



THE ALEXANDRIA ORAL HISTORY CENTER
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CITY OF ALEXANDRIA



Oral History Interview

with

Verdella Jennings

Interviewer: *Francesco De Salvatore*

Narrator: *Verdella Jennings*

Location of Interview:

Lloyd House, 220 N Washington St, Alexandria, VA 22314

Date of Interview: *05/05/2023*

Transcriber: *Louisa Caldrony*

Summary:

Verdella Jennings reflects on her family and childhood experiences growing up in Alexandria and work at Charles Houston Recreation Center.

Notes:

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General	Childhood; family; holidays; traditions; discipline; programming
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People	Barbara Thomas, Lula Strother, Leo Jackson, Ruby Johnson, Vandelia Strother, Eric Strother, Cheryl Lawrence, Fred Smith, Joe Roberts, Annie Jackson, Arthur Dawkins
Places	Lee Street, Lyles-Crouch Elementary School, Charles Houston Center, Parker-Grey, Gibbon Street, Mayo Clinic

Introduction

Verdella Jennings [00:00:00] Mm hmm.

Verdella Jennings [00:00:06] Hi, my name is Verdella Jennings. I'm 75 years old. Today is May the 5th, 2023 and the location is Lloyd House.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:00:19] Great. My name is Francesco De Salvatore. Today is May 5th, 2023, and we are at Lloyd House. Great. So, Miss Jennings, I wanted to start from the beginning, and let's just start with what was your first or earliest memory here in Alexandria?

Growing up on Lee Street

Verdella Jennings [00:00:38] Living on Lee Street. We lived on Lee Street, the 700 block of South Lee. That was a predominant white neighborhood and as a kid, we really didn't know what that was. We played; we had so much fun. They just called it on the hill and we had a hill we can sleigh down, we had a hill, we had come home, change our clothes and put our street skates on. On two blocks up it was a playground there and we could play on the playground with the other kids and we were so disciplined that we only played till 5. After that, we had to come in, do your homework, and get dinner.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:01:18] Yeah, it's interesting. So, you said that it was prominently a white neighborhood at that time?

Verdella Jennings [00:01:24] Yes. Across the street from us on the corner of Franklin and Lee, it was a police chief. He lived there.

Verdella Jennings [00:01:31] Diagonally across-.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:01:31] What was his name?

Verdella Jennings [00:01:32] I don't remember his name. And diagonally across from us, it was Judge Black at the Supreme Court. He had the whole corner up there and then in the middle of the block on my side, it was a black church; Zion Baptist Church was there.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:01:53] Yeah. Can you further describe the neighborhood?

Verdella Jennings [00:02:00] The neighborhood-

Francesco De Salvatore [00:02:01] What did it look like?

Verdella Jennings [00:02:01] The neighborhood was like a little teeny 1 street community. They knew everybody and we knew all the kids, even they playing, and my brother and them would put a little thing up on the tree in the backyard. They would play basketball. We had, some of the girls, we would either skate or we would just run, jump, and hop, play with a rope, or we'd, like I said, we would just go to the playground. We were very disciplined kids. We was taught respect. We had no confrontation with nobody as long as we lived there.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:02:38] So what time period was your childhood?

Verdella Jennings [00:02:42] I was born 1947. So, it had to been in the early 50s, up until the early like 60, I want to say 63 when we moved and in that neighborhood, the lady next door to us, they were real close to my grandmother and the communication we had with our next-door neighbor was amazing.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:03:09] What was their name?

Verdella Jennings [00:03:10] Their last name was Seay, S-e-a-y. That's how they pronounced it. She had a son, and then she had two daughters. Annie was my age and the baby sister was, I forgot, I think her name was, I want to think what her name was, Debra or Delores or whatever. And we would play almost every day. And one day we was playing and we were in the 700 block, we had another friend up in the 600 block. And we would play in the summer all day but we were the only kids that had to come home at 12, eat our lunch and take a nap. And then after 4 we take our baths, have dinner, and then we could go back out to play. They say, "Why do y'all have to do that?" I said, "We don't know but when this clock strikes 12, we are on our way home."

Francesco De Salvatore [00:04:07] There was rules in the house.

Verdella Jennings [00:04:10] Oh, the rules was amazing. And we didn't know that, I mean, we just went along with it and our life was real easy, we didn't argue, we didn't fuss. We knew what we could and what we couldn't do and it wasn't, it was no big chore. But all our friends was raised pretty much the same way. The guidelines, you come home from school, you change your clothes and then you can play. After that, 4:30 or 5:00, you come in. So, then you got to do your homework, have dinner, then you get ready to go to bed. Then the homework had to lay on the table so your parents could come in, look at it, and then make sure that you did it, and that was it.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:04:47] Yeah. Sounds like your biggest memory growing up was. I don't know how you describe it; rules or order.

Verdella Jennings [00:04:58] Discipline, guidelines, we knew what we had to do, it wasn't a fuss, we didn't have a problem doing it. But as long as we could play outside and in the summer months, it was even better. The summer months on Lee Street, everybody would come outside and everybody was talking to each other across the street and that was amazing. It was just like a family orientated. Then the best thing I can remember was trick or treat. That was like, oh, trick or treat back in the day was amazing. Even whether you had a costume on and you could just put, paint your face or put a mask on. On Lee Street, they would decorate their yard and one lady at the end, she had chairs outside and she would give us ghost, we had to sit down. She would give us ghost stories and we would sit there and then her husband come behind us and just scare us to death. And then we'd get our treat, we'd go next door. Then one lady, she would dip the apples, and I mean, they made Halloween so special that we couldn't wait to have Halloween. We could only go though, like 4 blocks, we could go down Lee, all the way to Lee, come down by Jefferson Street, come down that way, come back and come on back up Gibbon and come back. And we really had so much candy and it was just like we couldn't wait till they come back again, cause we had free candy, we got stories, we did that, we met our friends and everybody was doing the same thing. And then it was, again, it wasn't that bad. We didn't have to, my mother didn't have to go through everything to make sure that it wasn't no needles in it, it wasn't no razorblades in it, you know, it was just like a

little bit more, it was just more civil when we were growing up compared to what it is now. A little safer.

Memories of childhood and racial relations in Alexandria

Francesco De Salvatore [00:06:55] Yeah. Could you talk more about the friends that you hung out with? Like, what were their names, who were they?

Verdella Jennings [00:07:02] The friends on our block, there was Annie, my brother hanging out with a guy. His name was Dilly. Dillard. And they did cars, clean cars, they drag race, and they, oh my god, they would come up Columbus Street and go to the Hot Shop. We didn't understand that we couldn't go inside, that we had to go to the teller booth. Just like every other Saturday, my mother would bring us down King Street.

Verdella Jennings [00:07:35] This particular Saturday, she would bring us, like every other Saturday she could bring us. And then the other Saturday, we were by ourselves, and we would have to come get our ribbons for our hair. We would eat at the, they had a little hot dogs, little counter right there. As soon as you walked into G.C. Murphy, it was like on Saturday, like the meet and greet, everybody's down there getting something, doing something, going to the Timberland drugstore, and it was another drugstore on the corner of Pitt and King. We would sit there and get our hot dog, and iced Coca-Cola, and we'd be so excited. I mean, we just thought that was it, until I grew up and didn't realize that the dinner counter in the back, we couldn't sit at it. We didn't have a clue that we couldn't sit there. We really didn't want to sit there. We just want a hotdog or a hamburger and go downstairs and get our ribbons and we come back. Then when I was with my mother, we just hung with her. She guided us and did whatever. Then the next week, my sister and the two little girls lived next door to us we would come straight down Lee and make that left turn on King and go up to, um, G.C. Murphy's.

Verdella Jennings [00:08:51] And we'd go in, and they had to go downstairs, and you'd get your ribbons. And so, this particular time, we wanted some water and we wanted to go to the bathroom. That's when I saw signs said "colored water," or "colored only." We kept saying, "What is colored water?" We couldn't understand that theory. I did a whole concept at Charles Houston, a black history program on that. And so, the white girls, they got the water fountain on the side, and it was plain clear water. So, we kept saying, "Well, what is colored water?" It didn't say "colored people." It said "colored only."

Verdella Jennings [00:09:35] So we kept saying, "So this is colored water?" "What is colored water and would this taste any different?" So, I did like this, I turned it real, real slow and lo and behold, the water came up just as clear. And so, I said, "Well, what is the difference? Why would this water be colored?" And then one of the ladies said "Stop playing over there!" And I said, "We didn't know what colored water was" and then we went into the bathroom, the same sign said "colored only." And we went in that bathroom and it was dirty and trash was on the floor and whatever. So, and we went home and asked my mother, "Why would there be a sign that said colored only?" She said, "Because we are classified as colored people and we cannot go in certain things, certain places, where white people can go. So, they give you a border, when you see a sign say "colored only," that's the only side that you can go in. Don't go on the other side because you're going to get in trouble and a lot of serious things can happen to you. So, stay where you're supposed to stay, do what you're supposed to do and come home." And we had no problem.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:10:44] So how old were you when that happened?

Verdella Jennings [00:10:45] I had to been between, I want to say 10 and 12.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:10:55] And how do you think that first experience impacted how you understood race in the city?

Verdella Jennings [00:11:01] It just went along with the discipline. I mean, because we didn't have so much here and it could have been here. And because we lived way on the south side, then when you lived on the south side, we wasn't around a lot. Once you cross on the King Street to the north side, they had the advantage. They had the movie theater. They had the recreation centers. They had the swimming pool, once we got a swimming pool. I mean, they had more things that they kids can do than - what, we had to make games up and play. I mean, if we could afford a bike, have a bike, everybody had street skates with the key, that we could come home and skate we could do. We just made games up. This kept ourselves busy until it was time for us to do something else. But when we moved on the north side, we saw a major difference. We had one school and if we want to go to the Lyles-Crouch playground, and that's where majority of the black kids would play there. But we have to come 4 blocks to that, we had to consider our time, and we would go down there and play a lot with them. But we also liked the playground up in in the 500 block of Lee Street, and it's still there. And the amazing thing about that was, we could see the train. And we could run, and when the trains say "Woo Woo," we run to the thing and we run down Wilke Street and wait till the train, we always try to beat the train, and it didn't make any sense. Absolutely not. But we always tried to be there, and the train come through and everything. And then we had a lot of friends that lived right on Wilke Street. So, everybody was out there. We thought it was the Amtrak, and it would just be the coal train and coal dropping all on the streets, all everywhere and whatever. And then the train would come back. I think it came through like three times a day. And they would go through here, block off, stop the traffic on Washington Street, stop the traffic on Henry Street, and stop the traffic on Patrick Street. And it would go to Fannon and come back and go and they would do the same thing. And we just couldn't wait till the train come back so we can hear the sound, that was the exciting part. And I know them now that they cleaned the tunnel up and they have lights in there, so it's a walk through. For people that live on the water now and they can walk there and can go to the grocery store.

Family home and holiday traditions

Francesco De Salvatore [00:13:38] What did your house look like? Can you describe your house?

Verdella Jennings [00:13:41] When we was little, our house was very small, but as kids, we thought it was very big. It was a lot of people in our house, but everybody had a space they could go to. Everybody had something they could do. My mother was an excellent southern cook. My grandmothers was there. We had a coal stove and that's how we heat it and one bathroom. But it was classified as home. I mean, we had rules. We had guidelines. Christmas was amazing. My mother would boil her eggs and hide the eggs. Every children holiday back in the day, a majority of the parents would do that. And now you don't see, I even have my niece and she wouldn't even know boiled eggs for her daughter. We had Easter basket lined up on the table. Me and my brother, we looked at, we were terrible kids as we got older, we looking at our mother, I said, "What is she out there doing?" He said "She's hiding the Easter eggs and she wanted us to think that the Easter

Bunny hopped down the trail". So, we went found the Easter eggs and we were so excited and whatever. Then when we had Christmas, Santa Claus was amazing when we got around. We ate dinner early that day, Christmas Eve. We were the only family on that whole block that didn't have a Christmas tree. And we only got that Christmas tree on Christmas Eve. That was because they were free. After Christmas Eve, they leave the trees then, and no sense in doing anything else. We would go, a lot of people would go back and forth. We would go get the tree and everything. So, my mother is always telling us that we could decorate the bottom of the tree as much as we could reach, and Santa Claus was going to finish it. We couldn't imagine the things that Santa Claus do across the whole world in this one night. And we didn't really try to figure out as much as the kids today. When we got up, we had to get permission; "Can we go downstairs, can we go downstairs?" And we just knew Santa Claus and his sled dropped all that things down the chimney. That was the fun part that just kept us waiting. We tore up the gifts, tore up the present. It was that day. Easter day was amazing. Mother's Day was like, oh my God, it was like Mother's Day, we had a chair and we tried to keep the tradition going. And Christmas, like the youngest, would sit in the big chair and everybody would give them the gift and they open up all their presents. Then the next one come and you get a chance. You the single [Inaudible]. Everybody can see your expressions and your gift. You can play with the toys, but you couldn't open the gifts. And that part was like, we still tried to do that. And it's really good for the little kids and just the older kid, older kids like us, we just have to wait maybe 2 hours before we can open our presents because as the age goes higher, we can just wait to sit in that chair.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:16:54] What are other family traditions that you remember growing up?

Verdella Jennings [00:16:59] The only, like I said, those were the only ones. Christmas, they didn't they didn't do too much Valentine. This Christmas, Mother's Day, Easter, and we did all of that. And going back to school, that was real popular, cause we couldn't wait to go back to school. My mother had all our clothes laying out. We got our new clothes and going back to school. You can't see the kids getting excited, going back to school, but we was going back to school for the first day and we was going to meet all our friends again and we couldn't wait to go in. Our teachers at Lyles-Crouch was very strict. And they were very instrumental in what we did, how we did it and what the expectation from them is what we had to do every day. Back in the day, we were even allowed to come home for lunch and going from lunch, and you had a, I think we must have had a half an hour if we was close enough to do it. Some kids would come home and some kids didn't. And then you get paid your money, I think it's a quarter, and you could get a school lunch. And we'd do that. Then after you eat your lunch, you could go outside and play just for a short period of time. But the biggest thing we wanted to do was write on the blackboard that we felt like we were writing on, that we were the teachers, and the only thing we would write about would be our name. We didn't understand why we did it. And then we grew up and we went out and we had one class reunion. Oh, my God, it was a class. I can't remember when this was, but Courtney Brooks was a member of the Parliament Progressive Club.

Verdella Jennings [00:18:43] He started the first great big class reunion, starting with Class of '46, up until class of '65. People flew in, people drove here and all just to come and meet and greet the people that they went to school with back in the day. And Mr. Brooks was a close friend of our family. And he had that meet and greet over at the Marriott Twin Bridges over there by like, over there by the Bridge, 14th Street Bridge. So, it was over there. Friday was the meet and greet. And by

us graduating in the '60s, we didn't have a clue who these people were. And they came in, they were gorgeous, they were dressed to the nines. Just to see them hug and kiss people they hadn't seen in 20 or 30 years. It was just amazing, and he started that trend. And that trend went on until even after he died. And now Brenda and Lucky Elliott, they do every third Saturday. Class of '65, our luncheon. And we still holding on to that. But when the people came in, the older people came in and I looked at some of them, some of them I can remember, and some of them I couldn't. But they said "Aren't you Luther Strother's daughter?" "Yes, ma'am. Yes, ma'am." And but they just couldn't wait until they came back next year, then he started something that was just amazing. And then I think back then, when we was children, I think Parker Gray went to the 11th grade instead of going to the 12th.

Elementary school experiences at Lyles-Crouch

Francesco De Salvatore [00:20:34] Well, let's start with Lyles-Crouch, right, because that's where you went to elementary school.

Verdella Jennings [00:20:39] Yes. Lyles-Crouch.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:20:42] What are some of your favorite memories about Lyles-Crouch?

Verdella Jennings [00:20:45] Favorite memories with Lyles-Crouch. When I went first in the first grade, we went to the old Lyles-Crouch-

Francesco De Salvatore [00:20:53] Which was where?

Verdella Jennings [00:20:54] It was on the corner of Wilke and Pitt, sitting on, right on that corner, right by the railroad tracks on that particular corner. And we had to walk up all the steps and the school to me was a little dark. But we went up there and we met our teachers and whatever, and Miss Finney, Miss Lyles, Miss Barbara Thompson. Thomas. Oh, my God, they were this Miss Ellen Johnson. They were our teachers, Miss, Miss Allen. Oh, it was just something, and we went there every day. We knew where we had to go, we knew what we were supposed to do and if they had to tell you, you're in trouble. And the most, and then when they said they were going to tear down Lyles Crouch, we didn't know what we were supposed to do or whatever. Then we saw the construction just on the Gibbon Street side, this one little square block, they were still in that vicinity. And when they opened a door to the new Lyles Crouch, we just took a deep breath like, Oh my God. It was just like we was walking into a college or something. It was just that pretty and the auditorium, the big stage. Oh, it was...

Francesco De Salvatore [00:22:13] Where was the new one?

Verdella Jennings [00:22:14] It was, the old one was on the corner of Wilke and Pitt. The new one was on the corner of Gibbon and say nice up (inaudible) and they all numbers were still within that square block. One was on this side and one was on that side and they tore down the old one. We were just hoping that they had kept the old one up just for history or whatever. But they just expanded the yard, the court, the playground lot and then come May we had we wrapped the maypole in the May Day. It was like everybody would come and everybody participated in that.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:22:51] And that was a school tradition?

Verdella Jennings [00:22:52] That was a school tradition.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:22:54] Could you talk about what that was exactly, what would happen?

Verdella Jennings [00:22:58] Every grade from the first to the eighth had to do a skit or had to do something in this performance. At the end of the year, we had to perform at the end of the year just before we got out for summer break. I remember when I was in the fifth grade I was in the band, Mr. Payne was my band teacher. He told us we had to play the old flute, the little flute that had those six buttons on it. We had to perform, we had to do a little march and we had to do that, and then we had to wait till our turn to do something. So that particular year we did, we played in the band. When we was in the sixth grade, we were able to wrap the maypole and that was amazing because we had to have on a white dress, we had to be dressed the way they wanted us to do, it was something just to look forward to as kids.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:23:52] Mm hmm. What were other traditions at the school that you remember or major events that would happen?

Verdella Jennings [00:24:01] All the Lyles Crouch, and I'm sure with Charles Houston, all the major events was something that they did every year. We had Black History, we did a big play for Christmas, we did something different for Valentine and Mother's Day. They would always do something to show us what to do or help us do our, make our Mother's Day cards and do what we needed to do with that. We didn't have gym until we got to high school but we also was able to play in the yard and to do pretty much everything. But going into the auditorium was just several occasions that we had to do for the big, when the principal wanted to do a big announcement, something that we needed to do, we needed to take this home or they getting ready to bring somebody in that was a guest speaker and we get to go to that. And then every day, like I said, if we didn't walk home, we'd go down in the cafeteria and you knew exactly where you're going to sit with, which friends you're going to sit with and we are still friends today, and I talked to them, some of them are still here, some of them are not, but we still are good friends.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:25:10] Mm hmm. Mm. You mentioned a lot of teachers. So, can you maybe share some specific memories with certain teachers?

Verdella Jennings [00:25:18] I can. Miss Finney was very strict. When we come in, you couldn't be late, and she would put her little ruler on the thing and then we would have to get up, we would have to do a pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America. Then after we did that, then we had to say the Lord's Prayer. Sometimes, if she think that we cutting up too much before school gets started, she would make you individual go up, and if you didn't know it, then you gonna stand there until you learn it. When I got to Miss Evelyn Johnson, she was a real short, little stern lady and she told the class, I don't want nobody writing on the blackboard until I mean, for, you know, for our lunch period, we were finished eating, everybody want to go back and put your name on the blackboard and just do whatever. So, we came in and we didn't know that she told us that we couldn't do that and we did that and we got in trouble. Big trouble. I mean, big trouble. But and Miss Barbara Thomas, they did a fashion show and my mother couldn't afford the dress, so she picked me and she bought, she made the dress. I kept the dress for the longest and as I grew up and

got out of Parker Gray, I mean started in Parker Gray, then I was totally grown. I went to a AKA fashion show and I saw Miss Thomas there, and I kept looking at her and she kept looking at me. She said, "Did you live on the South Side?" I said, "Yes, ma'am". She said, "Did you go to Lyles Crouch?" I said, "Yeah, that was the only school. Yes, ma'am", and she said, "You Verdella Strother?" I said, "Yes, ma'am", and I said "you must be Miss Thomas". She said, "I am", I said "Miss Thomas, I still have that dress that you made for me, for the fashion show". It was amazing. It was a little white dress, it had puffy sleeves and back then, wearing a crinoline slip was just like, oh, my god, that was it, you felt like you was walking down the runway in New York. But it was real cute.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:27:39] What's it like to remember it right now?

Verdella Jennings [00:27:44] The dress that I had on, not one kid today would wear it, because it wasn't revealing, it wasn't nothing like that. It was just a little dress with a white satin sash of a straight thing. The little sheer, little crinoline slip underneath of it, and it had a little puff sleeves right here, and that was real, and then in the back, they tied a big bow. Back then, the bows in the back of a dress or whatever was very popular. We don't know why, but we just wanted our bows to be back and want our bows to be pretty and patent leather shoes and that was it for us, and Easter we knew we won't get the patent leather shoes and the Shirley Temple curls. Did we want them? No, but anyhow it was good for us, and then we would be at our friends and we went to a meet and greet one day, and we got to talking about Easter today. The Shirley Temple curls, I said yes and the patent leather shoes with the white lace socks on them and we fell down and the good thing about that, the memories, was just amazing coming up. We didn't know that we were centered like that. We didn't know that, no one really got in no trouble and then we never heard the N-word, I'm sure they were using it but the areas that we were living in, we were just kids that just want to have fun and communicate with each other and we did that. There's some kids getting in trouble, they did. Did I get in trouble? Cause my mother said, if I come 5 to 10 minutes late, I did get in trouble. But it wasn't because I was trying to be, you know, arrogant toward my mother. No, I just played too long and didn't have a watch and I ran home as fast as I could, but other than that...

Parker Gray High School

Francesco De Salvatore [00:29:23] Yeah. So, what are your memories of Parker Gray? So, you went Lyles Crouch, and then you moved on, right?

Verdella Jennings [00:29:31] Going to Parker Gray was a nightmare for me. Because we knew I wasn't a north side kid, north side kid to me, was a little more advanced than the south side kids. They could do a little bit more than we could do, and we didn't know what a project was. Like, what are these houses, why are they all looking alike? We didn't know what they were until we grew up because we didn't, when we were able to come on the North Side, we came straight down King and made a right turn on Henry and went to the 300 block of North Henry, and that was my aunt. We went there on Sundays to Sunday dinner, and then we will walk from Lee to there, and my mother would catch a cab back and we would stay to like 7 or 8:00, and when we would go up, we only played in that one block. We couldn't cross the street, we couldn't go nowhere. We just played right there. But when we went to Parker Gray, we went up there, we saw hot dog stands. We saw some that. I mean, they just had everything. Queen Street, we crossed over Queen and I kept saying, what kind of street is this? Oh, my God. They had the movie theater. They had a lot of barbershops, they had beauty shops. They had a place where you can go get fried chicken and whatever. They had

another place down on within that corner on the left-hand side, they had a pool hall, all of that. I kept saying, they have all of this here on the South Side. We had nothing. So, you had to walk, then you matured as you walked each step when we crossed over and went to the north side. And going into Parker Gray, the guys was taller, bigger, and we were like 12, whatever, and was going in there and then I just felt lost, like scared to death, I mean completely scared because going into that, we didn't know what to expect and we tried to keep together but they broke you up in groups, according to maybe how smart you were or whatever. But it was just totally different, and then after the first year oh our gym teacher, Miss Ruby Johnson, she was really- she was our gym teacher, our Home Economics teacher. She was a woman of every trick and trade. She taught us everything, and she also taught us how to be a young lady with respect. Home Economics class, she taught us how to sew a button on, she showed us how we could handwash something. She showed us how to do a lot of things, but first and foremost, she showed us how to be respectful and ask questions and be polite. And then we had the gym class, we did the volleyball and we did the basketball and whatever. Our other teachers up there, to me, they wasn't as people friendly as the ones that we had in elementary school because you do, you stay in there for 2 hours and then you got to go to another class and then you got to go to another class when we got to Parker Gray. But when we was in elementary school you stayed in that one class all day and that's what we like. Then we got up there and we had to get used to going back and forth into another class, and because we still lived on the south side we had to walk or either we come down Madison Street and walk all the way to Washington Street and catch that bus to Franklin Street and then walk down and do it like that. But it was like, it was scary for the first six months and after that, we kind of blended in with the kids on the north side. The meet and greet start getting a little smoother, a little easier and stuff like, and then I joined the band with Mr. Arthur Dawkins, compared to his band instruction and Mr. Payne's on the south side, I played the B-flat clarinet. That was amazing. It was a little bit more jazzier, there was a little bit I mean, it was loud and the band was huge. And then after we did it that first year then the second year we were in the George Washington Parade, which came down Washington Street. Then that right there was like this, the light of our life. We was marching in the parade, the stuff you see on television you didn't think that you would ever do, and we did that for three, for two years. The third year, the band was really popular. So, this particular year we was on the corner of Pitt and Wilke, waiting for hours cause you got to come down Pitt, turn on Franklin, get to where the suburban cleaners was and when you turn that corner you are starting the parade and the parade went all the way up to where W (inaudible) and used to be and that's where I think T(inaudible) is now, up in that area. And this particular year they decided to put us last and it was so cold outside, some of the instruments froze and that was an all-black area at that time and some of the people brought us in and gave us some hot cocoa, hot chocolate, let us use the bath. We must have stood outside maybe an hour and a half or longer just to wait to go into the parade and then when we turned that corner and we got in there, everybody say here comes Parker Gray, we were behind the trash trucks and the fire department. And when you get to that point, it's over. So, we was behind that and everybody thought it was disgusting why we were the last, and they put us behind the fire trucks and whatever and they gave Parker Gray an apology in the paper, da da da da da. Then the word got out and everybody started coming, when we got up closer to King Street by J.C. Penney's, everybody came running, hey, we start to see our families and everything, that was good. But it was terrible. I mean, it was so bad.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:35:48] And it was just that year?

Verdella Jennings [00:35:51] That's the only year. After that, I didn't you know, I was only doing it for three years. After that, I don't know. But I don't think they did that, they made that mistake anymore.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:35:58] Yeah.

Verdella Jennings [00:35:59] No.

Influential teachers at Parker Gray High School

Francesco De Salvatore [00:36:00] Interesting. You talked a little bit about teachers. Are there any other memories with teachers from Parker Gray that you want to mention?

Verdella Jennings [00:36:08] Mr. Dawkins was very instrumental about what we was going to do and whatever, but Miss Johnson was real instrumental.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:36:18] Ruby Johnson?

Verdella Jennings [00:36:19] Ruby Johnson, uh huh. She was real good with us. She taught us how to be ladies, at least she tried and she taught us the difference between right and wrong. And you were, some people listened with an open ear, some people listen with a closed ear, depend on what you want to learn from what she was teaching you, and we would talk about it at lunch. We would do this and do that. When it was come time for gym, you had to wash your tennis shoes on Monday, your gym uniform better be washed, your shoestrings better be clean. I mean, it was total discipline. And if you didn't do it, she gonna send you or she gonna let you know that this will not be tolerated. So, you had to get yourself together, and we grew up. We knew what she expected. So, we had no problems with that. And the other teachers, I mean, they were good, but they wasn't as good as Mr. Dawkins made sure. Now I was good in marching band, but this Edward Hernandez. This guy was amazing. He could play almost every instrument and I played the clarinet. He could play the clarinet, he could play the saxophone, he could play the flute. He could do any woodwind. He could play it all. So marching band, we was real popular. But when it came to concert band, he was first chair and pretty much he would say you're in my chair cause I'm sitting on the end. He came back here about, say, five or six years ago. He moved to California and he did a lot with his music and it became very, very popular, made a couple of songs and brought him back and he was over to the Carlyle Club and all of us went over there and he played and we stood up. It was just so good to see him and when he got off the stage, I said, "You remember me?" He said, "I do". I said "You remember what you did to me?" He said, "I don't." His wife was with him. I said let me tell you what your husband did and she started laughing. I said "I couldn't sit in the first chair it was only he". He said, "man, I remember you." But the good thing about it, Mr. Dawkins was there to see him and he was able to talk about him, his experience and how good he was. He said, then we got to hear and see an oboe that was one of a rare instruments that wasn't even, wasn't being taught into our class, and Mr. Dawkins said if he was good with that, he could be excellent with the oboe. Gave him that, two weeks later, went to the top of that. So, he could sit here and it could be two, three, four instruments, he could just reach and grab and play and to do whatever and we brought him here, we singled him out and we was like, couldn't wait for him to bring him back. He was good.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:39:13] Yeah, that's cool. What were your favorite things of study at Parker Gray? Like what, or like where your favorite classes or subject matter?

Verdella Jennings [00:39:23] My favorite class was, like I said, Gym. The other ones, it was just a little bit boring, but we just went and sit in there. But when we got ready to go to learn how to type, I was really excited about that. How we going to type and don't look, how we're going to learn how to do that, do the keyboard and whatever, then we all challenge each other, who could do this, who could do that, and I'm typing and I'm looking, I'm hitting the air, I don't know what it is it but and then two or three weeks, then my a was an a and whatever so we really got that down pat to do what we needed to do so it worked out good.

School integration in the 1960s

Francesco De Salvatore [00:39:58] And you, so you graduated in the early 60s, right? And so, do you have any memories of integration at all? I know integration started...

Verdella Jennings [00:40:08] We did after we got in Parker Gray, we did. But like I say, it really wasn't harsh. Now, it could have been for some other kid, but we never ran into that, never. I never ran into nobody that, you know, no white kids, no kids calling us the N-word or, I never ran into it. Not to say that it wasn't out there.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:40:27] So what were your memories of integration during that period?

Verdella Jennings [00:40:32] As I got older and look back, it was a lot that we didn't know that existed. We didn't know, like I say, we didn't know we couldn't eat at the counter. We didn't know going up that way to go to a hot shop that we couldn't go inside, that we could still get the food that we wanted to get that we'd love to do. Then as we grow up, got older, we had two corner stores on Fairfax Street. Miss Annie was a little store that had the cookies, the pickles, the stuff like that across the street on that same corner was Mr. Trolley. Then he had fresh chickens and all of that and greens and all that stuff. These were corner stores where as people growing up now they have 7-Eleven but these was friendly stores that you could go in. Saturday we would get our quarter and we would go in there and Miss Annie we come to get our cookies she would say lay the money on a counter and just go get your cookies. We was children of color. They didn't say, get out and do it. They just told us to go get it. They knew that we wouldn't steal. They know that we wouldn't do anything and once a year, Judge Black, we had he would do a ice cream party and we got to go. I mean, they didn't single us out because of our color or whatever. Like I said, we didn't see a lot and we knew it. As we got older, we knew that was a lot. But my mother said they felt it because they were back in the 30s and 40s. They saw a lot when it came to getting a job. They couldn't get my mother, I think she had 6 or 7th grade education. She couldn't get a good job or whatever, so she had to have a couple of jobs to raise her 3 children. She saw it then but when we came up, it was still hard to get a decent job if you didn't have degrees or whatever but a lot of my friends went into the federal government and I didn't go into the federal government, I just went and got jobs and that that kept me going, so that worked for me.

Memories of her mother

Francesco De Salvatore [00:42:31] We haven't talked, I mean, you've mentioned your mom a little bit, but now I kind of want to talk about your mom, right? Because, so you grew up in a city. You

basically were raised by your mom and your grandmoms, right? And so, yeah, tell us who was your mom?

Verdella Jennings [00:42:46] My mother was an amazing woman that never- she gave up her life to give us everything. She wasn't a woman that went out to clubs. She wasn't the woman to do a lot of things. She made us be children. We had to get up on Saturday morning. She washed, we had to hang the clothes up on the line. We had to make sure we hung them the right way. The sheets on the outside and the clothes and stuff on the inside. She only allowed them to be out there until eleven o'clock. We had to take them down, fold them and bring them and then we could go and play. She was a woman, she wasn't there because she worked two jobs.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:43:23] Where did she work?

Verdella Jennings [00:43:24] One of them, she worked at Secretaries Hospital. Then she worked in another place called D and S Grocery down here in Bellevue.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:43:32] So wait you said she was a secretary at the hospital?

Verdella Jennings [00:43:36] No, she was a cook.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:43:37] She was a cook. She was a cook at the hospital? At the Alexandria Hospital?

Verdella Jennings [00:43:41] No, no. Secretaries Hospital.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:43:43] Oh, sorry, I missed that part.

Verdella Jennings [00:43:45] Privately owned Secretaries Hospital. In her early days, she worked at G.W. High School when it was all white.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:43:50] Right.

Verdella Jennings [00:43:51] In the kitchen. Then as we got older, she got a job at this private hospital called Secretaries. Secretaries was all white. People would fly here from California, whatever to have private things done, and nobody knew the area of where they was and whatever. So, the best kept secret was Secretaries hospital. I went there, I think I was a teenager, like 15 or 16. We went there to work for the summer. One of the black ladies worked in the operating room and she got cut. They wrapped her hand up, put some ice on it and sent her to Alexandria Hospital so they could do the stitching because they couldn't do it there at the hospital and we couldn't understand why they didn't when they say because it was an all-white hospital and they wasn't allowed to take care of people of color. Then working there that summer, I knew then that you're going to need an education, because if I was to do this like my mother for the rest of my life, I was going to jump off a bridge. That was hard work. I mean, you served a tray, you brought the trays down, you scrape and then you put in the dishwasher, you stacked the dishes up. But that was a lot of work for teenagers and I seen the women do it, they were older than me and I the same they standing on they feet cooking, peeling, getting this, doing this, lifting and I said no. That made you want to stay in school, that made you want to get some education to do whatever. But she was right there for us. I

made a mistake and I got pregnant and had a baby at 17. But she told me, don't worry about nothing. But I didn't want to do that and I knew I was a teenage mom and this in many ways the way she raised me up and I owned that responsibility. And I got a job and she helped me out. She showed me what I needed to do. I didn't know what to do with this baby. I didn't know what. It's just that what she taught me and the things that I learned from her helped me out a great and I was so appreciative that she loved me enough to hang in there with me, to help me, to guide me and put me on my way to adulthood. And doing that and she stayed there and she started doing the dinners and we moved up on the, finally moved on the north side like we've gone up here, like do these people go to sleep? It was just too much noise because we lived on a quiet street. Oh, it was just amazing. Then we got to know the people on the north side and then, and living was totally different. It was a faster pace, real fast paced out there.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:46:45] What was your mom's name?

Verdella Jennings [00:46:46] Lula. Lula Strother.

Family history and lessons learned from her mother

Francesco De Salvatore [00:46:49] And what's her family history that you know?

Verdella Jennings [00:46:53] Her family was-we never got to know our grandfather. My grandmother was part indian, she was, she was in 18-something, she was like a little slave girl and she got beat and she ran away and she ran to somewhere in...

Francesco De Salvatore [00:47:11] This is your grandmother?

Verdella Jennings [00:47:12] My mother's mother.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:47:14] Yeah.

Verdella Jennings [00:47:16] She ran somewhere, she said Fauquier County, but she didn't know Fauquier County. It could be Gainesville, it could have been Warrington, it could have been a whole lot of places. And then she grew up, she came here and we did a history. They had a couple of houses here in Alexandria, on Patrick Street, on Columbus Street. When before we were even born, I didn't know any of her sisters or we didn't know her mother. We didn't know anything and then as we grew up, my grandmother had six children. She had 1 son and she had 5 daughters and they none of them graduated, not one. My grandmother never even had 1st grade education. They had a lot of common sense and they could do a lot of things, and they kept everything going. And we don't understand how much my mother did the things that she did with the money that she made. When we got grown, I was 26, my brother was 27, and we was up there one Sunday for Sunday dinner. He held his head down and I saw a tear roll down and I said, "Well, what is wrong?", of course you know Miss Mouth. I said, "What is wrong with you now?" He said "look at this." And it was a paycheck, and we looked at the paycheck, who paycheck is this? He said "look at the other side." It was my mother's. She worked two weeks and she didn't even bring home \$100. We didn't miss a meal, we didn't miss Easter, Christmas, birthday. Everything was big. How did she do it? We don't know. She took care of three children. It was just amazing. She prepared us for the good. She prepared us for a struggle, how you can make it, what you can make it on. She prepared us. We didn't know that she was sick. She wouldn't even let us know that she was sick. When we found out

that she had lung cancer, she was going to the operating room and she had had it for two years. And the next day I said, "how could you do this?" She said, "Well, first I had to understand it. Secondly, I had to learn to deal with what I had." And I said, "But we are grown, and by you not having the education to understand what the doctor is telling you, should you have gotten a second opinion, should you have gotten anything?" I was really mad with the doctor and really wanted to punch him, but I didn't. And he said he went this was a (inaudible) I said you cut her open from here all the way round to her back and took that whole lung out. I said she wasn't treated, she didn't do chemotherapy, she didn't do radiation. But you opened her up, he said, "Because the cancer was spreading." I said "Of course it's going to spread, you didn't treat her." Then once he opened her up and seven days later, she died, and we held on to her way of doing things. But on a more educated side, we learn, I learned how to go to work, I learned how to prepare myself and to learn everything that I want to do in my job. Some jobs I didn't even know the job, but I had the opportunity to learn. Back then, they trained you how to do jobs. I was very mature to do, I had opportunities with jobs that I could travel, I could do a lot of things. I worked in, I was a receptionist, the lady said 6 months, she said, you two, we want you in the back. We want you to do membership, we want you to do that. They always wanted me to do something, but I had no experience in anything, but I learned. They trained me and I learned from that. And I was strong enough to understand, I was disciplined, to know that if you want to move here, you got to pay attention. You got to learn to experience it, you got to learn it, and then you can get it. And I had no problems and I had a lot of opportunities to do that. Where I am now, I work in administrative services and support service. What we do is support the needs of both airports, Ronald Reagan and Dulles. So, we, I had to learn how, they said we want you to do contracts. I knew nothing about contracts and didn't even know how to get it started. And the biggest thing was statement of work. The statement of work means, I'm gonna do a contract, I'm gonna get you to do my bit (inaudible). In there I had to put word for word what I expect from you and if you didn't do what you agreed to do, then I could fight you. But if I want you to do something and it wasn't in the contract, then I'm wrong. So, we had to make sure that the contract, now, I can do it in my sleep, then I could train somebody to do it. But the opportunities that I had, I got that really from my mother. To pay attention, look at what people are doing. Learn how to do things, be quiet, ask questions. Don't just sit back there and don't just do this for the rest of your life. Ask questions: what are you doing, how you doing it, why you doing it, and you doing this for what, and why you're doing it. That I asked the questions that I needed to ask. And then the job that I work for advertising agency and we got to travel, and then I work for a company called National Spa and Pool Institute Association. We really got to travel. So different companies, we wanted to go, I was in membership. We had to go all different states, wherever to get people to join our association for our standards. We had a person and we had a department that just did standards, to guidelines, how to, a diving board, 6-foot, 12-foot, 8 foot, how far the diving board could this and that and whatever. So, when we would go out and a person would ask us a question, we had to be very knowledgeable of the questions that they're going to ask and that is in the book that we are trying to sell them. So, I had no problem, I read it, learned it, could speak it word for word. So, I paid attention and I still do. And I still get opportunities to say, do you want to do this? You have a choice to say yea or nay. What I try to teach my children and that opportunities don't knock on the door, but opportunity is there at the door. It's a difference. So, I want y'all to be disciplined, I want you to understand what's going on and what you need to do. Figure out what you want to do first in life. Then you have to meet your goals, and so I didn't have any problems with that.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:54:02] And this all came from your mom?

Verdella Jennings [00:54:04] It came from my mom. It came from my mom; it came from on my mother's side because my mother was just a hard worker and I could just see that. On my father's side, my grandmother, they had a huge family. My grandmother on my father's side, her mother, that having the 19th child. That's my point. They lived back in the day; it was called Carroll Town. You might want to look it up. That, it was a whole lot of property back where Hayfield High School is, all up in there was called Carroll Town, and they owned all that property. And by being 18 or 19 kids and their family was all scattered and I think we only met about 8 and they did a whole thing there was one lady, her mother died and she wanted her mother's money out of the property and that's how they sold all their land. But back in the day, the history it's a church on Beulah Street. It was called Laurel Groves.

Verdella Jennings [00:55:14] It burned down. It was lightning burned it down, but next door to it was a school. They have all the history of Carroll Town, where they lived, what they did. Now all my family on my father's side is buried in the back of that church and even though they didn't rebuild the church but they're all there, that I can remember.

Memories of her father

Francesco De Salvatore [00:55:39] What was, so what was your father's name?

Verdella Jennings [00:55:43] Leo Jackson.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:55:45] Leo Jackson. And so, like, what do you have, I know he didn't live in the house with you, do you have memories with him, what was your?

Verdella Jennings [00:55:52] Oh sure. He was a man that, I have no idea, like when him and my mother was together, whatever, we was very, very, very, very small. But then as we got a little bit older and whatever he lived in the 400 block of Gibbon. Our elementary school was in the 500 block of Gibbon and when we would come down the hill, we would walk past his house every day. Some days he'd be out there, how y'all doing and we'd say, fine. I thought that was amazing. That's my dad, I'm telling everybody that's my dad and as we grew up, like ok, really. But then I got to know him, and as we got older, he knew the mistake but he had asked my mother to marry him, and she said no, and she knew the kind of life that she would have with him and that wasn't what she wanted. She said she can raise her children by herself, and she did. That with her choice when we were small, we didn't know. But as he got older and we got older we became friendlier. We didn't know what and why and what decision those two made. We didn't, we wasn't taught to have that hate on our heart that you ain't do nothing for me. We didn't do that. So, we brought him into our lives and he did a lot of things for me, and it's a lot, a couple of personal things I need him to do for me. And one of them was to bring me down the aisle when I got married and a couple of things that I needed him to, I was a Campfire Girl, I'll never forget it. The church on Fairfax Street, I think it was called the Presbyterian Church, it's a big church, and they had father and daughter banquet and I went and said I need you to come with, he said of course. I don't care what I asked him to do for me, he did it. Now, what choice between him and his mother, my mother, what they didn't do, how they didn't get along, whatever, that was on them. I couldn't hold him responsible and I didn't hold her. I knew I had a mother and I had a father, but I knew I had a mother that did everything for me and I had a father that made a lot of mistakes. Now did I want to keep that chip on my shoulder for the rest of my life and move on with hate in my heart? We didn't want to do that. So, when I needed

him, I went to him, he came to me, he did a lot of things for me. My brother needed him one time in life, he went to him, he did the same thing. So that's what I meant. And his mother and he had 1 sister, and we were real close that we would always go up to her house on, she lived on that 300 block of Payne right in front of Mount Juries (inaudible) were church, and we knew them well. So, it's not like we only saw them maybe once or twice. That's not true. We saw them as much as we could. And then as we grew up, we would always go out there to see her and do whatever we needed to do and she was like a little skinny, elegant lady.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:58:41] What was her name?

Verdella Jennings [00:58:42] Her name was Annie. Annie Jackson, and she would dress up in a suit every day, and she had this little pocketbook that she would have on her wrists and she would walk from Payne Street, the 300 block of Payne straight up Prince Street to Washington Street to catch the bus to go to Pennsylvania Avenue. And she was working in the government, but she didn't have a government job, she was cleaning. She wore her suit on the bus every day and she had a uniform she would put on and go clean the office building and go do this and do that and come back and fix dinner, she had two children. My father and his sister, her name was Bea Jackson. And I said "You working now?", "I work in the government." And that's what we knew and then as we got older, she told us what she did, and on Saturday we had to go. But she had what you called this, I forget what you call it, a little thing on her wall, what not. And we had to go in and take all of them things out, dust it, clean them and put it back in there maybe once a month. Like, when are we going to grow up? Cause they were stopping us from playing with our friends. But like I said, it was all good. I just think we had the best childhood, but like I said, we had to grow up to realize that we were poor.

Her mother's family history

Francesco De Salvatore [01:00:06] So you live with your mom and her mom, right? And so really quick, what was your grandmother's name?

Verdella Jennings [01:00:14] Vandelia. Vandelia Strother.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:00:16] Is that who you're named after?

Verdella Jennings [01:00:21] No, I'm Verdella. Her name was Vandelia Craig. Then she married, his name was Alfred Strother and we never got to meet him, and as we grew up we knew why because my grandmother was kind of bossy and crazy.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:00:34] And why did they move to Alexandria?

Verdella Jennings [01:00:36] We have no idea.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:00:38] Do you know when they did, what year?

Verdella Jennings [01:00:41] We did some history. Like her birthday was 18- when she died she was 89, and I think that was in 1980. And we knew no history of our grandfather, we didn't even see a picture of him. We know it's a lot of Strothers, there's a lot of history of Strothers in Gainesville and Warrington, a bunch. And my niece did, and she found our grandfather and they had a lot of property. I mean, a lot. Now, we knew nothing, we couldn't...

Francesco De Salvatore [01:01:25] So they owned this property? And how many properties?

Verdella Jennings [01:01:29] We don't know because we didn't, we didn't know them. When she looked it up, she found about a lot of that, but we wouldn't even know who to go to now to say we are the grandchildren of Alfred Strother, did he remarry, did he have other children, who was the cousins. So, we knew nothing about him. And that was the saddest part. We knew nothing about him. On my mother's side we knew everybody, but we didn't know nothing about my grandfather, and she had 2 sisters and they died before we were even born.

Move to the north side and birth of her son

Francesco De Salvatore [01:02:07] Okay. Really quick, when did you move to the north side? How old were you then?

Verdella Jennings [01:02:18] In 64. I think I was 17. 17 going on 18.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:02:22] That's when you got pregnant, right? So, as you were pregnant you moved to the north side? Okay. And so yeah, let's talk about that period of your life. So, like, walk us through, like...

Verdella Jennings [01:02:32] That period of my life would have been a nightmare listening to other people, and instead of making my own decisions and whatever, oh you need to do this, you know, I never wanted to be a follower. I wanted to be a leader. But I made a major mistake in my life, and I promised the Lord Jesus that I would never do it again and I met a guy that was a little bit more mature than I was, and, you know, he was a friend of my brother's and I thought he was safe and whatever. And we got into a relationship like, you know what are we doing, what are we doing this whatever, you know, and that overnight it was like, okay, what is wrong with my body, something is changing with my body. I didn't know what was going on. And I talked to my mother and then we went to the doctor right here on Washington Street and he said, well your daughter is 2 months pregnant, and I was, it was just unbelievable. I was more hurt than I was embarrassed because that was nothing that I wanted to do to my mother. My mother raised us and gave us the world and I didn't want her to raise me and then raise a grandchild. I just couldn't see that. Then as I had the baby and learned how to be a mother, I realized that I was not a teenager anymore, I was a mother. So that's when I quit school and I went and I got a job and then I went back to night school and graduate that way. But I made everything work like, I looked at my mother strive (inaudible) and goals for me, for us and I had to do the same thing for my child, and I didn't want to put a burden, put all that on my mother when I know that was my mistake. And I believe me, I learned from that mistake, and I didn't listen to anybody, I didn't know what to do. I didn't, you know, should he had done this, this done and whatever. No one never talked to me about sex, about this or whatever. So, when they was telling me this and I'm listening to it and I'm just like, what do I do, do I just follow the lead, do I do this, and I did. Then when I did that, I realized that that wasn't the way that my mother wanted me to be or wanted it to be. And then I realized and as we got older, a couple of my girlfriends, they did the same thing, we all did that. Back then, you couldn't go back to school if you were pregnant, you're classified as a mother. You're not classified as a teenager. Now today, they can go back. They even have a nursery in the schools if they need to bring the children down while they're still getting their education. It's a big, it's better now like we almost encouraging it. But I learned, I did this, my father came, he bought the crib, he gave me diaper service. He was there for

me. My mother was there for me. My aunts came and they showed me what to do, how to do it. And just like overnight, I was a mother. I just couldn't understand it. I didn't know what was going to go on in my body. What's going on, why do I look like this, what is it. I was just depressed until I had the baby. And then when I did that, then I realized and I heard him cry and I realized I just created a life. So that being said, I had to learn how to take care of this life.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:05:50] Let's talk about that moment. Yeah, that moment where you're like, I just created a life, what...

Verdella Jennings [01:05:57] It was like...

Francesco De Salvatore [01:05:57] What was that day?

Verdella Jennings [01:05:58] That day was October the 31st. Trick or treat. That's when he was born. And it was by being so naive. I was in the hospital and they put me in there, I went to the hospital in the ambulance. Like I had one pain. Like, what in the world? And I go there, there was a lady in the room with me, right here. I was in high school and the lady was 50 years old and she had a baby. I couldn't believe it. You know, her daughters was mad with her and they was talking back and forth. So, I was sleep and I had had like an infection so they stopped the contractions and gave, trying to clean up the infection and plus, I gained too much weight. You was only supposed to gain was it 20 pounds doing the whole pregnancy. I went from 110 to 203. Thank you. And my whole body just exploded. I got a 32 A bra to a 40 D. Like what in the, what is wrong, I just couldn't understand this body, expanding and it just kept expanding. And the lady next to me had her baby, she woke me up, she said, "Miss Strother?" I say "Yes", she said "The lady next to you just had her baby girl." I say, "Oh, so what did I have?" And that's how naive I was. Like she said you had nothing, you're still pregnant. So, I'm thinking, if I go to sleep, this baby is going to do something. You know, I just want this done. And then the next day then that was the nightmare. Oh, my God. It was just absolutely terrifying to me. This, that, I'm in there and then the doctor sitting there and you had nothing on and they in the middle and everybody touching and pulling and-oh. It was, that part was terrible. But other than that, I learned and realized that was what you had to do. And then I took a class afterwards. Constraints to keep from going into postpartum the constraints, what you can do to produce life. I went to, the class made me understand what to do, why you had to push and why they had to pull, why they had to do anything. So, I had to learn that. And again, then I had life and then I had to learn how to take it and I just kept stepping forward. And I just went into the real world and I didn't look back.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:08:27] What was it like when you first saw your son?

Verdella Jennings [01:08:31] It was amazing. He was 10 pounds, like, what in the world? And it was like a joy. I knew then I was a mother and I knew then that was I prepared to be one? No, I wasn't. But we grew up together, so it was good.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:08:45] What did that look like growing up together? What do you mean by that?

Verdella Jennings [01:08:49] The discipline. Like he was there, oh my mother just thought that he was it and sometimes I come home where is my child? And she had him, and she would do this and

my aunt would come by, and he had a godmother and everybody was in my life, in his life and it was fun. We grew up together and do whatever. Then I got married. I had a daughter and my daughter, my son's dead.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:09:13] I'm sorry.

Her son's death

Verdella Jennings [01:09:13] He had a brain tumor. He got into trouble and he made a lot of mistakes. And then he told me that mom I made too many mistakes, I said you did and it wasn't out of disrespect. He had some issues and some things he didn't want to talk about. But at the end, I did, me and him did get to sit down and talk.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:09:33] What was his name?

Verdella Jennings [01:09:34] Eric. Eric Strother. And he told me and he was 5 years older than my daughter, and he was very protective of her. But she was a child that I knew was going to make it. I mean, she didn't, she looked around at people, she was very standoffish and she was distant then (inaudible). And when she graduate, we moved to Burke and she graduated from Lake Braddock High School. And that was, she went to a totally predominantly white school. Lake Braddock was, the capacity was over 5000 kids and it was out of 5000 kids was only 167 black kids there. When we went to the school to register her they gave us a map. That's just how big the school was. Just to get to the principal's office. The principal's office wasn't on the 1st floor, they was on the 2nd, I mean the administrative office on the 2nd floor. So, she struggled like her last year. And I said, okay, if you struggling, you need help, then we can get a tutor but you are going to graduate. Trust me. My son, he did the same thing. He was so bad, me and Mr. Porter became best friends, and that's just how bad he was. Out there dancing and cutting up and acting just like he was it. And Mr. Porter came to his funeral and said "Miss Verdella?" I said, "What?" He said "This right here, Mr. Eric Strother was a challenge for me." I said "Every day of your life". He said "Yes he was", and I was happy for him to come. And I, well, I wanted him to speak, but we didn't ever sit down to say, this is what I wanted you to do. You know, first I had to adapt that he died and he didn't die here. We had to fly to the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota. And when we got there, I just prayed on the plane that when I get there, he still have some kind of life in his body so he know he wasn't dying alone and we were there for him. And we had 2 and 1/2 hours before he died, which that was fine with me.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:11:39] How old was he?

Verdella Jennings [01:11:44] I want to say he was, he would have been turning. I'm going to say it would have been turning 40. Now if he was living, he would be 58 or 59. Yeah.

Memories of her son

Francesco De Salvatore [01:12:02] What are some of your favorite memories of Eric?

Verdella Jennings [01:12:05] Everything. He was born with this hair, he had, he was very active. He was a little cutie pootie and everybody want him. He stayed in trouble. Every day I had to go up to school. They said, well, we're putting him in, they're going to send him home. I said y'all not going to send him home, y'all going to learn how to teach him. And every time he cut up in class he want y'all to send him to the after-school class or whatever, D Hall and he's not going in there,

you're going to learn to teach him. And one lady, it was in the 4th grade and one lady carried on that he was d (inaudible). She gave him all F's and he was real upset with that because he was right this time. He said, Mom, I did all my homework and everything was a C and a B. I said, okay, a B or C, I said, okay, so what's the problem? And now I got a F on that. And when I go up here and I'm going and talk to this teacher, is she wrong? I'm a beat you and kill you in front of teacher. You understand what I'm saying? He said, I'm ready, come on. I said, oh, ok come on. I went up there, call the principal and this was, I forgot what school this was on the north side. And I asked for the teacher to come down to the principal. The principal said "Can you explain to me what's going on?" I said, "Yes, I said teacher's name, I said, Eric is one of your students." She said "Yes." I said "You graded him an F in every subject." She said "I did." I said, "Okay, can you explain to me why?" And she said, "Because Eric is all over the place. Eric is doing this and Eric, Eric, Eric" and I said, "Okay." And so, the principal said "So where are we going with this?" I said "This is his notebook and if you look at from September to November, everything that he turned into her, everything in here is either a B or a C. So, with the math or the figuring that she could do to do the overall average with B's and C's there's no way it should have been a F or nothing. So, I need her to explain to me how she get this from this." Because he's all over the place, he doesn't. I said "That's discipline, ma'am. I'm talking about his grades. I'm talking about his education." Oh, she went on talking and screaming and hollering and I'm just looking at her. So, the principal looked at me and said "Ms. Jennings we're going to take care of this." I said, "Not before I leave or whatever discipline you're gonna do, I need to hear it now, and I'm going to make sure that any kids in her classroom that's all over the place, not being graded according to how she want to grade." So, she got fired. And did I want her to get fired? No, but I wanted her to understand that you can't discipline a kid like that. You need me to come up to the classroom, you need me to take care of this issue, I didn't have a problem. But I do have a problem when you do that and I said "Now see how easy that was Eric? All you had to do was are you coming to tell me," I took care of it. Now, you go over there and act crazy there one more time, then I'm coming to get you. And so, we just had a good, funny relationship. My mother died, and he went into total depression. He was the first grandchild, and he called her Googa. Her name was Lula and she went to the hospital and we didn't know she had cancer. And he thought she was coming home; he was ready to take care of her. And 7 days and I went home, I brought the family together, and I told him that she wasn't coming home. He said "She ain't coming home today, but she she'll be home tomorrow." I said "She died", and mentally I didn't know the strength of those words to him. How that meant he was in total depression. He couldn't, he didn't eat, he didn't care. Instead of him turning right he turned left. He went down a different road. He didn't care about his life. He didn't care what he did. One day he called me he said "Mama", I said "What?", he said "I don't know where I am." I said "Can you go to the corner, look at the green sign up there, tell me what street you're on, can you do that, and I'm coming to get you." We knew there was a problem. He started going out there, and he really broke my heart. He was doing drugs and whatever. And he went with this, I know you heard this guy, Tracy Fells. Tracy Fells was all over the news. He was an excellent football player; he was this and he was that. He turned down scholarships to stand on the corner to sell drugs. And my son, in some kind of way got hooked up with him and they all got 15 years. Tracy had 22 and they send my son to Wisconsin. I went to Wisconsin to see him and make sure that I'm a be in his life wherever he go. He left Wisconsin and they sent him to Colorado Springs. I went to Colorado Springs to let him know that I'm still here and to make sure you have anything that you need. He learned from his mistake was amazing. Then they sent him to somewhere in Pennsylvania, up the street from Lewisburg and the facility that they put him in was Martin facility, there wasn't facilities like Lewisburg or whatever. When he went to Wisconsin he was able to go to Wisconsin University

until- because at that time people was able to go in to be rehabilitated and he was able to do that. And then 2 years after that, then all the people decided they didn't want they taxpayers' money for prisoners to go to college. And then he started doing something, whatever. And then he came to Allenwood, Pennsylvania, and that was something like 3 hours from here. And we drove there like twice a month to see him. And we did that for a long time. And then they transferred him to Cumberland, Maryland. He was getting closer because his time was wearing down. And then I got this call and said that do you want your son, if something was to happen to him, do you want us to resuscitate? I can say sure. They never told me what was going on, and I hung up. So, a month later, they called me again. Say, would you, if something happened to your son do you want us to resuscitate? I said, this is the second time y'all called me, can you please explain to me what's going on? They said, Miss Jennings, your son is dying. I couldn't believe it. I just couldn't believe it. And then they said he had a tumor, and the tumor wouldn't stop growing. And if he had took the medication 8 years before it would have prevented all that. But then he turned into a Muslim while he was in prison, and he got with a group of people, you know, that protects you to do whatever, you know, and he wouldn't take the medication. Certain medications they don't take or whatever. And that was a choice he made. And then at the end, the tumor got much, much bigger where they couldn't control it. And it was too big to disturb the brain to go in there to get it. So, when I found out about it and I looked at my daughter, she knew. He made her promise not to tell me. Then I flew out the next day to the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota and we got to talk then. And he said, I said "You think you're going to be okay?" He said "I don't know." I said, "Why wouldn't you take the pills?" He said "Mom I just made so many mistakes, I said my grandmother died, I miss her so much, I didn't know what to do." So, with our conversation, he made this decision and he was okay with it. And wasn't nothing else I could do. Then 2 weeks later, it was October. 2 weeks, almost a month later. Then we got a call and the lady asked us when were we planning to come. It was Columbus Day, so we were going to go for the long weekend to be out there, stay out there the 4 days. And she said, no, you need to come now. And that was October, when we flew out there it was October the 1st. And when we got there, we only stayed with him 2 hours and he died. And we brought him back here, and that was it.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:20:34] What were those last 2 hours like?

Verdella Jennings [01:20:36] It was amazing. When he heard our voice, tears just rolled down his eyes and he was in a semi coma. He couldn't talk to us, but we talked to him. And I wanted him to know all of us was there. We held his hand and we just talked about him and talked about the things that he did. All of us just went back and forth and did everything. And then when we realized he had already taken his last breath and we were there, it was like, oh my God, I'm so happy that I gave you life and I was able to see your last breath. And that was good for me, and I was okay with that. But people make their own choices. I mean, it was painful, but it wasn't where I'm falling down, screaming, and I didn't know or he got shot or anything like that. I was able to talk to him and we talked about it 2 weeks before he died. And could I, did I wish I could change it? I do, but I knew I couldn't. So, everybody have choices in life, he just made some bad ones and he learned to live with it and nothing else I could do. And we brought him back here and all his friends came. I mean, it was packed. I mean, people were coming from everywhere. And that really made me feel good. All these friends and good ones, the bad ones, everybody was there. And we couldn't have it in a church because he was Muslim and I couldn't have it in a mosque because he had been embalmed. They had to embalm him to fly him and I could've had it in Minnesota. I didn't want my child's body up there. I still want him to come back home, dead or alive. So that's what we did. But like I say, we got

to, we got used to it. And then he died October the 1st. He only had 2 more months in jail. And he died and we got used to it. And then his birthday, we would talk about it. We still celebrate his birthday, we have a cupcake, or we would go somewhere and my daughter say, Mom, you wanna go somewhere? I say, no, but I want my cupcake. And he had a son, and the son grew up. We took him, he was was real small. We took him every time we would go but I didn't take him when we had to fly to Minnesota or fly to Wisconsin or fly to Colorado so we didn't take him, but when he came closer, Alanwood we took him up. That was the longest place he stayed, and we took him every time we went. And then he got a little older and he got to really see his father, understand this was my father. And then he got, went to Cumberland and we took him there too. But then he didn't stay in Cumberland that long before they had the flicker (inaudible). He called me one day he said, "Mom", I said "What?", he said, "Guess where I am?" I said "It better be in Cumberland. So, tell me if it's somewhere else I'm gonna punch you in your head." He said, "Mom, I'm in the Mayo Clinic" and he still didn't tell me he was dying. So then when I found out then we went out there, me and my daughter, and we spend 2 days there, and then I'm thinking he's getting better and they're still lying to me. And 2 weeks later, 2 weeks after that, then we, I realized that he was dying and then that was it.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:23:56] What's it like recalling all these memories about your son?

Caring for her father in his final days

Verdella Jennings [01:23:59] It's good. It's good living the memories of love that I had for my mother. I sit with my father until he died. I didn't hold a grudge on him. He called me. I put him in a nursing home and he cried. I said what are you crying for? He was, him and his wife, they put him in the hospital on a Friday. He had a defibrillator here and a pacemaker here because he couldn't stop eating that food, that junk food, so they put him in hospital. So, the next day, he lived right there in the 400 block of Gibbon and I went down there and cause he was a diabetic I had to go get this certain razors he had to use for his face. And I talked to his wife and she said, you got to take this up there to him, I did and while I was at his house, a phone, the phone rang. So, she answered the phone and then she gave me the phone. I said okay, I said hello. And it was her doctor telling me that I got to get her to the emergency room now they just put him in on a Friday and that Saturday she went in and lo and behold we knew neither one of them was coming home. And then he stayed in there, he wouldn't do right. He was so frail, he was like 6-7" but he was real frail so they wanted to take him, put him in in a nursing home to do therapy and they want to strengthen his bones and so he could eat some more food to do this. So, I put him I say, I'm gonna put you in a nursing home and so you could do the therapy and then you be in there about 3 weeks. All right. She had cancer of the liver but she outlived him.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:25:49] Mm hmm.

Verdella Jennings [01:25:50] He lost his will to live. He said how long am I going to be in here, I said until you learn how to do this therapy and strengthen your bone, why I put your butt in here. My cousin was with me every day, and she was a minister. And we would laugh and talk. And so, we went in there one day he was having a pity party. And I said, "Why are you crying today?" I kept saying ooh, real tears. And he said "Well if I could do it all over again". I say "If we all had an eraser in our life we would erase the bad part out. But sometimes you live with the bad part, you can get stronger going forward." I said, I knew I could do that (inaudible). I said, "Look, okay, wipe your eyes and let me tell you what you did for me." Oh, he wiped his eye, he sat up in the bed like that. I

said, "You know what you did for me?" He said, I said "Remember when I came to you with that issue that so and so was bothering me, you went and took care of it." He said Yeah." "Remember when I came to ask you to do, come to the father daughter banquet with me?" He said "Yeah." I said, "Remember when I came up there and asked you to walk me down the aisle and you did?" He said "Yeah." "But you know the main thing you did for me?" He said "No." I said "You gave me life. So, since you gave me life, I'm gonna be in your life for the rest of your life. So, stop crying and enjoy your life." And then...

Francesco De Salvatore [01:27:06] Mm hmm.

Verdella Jennings [01:27:08] They put a p (inaudible) on him. And pretty boy didn't want that. He tried to climb out, he kept pushing the buzzer, pushing the buzzer at night, climb out the bed. And he couldn't do it. And he fell and didn't know that they only had 2 people there. And they gave him a sleep pill at 8:30, I guess they thought he was going to be sleep. And I went up there, they call me 4:30 in the morning, I kept saying, why did he fall down? I said, I'm just going to get on the mountain (inaudible) and he ain't be ready for me. And so, they told me the next day that he wasn't doing good in therapy. He didn't want to do therapy. He wasn't striving for no goals in therapy. So, he said we're gonna have to put him in long care. I said, are you serious? I kept saying to myself, how am I going to explain this? You're going in for therapy and you will stay here, you can't go back. Can't you live with me? No. So he got to the point where he didn't care. His whole will to live was done. And they call me 5:30 in the morning. I ran to the hospital. I tried to call my sister, I tried to call my brother. Nobody answered. So, I was there with him by myself again and I held his hand. He said, you know, don't put me in no ground and don't do this and don't do that. I said, look, I'm doing exactly what you want me to do. And so, I did it. So, did I feel good? I did. Was I mad with him because he wasn't the father, he wasn't there to take care of. That didn't bother me at all. As I got older, everybody have choices whether they're good or bad, what reason he didn't do, why my mother didn't want to marry him or why that wasn't my place to even ask, they understood it. As I grew up I had to get my life and either I want to put him in it or keep him out. I put him in, I didn't have a problem with that.

Marriage and divorce

Francesco De Salvatore [01:29:04] And so during all these moments, you're always living in Alexandria, right?

Verdella Jennings [01:29:09] Well, no. When I got married, I moved to Burke. I moved to Burke, we was out there, I think, were about 3 years, maybe 4. Then I moved back and I got a divorce.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:29:19] When did you move back? When did you move back to Alexandria?

Verdella Jennings [01:29:23] Oh, my God. Let me see. What year was that? Oh, my God. I moved back. We stayed in Montebello. We were the first, that first building they built. We was in Monte, we got married in 73. My mother died in 82. So that had to have been between 79 and 80 when we moved back.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:29:45] And so describe what was 1980 Alexandria?

Verdella Jennings [01:29:50] Oh, it was, it we were grown and we were ready. I was mature. I was, I can handle a lot of things. I had a good job. Me and my husband had a lot of differences and we had been married for 20 some years and it just wasn't for me. He did things I didn't like, I guess I did things he didn't like and whatever. So, I just asked for the divorce. He didn't ask for it, I wanted the divorce. Was I happy with that decision, I wasn't. I wanted to be married for the rest of my life, but I couldn't take the way that our marriage was going. He wound up being the alcoholic and he gambled and we made money, he was a top executive for this print company, and he had clients like Washingtonian magazine. He had big clients. 4 times a week, we are going to black ties with the President Reagan, President Ford, Jim Brady, the one that got shot, Jimmy Carter. We went to all kinds of benefits, we was on the V.P. status at the African-American Smithsonian Institute. We got to do a lot of things with them, found out what the deal (inaudible) was. We could do a lot of thing within his job, but he loved gambling and sometimes I just look back and I don't know if I may wake up and my car is gone or I'm gonna come home from work there's a padlock on the door. It was just a nightmare. It wasn't getting any better and I didn't want to work hard and everything going down the drain. I realized that this is your love. This is what you want to do with your life. You entitled to enjoy your life the way you want to do, whether it's right or wrong. But it's not for me, so I paid for the divorce. Whether that was good or whether that was bad. I wanted my life back and I didn't want to wait till he come home and wait till he was drunk or discover (inaudible) I wanted to be happy, and I wasn't, and staying with him and on Monday we could talk, on Tuesday we could talk, Thursday we'd go to bed, Friday he'd go to work, he'd come home Sunday. On Monday morning, he done lost all this money. He did this, you know, drank and then he come home getting ready to go to work on Monday. And that went on for a while and it wasn't for me. So, we divorced and I came back and I learned how to be very, very independent, take care of myself and my daughter. My son was grown at that time and then my daughter got out of school and she got a good job. And my daughter, oh my God, this girl here, she had a good job and she's been having powerful jobs all her life. Now she works 2 jobs. She works for the D.C. government, I.T. She was the head person at some software that she do that is powerful and now she works for Disney. All 5 of them. So, her salary alone is amazing and she doesn't have the time. She only had to come outside (inaudible) because she can, she's on she does the database for both of them and Disney has 5 different locations. Even the one in Paris was the one that was a nightmare and working with D.C. government. You talk about the police, the fire and all the D.C. government people and all of that. So, the database for all of that was amazing too. So, whatever this particular software is, she get called all day and you can come, you can tell me what the salary you want. You could do this community college, universities and stuff, what is this software little girl, I don't know, but she's very strong. Very. She remind me of me. She's very independent. She's married. She decided she didn't want to have any children. She's a kind hearted person. She would give you everything and so, like I said, when we have my niece and her daughter and that's her goddaughter, so she done got from Apple watches to laptop, decide, decide, decide whatever she want and we all had that net around us. My niece, my daughter and my nephew they're me and my sister's children. So, they take care of us now. So right now, me and my sister's very fortunate. Whatever we need or want, they're there for us. Right now, I don't need anything cause I'm still independent. My sister needs a lot of help because she had 2 brain surgeries, mild heart attack, epilepsy. She has a lot of problems and so her daughter and her son is taking care of her.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:34:48] She's your older sister or younger?

Verdella Jennings [01:34:50] Younger but she looks older because she let herself go and right now she's in Michigan and we drove her up 3 weeks ago because she can't fly and she'll be there to the end of July, then her son bring her back. And then we can't let her go to Michigan in September, October, November, December because you may not come back because it's just that much snow. It was snowing when we took her, it was snowing while we were there, so we laughed about that. But it's what they want.

Alexandria in the 1980s

Francesco De Salvatore [01:35:23] So when you came back in the 1980s, where did you live in Alexandria with your kids?

Verdella Jennings [01:35:30] I lived on, we lived on, I went back to Montebello.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:35:35] Oh, okay.

Verdella Jennings [01:35:36] I rented a condo there for like 5 years and then from there, I wanted I said I wanted to buy one but I'm grateful I didn't do that, though. Then my daughter bought a house in Mount Vernon.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:35:49] Okay.

Verdella Jennings [01:35:50] And she renovated herself and did what she wanted to do. Said Mother, I want you to come stay here, I said I ain't staying here, I ain't ready to get underneath of your rules, not yet. So, I stayed I just had an apartment, I went from in Montebello the lady wanted to sell it. So, I moved into, I think I went to City Side and stayed there for a long, long, long time and then the management got real crazy. So, then I moved. Right now, I'm living in the Courts of Huntington.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:36:22] So what was Alexandria I mean, like in the 1980s? Can you describe?

Verdella Jennings [01:36:26] It was, it was, it was..

Francesco De Salvatore [01:36:28] What was it like?

Verdella Jennings [01:36:29] It was getting populated. A lot of people was coming in. Just the waterfront was totally different, restaurants and everybody was popular. It was so much an old town compared to when we was a kid, wasn't nothing down there then when we went down there, in the 80s and whenever the things was changing, we had McDonalds, Roy Rogers, we had all this stuff on King Street. We had stores, that Lady Lois Robertson, Lerner's, Haines, I mean, Horn's, J.C. Penney was the big popular store. Then if we accidentally go all the way up Washington Street, pass here the big wooden loafer (inaudible) setting right there it was like that was like the kingdom come there because Woodland and L (inaudible) at that time, they didn't have the Landmark. So, when Landmark came with the 7 store the main they had a little first business credit card Landmark, Riley's, Hecht's, Woody's. It was 7 stores underneath of that umbrella that was the first credit card and you start seeing a major change we had a mall. Then the Ellington Hospital moved from Duke Street to where it is now. That changed with the population was getting bigger and the George

Mason Hotel closed down. Then they put the post office in and then they had stores all beside that. Then I saw where the post office changed right there on Prince and Washington Street and turned that into a federal courthouse. The chains had started to come. More and more people was coming into Old Town because it was more restaurants down on the waterfront, more restaurants coming up King Street from the water on up. You start seeing development. You start seeing restructure. When we was coming up on Christmas, the decoration went across the street like this, at the corner in the middle, at the corner. It went from Washington Street all the way to the Masonic Temple. Now from the Masonic Temple, all the way to the water, you see all the lights in the trees and it's like that every day, you don't have to wait for Christmas. And the difference is that people celebrate to pretty much every day. We you could, I saw growth. Suburban Cleaners was really heavy and populated. I saw where Balducci's was, that used to be the Acme Market. I saw it first came out called Southern Gourmet. We saw where the restaurants I mean, the grocery stores was popular. You could taste the stuff before you buy. We saw a major difference. Then Southern Gourmet turned into a major store that's across the world. Balducci's, that was popular and that they catered, they did everything. I saw in Washington Street where they had the graveyard, and then they turned it into a service station. Then I lived long enough to see that we got it back. That was amazing. On Washington Street itself, they didn't have no restaurant on the corner of Jefferson and Washington, it was a little corner store called D and S Groceries. Now, they have three restaurants there they used to have Williams and Sonoma, and then they got the hardware store, F (inaudible) and they got M&T bank right there. That 1 block had nothing. Now we see that those people that lived there right now, they can just walk a street and get something to eat. I mean, everything now is walkable and we didn't have that when we was coming up. So, the growth now is amazing. The growth is just not for people making money, it's for convenience. Old Town now is a place where you can just park and walk. They got restaurants in the middle of the block. They got restaurant on the north side, on the south side, so you can pretty much do, it's more, to me, it's becoming more people friendly, but you still see where now Old Town, it's more white, if it's not all white and everything down there where Ford's Landing is. That used to be the big government now, now that's Ford Landing and that started at a mil when they first built that. No telling what the price is now. The houses is amazing. We drove through there like, wow, I could see standing up on Lee Street hill sliding down and snow going into the gum (inaudible). They would open the gate at 4 and then I'm looking at all these beautiful houses and everything. And if I go down to Union Street and turn left, it used to be the Exxon refinery down there at the gas big things before I got to the ah to the playground now all of that is beautiful homes, not houses, beautiful homes where people can walk and do what they want to do. I'm thinking now they want to make everything in Alexandria people friendly, people can walk to and do what they want to do. People can do whatever, whatever they choose to or not. And I think you can do a lot if you want to. It's a lot of opportunities here, like it is pretty much everywhere. I mean, if you want to go to college and do, you can do that, but you still can get something good with your high school diploma. I'm proof of that. It's all in what you want and where you want to go.

Working at Chinquapin and Charles Houston

Francesco De Salvatore [01:41:59] And when did you start working at Charles Houston?

Verdella Jennings [01:42:02] At first I start working at Chinquapin.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:42:04] Okay. So, yeah, maybe, like, walk us through.

Verdella Jennings [01:42:07] I start working at Chinquapin that was in the 90s and Cheryl Lawrence was the manager of the pool. She called me and said, I need your help, do you want a part time job? I said, absolutely not and so she laughs, she said just come up, just come up, just come up there. I said and why do you need me? She said, I need you, I need someone strong at the front desk. I said who is Chinquapin and what is Chinquapin? And then when I got there, she left, right, and so it was a lady up there called Elsie Akingbola. I said is Cheryl Lawrence here? She said, no, I said but she told me to get here at five, she said and you are? I said I'm Verdella Jennings. She said, oh, so you're Verdella Jennings? I said, yeah. She said, let me give you a tour. I kept saying a tour? So, she gave it to us at the facilities and outside, I kept saying now what am I getting into? And this was, I went along with it so I said this is really nice and looked at the sauna beautiful and they had a lot of equipment downstairs, they had a lot of classes. And she said, well, you can start work now. I said to myself, now how can I start working? I don't know what I'm doing. I ain't been interviewed. I guess my interview was touring. So, I said well, let me talk to Cheryl and let me find out what's going on. And she was ran according to my God, my soul (inaudible). And she started laughing, she said I know you was coming. I said I'ma kill you. So, she said, I said what's going on? She said I need somebody strong at the front, that I needed to be a greeter, I want somebody to do whatever and with 2 other gentleman and the lady, one was in charge of the weight rooms and whatever, and I forgot the other lady's name and they was in charge of program, in program. So, they came into, they started doing a triathlon.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:44:03] Hmm.

Verdella Jennings [01:44:04] And that was amazing. They must had 200 or 300 people doing it. And they started like 5:00 in the morning. They would do the race, do the bike and do the lap swimming. And that was really powerful. Then they started doing more classes. Then they had a class in there called the Master Swim. They got so many people to come to do that with something then was very competitive and then while I was at Chinquapin, all the lifeguards would do competition with another lifeguard and another and that was competitive. So, it worked out really good. Then she got the opportunity to be the director of Charles Houston, and she said, well I want you to come with me. I said, I didn't want a job. Now I'm going from this to Charles Houston. I've been here all my life and I went into Charles Houston, like what in the world is this? No discipline, no order. I said what is this? She said that's why you're here. I said oh. So, I talked to the other people.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:45:09] What do you mean? What do you mean by there's no order?

Verdella Jennings [01:45:12] It was in the total project area and the children just came across the street to do and this was supposed to be where the kids 12 and under were supposed to leave at 6. Teenagers were supposed to come from 6 to 8. The adults was supposed to come in from 8 to 10. The children from 12 to 6 would come back with the teenagers, see what I'm saying, so they never left. So then from 8 to 10, the adults maybe bring back the teenagers. So, we didn't have no order. So, Cheryl say I'm gonna change all of that and we're going to do this, we're going to do that, and da da da da and then we start having meeting and I kept saying, doing that (inaudible), what I gotta do, how I got to do it. I'm coming from one job because I'm working for an advertising agent with pumps, in pumps and dress up and then I'm coming here and they don't have uniforms, anything. So, I'm working in heels and a skirt or blazer or whatever, and then program, I learned how to program. I had to learn overnight, this is the program we're going to do, this is the activity we want

to children to do, da da da da da. I kept saying, okay, we got this down pat and then an opportunity came that I could be a higher grade if I-they had a position at Mount Vernon Rec. So, I got that as a rec leader 3, I went up there. Their center was totally different. It was more mom-and-pop center where they bring to drop the kids off, the after-school program was a little bit different. They had afternoon snacks for the kids. You go in the gym or you go into the arts and crafts room or you go into the multi-purpose room. You had different places to carry (inaudible), different age group with it, this is what you. We had to write our program plan up every day, we're going to do this and I didn't have to do that at Charles Houston. But after she got up there then we had to do all that. We had to do program to stuff like that. Then Mount Vernon was totally renovated. So that's when I went to Mount Vernon and stayed there. I stayed there maybe 3 to 4 years. It was really nice. Mark Hubler was a director there, then Sheila Whiting. Mike quit, and then Sheila Whiting became the center director at Mount Vernon, and she was a programmer to no end, and we had to really- we were here, she was way up here with program, you're going to do this and that and da da da da da. We learned so much from her, it was almost scary. She was like whipping it out. So, then Charles Houston was being renovated to the center that it is, and then Mr. Gray was the director of that. Then I think he got sick and then I we didn't know Ms. Sheila had interviewed for the position. Then it was the article in the paper, the brand-new rec facility, Sheila Whiting will be the center director. We all turned around and said Sheila who and then we got that job and then we went in there and started doing the thing. Oh, it was amazing going in there, the new facility and we was working with a different kind of community. After the center was open 2 years or 3 years later, then that's when they tore down 5 square blocks of the projects and they brought in the diverse and they was coming in, doing whatever. Then they saw we were there, how the operation was and then we had to bring the boxing ring. That was historical because a guy did the boxing ring, he kept...

Francesco De Salvatore [01:48:50] Who was it?

Verdella Jennings [01:48:51] Fred Smith, and he was there when over it and then he hooked up with a guy named Joe Roberts. He was a billionaire, and what he did was help Fred fund a lot of things. And then they built an addition onto the old Charles Houston, was just the boxing club over there. So, if the rec center closed at 10, they could stay open because they wasn't part of the facility. He had got that from the city. So then when they restructure everything, then they brought them back into Charles Houston under our rules and guidelines and then he died. Fred died and then Joe Roberts died. So, then the money that- he still left money in his will and through Fight for Kids and they ran the box center and did what they needed to do. And the programs came and then they did, what, 5 years ago, 7 years ago, they had one guy went all the way to the Olympics and came back as was it silver or bronze? I think it was the silver. And they got really, really popular, then people was coming from DC and Maryland to be trained and do whatever. So since then, they had 2 more kids to go to the Olympics to do whatever so they turned out to be pretty good.

Memorable programs at Charles Houston

Francesco De Salvatore [01:50:12] So what was programming, during your time with recreation what was programing that you're most proud of?

Verdella Jennings [01:50:18] The program that we was most proud of, we hooked up with The Untouchables. That was about Theodore, Theodore Jones and it was called un (inaudible)- him and Chucky. And we had our teenagers, and so I wanted to do a program with them so what we did was well they used to do the thing on Sunday, they had a table here, a table here, and we would do

competition where we would do sports, but we'd do whoever rhymed about it could get the answers, we did that. Then they didn't know anything about Charles Houston so we did a black history program on Charles Houston. So, we wanted the children to know who Charles Houston was and why this recreation center, elementary school was named after him. Then we got our children involved in it, into the history, into our programs. Then Mr. Priestley was over top of AHA so he did a thing called Winter Wonderland and he would convert our whole gym into, it was amazing how it was decorated for Christmas and whatever. And then one night, like maybe about 4 days before Christmas or whatever, everybody got to line up. I mean the line would be past the center, down the street and around the corner. They could come in and go in, toys would be everywhere and they would even replenish the toys. And that was popular. And then that Monday, we had Mr. Ewell, Mayor Ewell come in and he would do, he would read them a story with afternoon like cookies and stuff and stuff like that, we made it, we joined in with them with the, with one of the programs. And then the next year we bought the bell chime ringers from Alfred (inaudible) Street Baptist Church joined in. So, they tried to get everybody in the community to understand what this was all about. It was amazing. And then they had somebody donated 8 bikes. They didn't know what to do with them. I said what you should do with them not first come, first serve, that's gonna be a fight. Do a drawing to make sure whoever get it fair and square, then you know, whoever gonna come for, they might spend the night at the doorstep so they could be the first to get a bicycle. But they did something powerful when they had so many toys left over and they would put them in storage for the next year and it got big and big and bigger. Then we hooked up with Willie Bailey. Willie Bailey was a fire chief from Fairfax County. So, he start coming up and he start donating backpacks, and then he started working with the black barbers. So, they would come into Charles Houston a week before school opened up, got the free haircuts and then they would get a backpack according to their age, and it would be full of supplies that they would need to get started, and that went on for about 4 or 5 years and then they hooked up with what's the guy from here that played football?

Francesco De Salvatore [01:53:23] I can't think of his name.

Verdella Jennings [01:53:24] But he um...

Francesco De Salvatore [01:53:25] Nixon or?

Verdella Jennings [01:53:28] Name was on the tip of, I'll think of a minute and he.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:53:31] He played for Kansas City?

Verdella Jennings [01:53:32] Uh huh, he joined in with the group and he started bringing tennis shoes in, in all sizes for elementary kids, he didn't do for the teenagers cause that would have been like they don't want them kind of tennis shoe. So, the families came in, they could get a free haircut, they got backpacks, they could go over there and picked their tennis shoe and it made it people friendly and everybody was around and they did everything. Then one year, Miss Sheila, we did Thanksgiving dinners. So, we had some churches do a table, some did potatoes and string beans, some did onions and peppers and some did cornbread and bread and some did turkeys and some did ham. So, they could go around and get some of everything to have a whole dinner. And we did all of that. So, the programming was amazing. All somebody said, I want to do this, this is whatever. And we also had an outstanding senior program. They would come in; they would have Meals on

Wheels to bring them their breakfast. They would stay there to do some kind of program, some kind of arts and crafts. They also had the gym in the morning. Some of them could walk around the gym as much as they could or to do whatever they wanted. They had a bus just for them, the bus of aging. They would go by, pick them up if they couldn't walk there or somebody didn't drop them off or they couldn't drive. So that program went over very well and that was there for a long time until I would say 2 years ago. Vanessa Green retired, and do they still have it, probably. But I don't know the, who the new leader would be.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:55:03] That's great. Um, I didn't ask you questions about Douglas Cemetery.

Verdella Jennings [01:55:10] Douglas is not the cemetery that I have family in.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:55:14] It's not Douglas, is it not? Okay.

Verdella Jennings [01:55:18] I have family in Penny Hill and Union. It's some Strothers that's in Douglas. So, I don't know if they my family or not and we tried to do the ancestry with those and right now, we don't know. But we do know we did find 5 extra Strothers that was buried in Union that we had not a clue of, but Douglas is, there's is 2 Strothers there. But we don't know if they kin to us or not. So, we claim them but we don't know if they are, if they are our relatives or not.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:55:52] Okay. Yeah we don't have to talk about Douglas then. Um, so before I close, I have, like some closing questions. Is there anything I haven't asked you that you want to share?

Verdella Jennings [01:56:04] I think you've covered everything.

Most important life lessons

Francesco De Salvatore [01:56:05] I've covered it all. Yeah. And so just some closing questions. So, um, what are some of the most important lessons you've learned in your life?

Verdella Jennings [01:56:15] I learned to, I learned to think before I leap. Before I get involved in anything, I wanted to find out when I'm getting involved with, I need to understand, is this what I want to do? I always wanted to be independent on the way I wanted to do anything and I learned that from my mother.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:56:38] Mm hmm.

Verdella Jennings [01:56:39] And when I, you know, you just want to befriend people for who they are and not what you think they should be and so I just wanted to do that. That's most important to me.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:56:50] And how do you want to be remembered?

Verdella Jennings [01:56:52] I just want to be remembered as a helping hand. If you need help, I'm there. I was real strict with the kids up there at Charles Houston. I see them all now, Miss Verdella, Miss Verdella. Some of them came cause they had the big thing up here the other day and 2 of them

walked up and said thank you. I said oh so now you're gonna say thank me, first you wanted to kill me. Miss Verdella you were strict, you were strict, I mean, you didn't play with us. And that right there meant a lot to me. I said I was strict with y'all because you had teenage mothers and nobody was guiding y'all to do the right thing, y'all was more followers than leaders. To me, I didn't think y'all were gonna get the opportunity to live the life you should be living instead of living the life somebody is telling you to do. And that's why I was strict. Was I too strict? Probably. But I thought, I lost my son, I didn't want to see y'all getting caught up in something that you, you wouldn't been able to turn right or left for, you're gonna let somebody tell you what to do, when to do it, how to do it. You want to make that decision do you want to do it. So, was I hard on you? I was. Would I do it again? I will. And they told me thank you. So, I had more people to tell me, especially when I go to the barbershop. Oh, here she come. Where's your ruler? Can I sit down? I ain't scared of you now Miss Verdella, oh bring it, just bring it. So, all them now is really friendly, and they do, they did appreciate it, and they have said it and that part made me feel good.

Hopes for the next generations

Francesco De Salvatore [01:58:21] What do you hope for the future? I guess, in this case for your daughter, since she's your only remaining child.

Verdella Jennings [01:58:30] My daughter. I just think that my daughter is doing so well. She's very prosperous. She have enough revenue to last her. She doesn't spend money. She spent her money wisely. She makes very good decisions and I just want her to be happily ever after with the things that she's doing. I want her to reach out a little bit more. I want her to be a little more outward, to come out, come from behind the computers. So, I want you to enjoy the, all this money that you're making and I want you to come out and do. I wanted her to come with me today and I wanted her to see, I want her just to be able to voice her opinion on how she felt like growing up with me mother. But I'm looking at her then I have a niece that I call her my booby girl and she surprised me. She left and went to North Carolina. I mean Columbia, North Carolina State. She went down there, straight-A student, went in, president of the Deltas and president and then she became an AP. They had her over top of dorm. Soon as she got through the door, she reminded me of me and I said, what you say? Auntie I got this, I got. I said okay. She called every other night; I'm doing this and I'm doing that. I said, just stay focused, and she graduated and the university offered her a job. So instead of that, she took a job as a center director. I said you know, I'm coming right? She say, that's why I called you. So, we go down to see her like every other month. And for the center director, I say, how do you want to do it? So, she said, this is what I, this is my plan. So, she already had everything laid out to do what she wanted to do. And she called us and she said, Auntie? I said what? I am South Carolina rich. I said, explain that. She said, I create websites online for people. I can do logos. I do the whole college application for people and they pay me to do all of this and I put all my money in the bank. So, we go down and she treated us to the, y'all ain't got to spend your money when y'all down here. For me, I'm a take care of my family, she have her own apartment, she have our own car. Are we proud? Yes. She been out of college for 2 years and she been doing good ever since, and her brother, he's doing good. He's doing real good. My sister's son, Troy, he's a minister. Him and his wife is in East Lansing. They got jobs at Maryland was it, Michigan State University. She's a PhD, he's has a masters degree as a counselor. They doing wonderful. Moneywise, they doing good and he has children and he guiding them to do the right thing. I just think we have 1 child and she's a A-B student and she plays basketball like unbelievable. Now will she get some scholarships, she probably will. Does she want to do basketball now? She's done. But if she get, this is her last year, so she get a scholarship, she's going to take it. But she want to be a

realtor. I said being a realtor, it's not a real job until you get a lot under your belt. How to do the operations, the whole operation of what realty is, instead of just going out to try to sell the house and do this and do that. She said I already got all of that. So, looking at them and with our strength moving on down to them, my daughter, my niece and my nephew, they all got a platform. And they all like this in the triangle. They all close and they, we are family orientated. When something goes wrong, we are there and we, everybody come together and do what we need to do and we don't regret it. We don't have a problem, even if it's something we know was disgusting. You made this mistake, let's see what we can do. But if you make the mistake again, you're on your own. But we come together as a family, and we got a small family. We know we have no aunts and uncles, no parents and no grandparents. On my mother's side I'm the oldest, my brother died, my son died so, and we still glued together.

Most important memory

Francesco De Salvatore [02:02:36] My last question is, if there's a memory, you could hold on forever, just one memory?

Verdella Jennings [02:02:41] My mother.

Francesco De Salvatore [02:02:42] What would it be?

Verdella Jennings [02:02:43] My mother doing the Easter eggs when we were 12 and 13, and she was still trying to hold on, have us to hold on to the memory of Easter and the things. We just looked at her out the bathroom window, still doing things for us to build our life on and everything. Me and my brother just looked there I said look at your mother, he said that's your mother and all the things that she did for us and we remember those things to keep us going and keep us focused in going into the right direction, going into Charles Houston and stuff like that was a job. I mean, it was just like going into a penitentiary without guns. I mean, they were feisty. They were talking back, they were doing this, they were doing that. We didn't know if we could aggressive this and do this and do that. We just had to find programs to keep them busy, do something, bring people in to do this. We had a reading class for the little children and we had AKA's {Alpha Kappa Alphas} and the Deltas that come in for the after-school project kids and we had them to do that, our (inaudible) had some kids back there to teach them how to do this and whatever. We had some of the 100 black businessmen to come over to get some of the boys, just to teach them how to wear tie, pull their pants up and what a belt was for. And we had all kinds of organization come in. Then we did a go fund me to redo one of our game room, and they made it just for a teen center. So, it was from when I went through the front door and from when I walked out with Miss Sheila, when we both retired on November the 30th, we looked back and saw a major change from going through the door with no experience and coming out with some accomplishments.

Francesco De Salvatore [02:04:24] That's great. Well, I think that's all my questions for today. This has been really great. Thank you so much.

Verdella Jennings [02:04:31] Thank you so much for the opportunity. Okay.