. He’s always been [hand gestures] a very encouraging in a very soft spoken, spiritual way. I’ve known him since 1975, yes 1974.

C: That’s wonderful.

JVB: Anyway, a long time and major steps in my life he’s been sort of my go-to person and just a wonderful man.

C: Your sounding board.

JVB: Yeah [nods head], yeah. And he knows me well enough to [hand gestures] put it in my head and that’s what he does. He gets in your head and makes you think and you come to the conclusion.

I can never say, “Ah that didn’t work out because that’s what John told me to do.” No, John put a thought in my head and that’s what I chose to do.

C: Very good.

JVB: Although he told me Fontana was ready [hand gestures], they were and look at where they are today.

C: Yup, yeah.

JVB: An African American woman is the mirror of Fontana.

C: Yeah, who would have—

JVB: —Who would have thought it [nods head], yeah.

C: [laughs]

JVB: In 1984 when I went to work there [shakes head], the Klan had just marched in Fontana.
C: Wow. In 1984?

JVB: Yeah, that’s when I went to, was it 80, god I’m getting old. Anyways it was in the 80s, yeah [nods head].

C: The 80s, yeah. Wow.

So we have sort of touched upon the segregation and integration piece and that you’ve found yourself in a city that was still fighting integration for its schools. And we sort of talked about it verses when we talked about Fontana and how long it took them to finally. So you’ve been somewhat of a pioneer just given the fact that you were prepared to just take these jobs at these various places. I don’t think there were very many black people.

JVB: You know surprisingly [laughs], in Fontana there were a number of black people.

C: Serious?

JVB: That’s how I really met Mary Potts.

C: Okay, okay.

JVB: Who was in the PD, for and this is why young people sometimes have a hard time understanding slavery—

C: Okay.

JVB: There are many things we learned from being an enslaved people that weren’t today and in the Fontana PD for many for those young, and they were young, African American officers, Mary Potts was the go-to person. In her way, she could for some of them not all of them, she could get them to think differently. Which if you think differently, it changes your behavior.

There were a number of people in the public work [inaudible]. Now what was happening, they weren’t given opportunities. And sometimes when there’s someone there to just ask the question, [hand gestures] groups take one of two directions. They go, “Uh oh maybe we do need to look at that.” Others tend to isolate and move you.

Now but as survivors of slavery, we know to always—

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JVB: —be alert. Not paranoid, not angry, none of those things but to be aware of history and the possibilities. If it doesn’t happen, wonderful but know that it can because if it does, then you have a way of dealing with it. If you don’t know it was coming and I’ve seen it happen to people. And you think, how did you not know that was likely to happen [makes face expression and hand gestures]?

And it’s not just because I’m from the South, you know maybe that gives me a little bit of [hand gestures] an edge, I don’t think so but—

C: —Or maybe.

JVB: Yeah [shrugs shoulders and hand gestures], maybe because in our house we never talked about segregation and integration. We went on with our lives.

You know, I had an uncle who just put us in the back of his truck once, took us to the river and said, “I better not ever catch you near this river alone.”

We thought he was crazy. Well the adults in our family thought he was crazy. I later [points index finger] realized what he was doing, that’s where they drowned black people after killing them. So if you never got there, your chances were slim.

He’s also the same uncle who taught us how to shoot guns, even the girls. [Shakes head] Grown-ups in my family never knew that. We knew not to tell them that we knew how to shoot a gun.

C: Yeah. He was going to make sure you were equipped.

JVB: Yeah [hand gestures].

C: Yes.

JVB: But he had his own way of preparing us for what was out there without saying the words directly. This is why I take you to the river, this is why I’m teaching you to shoot guns. We knew that the Vaughns probably wouldn’t like this story, [shrugs shoulders] so we never told them [hand gestures].

C: [laughs]

JVB: But now as a 68-year-old woman, I understand very clearly why he did that. I was in Mississippi not too long ago and I had a conversation with his granddaughter, my sisters and my brother about him. And she could not understand why people called him Old Goat.

C: And they did because?
JVB: For the [air quotes] Vaughns he didn’t [hand gestures] meet their standard of work ethic.

C: Oh.

JVB: And so, they just sort of disregarded him. But we all, kids, loved him because to us he was cool. But we knew our standards for cool and our parents, were not the same [laughs].

C: [laughs]

JVB: And so, we knew how to shoot guns which were readily available.

C: So you had a variety of education.

JVB: [Nods head]

C: Maybe you weren’t as naïve as you thought you were, coming out of the South [laughs].

JVB: [Smiles] Well when, yeah, yeah, maybe I should have applied for that job. But you’re right, there are certain things that if you, you know, people talk about I’m not street smart, well maybe I am. It was a country road that I walked down but I have street smarts. I know, I know trouble brewing, you know I know things.

But integration and segregation and [hand gestures] the dreams and hopes of that, in my household were never, was [shakes head] never discussed.

I told a reporter who called me once about the march on Washington and I said, you know I saw it on the news, I remember the speech but in terms of a dinner table discussion and what it meant [shakes head], my household [shakes head].

Yeah, you know, my family had a plan, we’re working on that. Whatever happens over here, that’s okay and yet later as an adult I discovered my father and his oldest brother and sister, who were at that time in their 60s and my uncle was probably in his early 70s. I talked to my sister on day and I said, “You know nobody in our family was ever in our Civil Rights Movement, that’s so sad.”

And she said, “What are you talking about, that’s not true.”

And I said, “They never marched, they never did stuff like that.”

And she said, “At night, Daddy, Uncle Robert and Aunt [inaudible] went down in the country to meetings on voter registration.”

And I said, “why didn’t they said say anything about it?” There’s the naivety.
She said, “Don’t you know if they had said anything, Daddy would have lost his job at the mill, our house probably would have been bombed and our mother would have been so proud she would have told everybody in the neighborhood.”

So he couldn’t tell anybody.

C: Sounds almost similar to why the Underground Railroad was undocumented.

JVB: [nods head].

C: Because it was a covert operation and so in terms of blasting who or who wasn’t engaged or involved those activities—

JVB: Yeah [nods head] and it was a way [hand gestures] of preventing others from getting involved.

C: Right.

JVB: And that’s been going on and some would say it’s still going on. That’s part of our history and I thought, wow I never knew that.

She said, “You know people don’t talk about things sometimes until the people who are indirectly involved died.”

C: Yes, that’s true.

JVB: And then it was like, wow people in my family were part of the Civil Rights [laughs]. But it was like, gee they were good, honest, hardworking people who had a strong sense of [inaudible] so why not this? Well [hand gestures].

C: Absolutely, in their world it was the best form of survival. How you survive for today, planning how you’re going to survive [inaudible].

JVB: Yeah, they had a plan. With the work that I do in terms of engaging African American communities with mental health issues, I talk a lot about our history [hand gestures] and how that impacts our mental state—

C: —Oh yes—

JVB: —and trauma and treat it.

C: Yeah, it’s PTSD, believe me—

JVB: —Oh yes—
C: —that the trauma we are recovering from as a whole of behaviors that I think is worthy of [inaudible] [laughs].

JVB: Yeah, [hand gestures] that started in the 1600s.

C: Absolutely, absolutely.

JVB: Yeah, when I came to California there were three things I never knew about or heard about. I don’t know if it was because of segregation or what.

I never knew anything about foster care, I never knew anything about welfare, I never knew anything about convalescent homes. Because that’s what your family did, took, handled.

C: Yes.

JVB: Anybody who had a child who couldn’t take care of the child, couldn’t cope with the, that child went to family. Anybody in your family who got sick, [takes a pause and shakes head] —

C: —the rest of the family joined in and provided for, filled in the gaps.

JVB: [Nods head] when my mother’s mother, who had double mastectomy in the late 50s, was in her last stage of cancer, my mother packed us up, there were four of us, we moved to my grandparent’s house.

My father brought food on Fridays when he got paid, visited with us and we stayed until my grandmother died.

Convalescent homes, welfare [makes face expression]? Your family, your neighbors, whatever you needed, [hand gestures].

C: Yeah, you’re right.

JVB: One of my mother’s best friend’s husband, put her out in the cold, in the snow, my mother and her friends [hand gestures] put to get money out of their households and got her a motel to stay in until she could get to her brothers in the Michigan.

C: Wow.

JVB: That’s a support group, that’s a sister circle [nods head] and nobody ever knew about it. They never said a word. I didn’t know about it until my mother told me many years later. [Shakes head] And they were a church band family, the kind they put on the [inaudible] cause they’re so perfect-looking and acting [hand gestures] but when he did that and they never badmouthed him at church, they never—
C: —Wow.

JVB: But one day, she was gone [shakes head]. And that’s what we need to teach our children to value and what they [hand gestures] really come from.

C: Cause I was raised Christian values.

JVB: Yeah, cause that’s what they knew.

C: Yeah, very good.

JVB: Yeah and that’s what many of us have in common and we have more—

C: It’s even bigger than just doing right by your fellow [inaudible], doing right by what spiritual [inaudible].

JVB: And in our house we had the Catholics and the Baptists [makes face expression].

C: [laughs]

JVB: [Nods head] We weren’t Catholic, we went to Catholic school. We went to Mass by three or four times a week.

C: Wow.

JVB: When we played in the neighborhood and we played Church, we mixed Catholic Church and Baptist Church.

C: [laughs]

JVB: Once almost got kicked out of Sunday School when we did, my sister Carolyn and me, back then there was a Sunday School lesson on what happens when you die and you know. Ms. Carey Jones, she’s teaching the Sunday School in a Baptist way and the question of what happens, you know, about sins and dying.

My sister piped up and said, “Hey, if you don’t kill anybody, all you have to do is confess your sins and you go straight up to heaven.”

Ms. Carey went crazy, the kids were, “Really?” and would ask me, “Is that true?”

“Yeah [hand gestures], just don’t be murdering people” [shakes head].

She dragged us out of Sunday School and the kids were clapping.

C: [laughs]
JVB: And my grandfather, who was a wonderful man, was the superintendent of Sunday School. He was in the background and then she took us, pushed us through the door and she goes, "Mr. John, your grandchildren out there telling these children about some place called purgatory and how they can just be sinning."

And my grandfather said, "Ms. Carey just sit them there, [hand gestures] I'll talk to them."

She did, she slammed the door and went out and [laughs and smiles] my grandfather said, "You go to Catholic School because of the education. We are Baptists. When it comes to God, believe what you hear here."

C: Okay.

JVB: What he didn’t know, we have been praying, they would ask us to pray. Well Catholics have a prayer for everything, they got a prayer book.

C: Yeah.

JVB: My sister and I would volunteer to pray and then we would add spice. Say, “Oh I believe in God, the Father Almighty, oh yeah! Creator of heaven and Earth!”

People would, because kids don’t pray right and they would say, “Oh let those little girls pray. They have some good prayers,” [touches forehead].

After the purgatory incident [shakes head], we could stand on top of the [inaudible], “I'm praying for” [lifts hand], “uh uh no you’re not” [laughs and smiles].

And I am writing a book about those stories—

C: —I hope you are.

JVB: — [nods head] yeah because it’s like—

C: —that is hilarious, thank you—

JVB: —in the midst of all of that segregation and racial hatred, we had a good Southern life. And lots of people who come from the South have similar stories, they weren’t running around worried about racism and hatred from other people because our families protected us from that and [hand gestures] you could be happy. You could play, we would set dry-brush on fire and have funerals for birds—

C: —Wow. —

JVB: —Cause in Catholic Church you have incense—
C: —Yes [laughs] —

JVB: —we could’ve burned up a neighborhood. But my grandmother used to say “God takes your babies and fools, don’t worry” [shrugs shoulders and smiles].

C: That is hilarious. We are going to conclude our interview. Thank you, Jennifer Vaughn-Blakely—

JVB: —You’re quite welcome, thank you. —

C: —So much for the interview.

End of Part 4:  
[00:16:01]

End of Interview:  
[00:64:46]