

## COPYRIGHT / USAGE

Material on this site may be quoted or reproduced for **personal and educational purposes** without prior permission, provided appropriate credit is given. Any commercial use of this material is prohibited without prior permission from The Special Collections Department - Langsdale Library, University of Baltimore. Commercial requests for use of the transcript or related documentation must be submitted in writing to the address below.

When crediting the use of portions from this site or materials within that are copyrighted by us please use the citation: *Used with permission of the University of Baltimore.*

If you have any requests or questions regarding the use of the transcript or supporting documents, please contact us:

Langsdale Library  
Special Collections Department  
1420 Maryland Avenue  
Baltimore, MD 21201-5779  
<http://archives.ubalt.edu>

Transcription: Stewart Interview

Christina Baird: If you could please state your name and um...

Stewart: My name is Ruth Stewart.

Baird: OK, this is the interview for the 1968 riots, and we are interviewing Ms. Stewart. Our first question is: where did you live during the riots?

Stewart: 1533 Edmondson Avenue

Baird: Edmondson? so that's West Baltimore?

Stewart: West Baltimore.

Baird: And what was your neighborhood like before the riots?

Stewart: Well, I lived on the corner and there was a pool room and there was a restaurant and a square where Highland Park School is now, there was just a square. And um... we used to play on the statues in the square, until ... well I used to take my children there cause in sixty eight I had two children. And I used to take my children to play in the square. And I used to play there when I was a child, and it was nice then. And my grandmother lived 1527 Edmonson Avenue. And I had a sister who lived on 1531 Edmonson Avenue, So... as a child I was always on Edmondson Avenue and playing' in that square and then when I got grown and I got married I lived on Edmondson Avenue with my sister... 1533...so we used to take our kids in that square and play, but then drugs came about, ok. So, we couldn't go in the square because the drug dealers dealt from the square.

Ester: Approximately, what year was this?

Stewart: '68.

Ester: '68 that the drug dealers came?

Stewart: Yeah, well, they were there before '68, but they became more visual in 68. And they didn't care about who saw them, you know, they did their thing, they sold their drugs or whatever. And whatever they were selling they would sell it in the square. And they sold it from the poolroom that was right around the corner from where I lived at. So, we didn't have as much access to the square unless we went early in the morning. Because after that, after ten o'clock in the morning, that was their square. It was dangerous to be in the square. So we usually stay in the back. We had a nice backyard. My sister did. So we kept our children in the back yard. My grandmother was always in the backyard and she lived in 27 we lived 33. And she had a garden. She was always in the back doing her garden thing, and hanging up clothes. So we would always be either at grand's or at my sister's, because we all lived in that area. So we stayed away from the front because of the drugs. Basically that was it. And when the riots came...MAN! It were fires, it was people just moving, running with food and appliances and clothes. Because we had a pawn shop, we had liquor stores, we had bars. And all those areas were

hit. OK. And people took chains, I could see them, this man took chains and put them on the back bumper of his car. This store on Monroe and Edmondson had bars over the window. And he hooked that chains to the bars and he ripped the bars off and it was free range. And everybody was up in that store, ME, Everybody was up in that store. And, my baby, I never bought baby food from that time to up until she was off baby food.

[Laughing]

Stewart: I didn't buy Carnation Milk, which my baby was on, I didn't buy Carnation Milk anymore until my child was drinking quart milk because during the looting I knew they were things that I needed. So I went for baby food and milk and cereal, baby cereal. These were things that I went in for. A lot of people went in for cigarettes, and stuff like that, but I knew I had two children, I didn't know what was going to go on after this, riots was going on. And if I was going to be able to... you know..., and my husband was in the service, so he wasn't in Baltimore So I said I got to look out for my children, you know so when they broke in those stores and they was right in my area, So I said I might as well get for my children. So I went in and I had milk crates full of Carnation milk. And I would run and dump that in the car, and run back and fill it back up again with some more stuff. But, it was a scary; it was a scary time because you didn't know whether or not the world was coming to an end because everywhere you looked there was smoke and fires. And people running and screaming. And furniture stores on Edmondson Avenue were hit and you could see people coming out on the streets with TV's and stuff. I saw my cousins and they had a sofa and one was on one end and one was on the other. And the next thing you know, here are all of these soldiers setting up camp right in that square on Edmondson Avenue Ok. We had a curfew. You dare not be out on the street during the curfew. So, we were out there early, and when it was curfew time we were in the window. And seeing them get people, walking with furniture and appliances and stuff that they had looted from these stores. Well that was a scary time because you didn't know whether you would live or die.

Dottie: Do you know what set it all off Ms. Stewart? Do you recall...?

Stewart: the looting started with the killing of Martin Luther King.

Dottie: Really?

Stewart: That's when it really, really, started; when it really got heavy.

Dottie: Right, Right. Do you remember what incident it was? What store it was that got hit? Or was it one big thing that set it off? Or a group of people went out? Or...?

Stewart: I was just like everybody, just all of a sudden just came together. And people that didn't know what was going on and saw people coming out of these stores and coming out, stopped their cars and next thing you know they were up in the stores too.

Dottie: Oh I see.

Stewart: You didn't know what was going on because at first we didn't know what was going on.

Dottie: Where were you at?

Stewart: I was at home you know on Edmondson Avenue when it first started, but we didn't know that the looting and stuff was going on until my brother came and said, "Man these stores are wide open, you better go." "What do you mean the stores are wide open?" He said "People are just stealing stuff and just walking down the street and all kinds of stuff." So we just get in the car, and we are riding and we just seeing people just walking with all kinds of stuff. And we had so many hams.

[Laughing]

Stewart: We went in one store and they had hams galore and he just had hams. And I remember my brother had the machine that you just slice lunch meat up and you could see him dragging it down the street and you know. But we had hams and we had big hams. Silver label hams. Eskay, silver label hams.

Dottie: [yeah]

Stewart: You know, and people were walking with loads of stuff. Pampers and... well I didn't use pampers so I didn't bother with those pampers, but I was diapers and still am with my grandchildren. With my grandchildren, they use pampers, but they know that when they come to me... don't bring no pampers, bring me some diapers cause I can't deal those pamper things you know so... My baby got into the habit of diapers because they only use pampers when they are taking them to someone during the day, but, basically they knew that diapers were the best for them, but when the meeting was on, I didn't want none of them. If I didn't go find some Birdseye's diaper's is what it was, then we are fine but other than that I was getting the things that we needed. Vitamins and stuff like that was in the drugstore off of corner Gilmore and Edmondson where I lived at. When they pulled the bars off of that, and it was a pharmacy, I got Polyphisol. I just grabbed Polyphisol because that is what my children took., that was what my sister's children took. So, I got plenty of vitamins... I went in for what was going to help me and my family. Other people went in for themselves. So I a survival, this is survival now. So I don't know what's gonna go down after this so I was gonna get what I need to survive with my children, keep them well. So that's what I did. I thought about getting the vitamins and aspirins and all this kind of stuff when I went into the different stores. But, I was up in there too, you know, and I got liquor and I was selling liquor cause I had so much of it that I wasn't drinking.

[laughing]

Stewart: So my sister's and my brother's and their husbands and stuff was drinking, but I wasn't drinking. We had cases of liquor. That's how when we went in the place, that's what they grabbed, you know. Nobody thought about cash registers and stuff like that

They just went in for stocking stuff... what was around to survive because we didn't know what was gonna happen. We knew that Martin Luther King had died and that was a travesty, and we were upset about that, and we were showing that we were upset. These soldiers came and you know... "Get out the windows"... No! We not getting out of our windows. We gonna see what's gonna come about him being killed. So we were about survival and survival that meant you had to go and take what you were gonna take. Because no one was opening the stores to let you buy anything, so we had to rip them open. And that's what we did.

Christina: I have a question. Did you have a job or an occupation at that time?

Stewart: I was a student. And a mother. I went to Cortez Peter business school. And my husband was in the service, so I traveled. And at this time I had just had my daughter in January '68. And that's when a couple months later... when the riots came. But I was a student at Cortez Peter business school. And I did house work for different people that my grandmother and aunts used to work for. For extra money they used to let me take days and iron over their place and whatever. But, basically I was a student.

Dottie: Where was your husband stationed at that time?

Stewart: My husband was in Germany.

Dottie: OH! Gee Whiz

Stewart: No, he was in Vietnam. He was in Vietnam because my daughter was born in January and he left that December of the year before. He was in Vietnam in '68.

Ester: Was there a lot of segregation in Baltimore?

Stewart: Huh! Was it?!

Ester: I am not from this country so I don't know.

Stewart: Yes, we had... there were certain streets you couldn't cross.

Dottie: Couldn't cross?

Stewart: Certain streets in this city you couldn't cross because you would be crossing a boundary line. Yes... Yes... And there were bath houses and stuff like. But, they were for ya'll and weren't for us. We had them, but we had them in our backyards. Foot tubs, you know. Stuff like that. But, yes there was segregation. WHoo!! It was... I never thought I would see this age. Because I had a mouth.

[Laughing]

Stewart: And my mother and my grand mother would say that my mouth was get me killed. Because I feel like you and me, God put us both here. And he didn't have no separation of color and what not. So I felt like things shouldn't have been. I knew it was, but it shouldn't have been. And I was taught that you don't judge a person by the color of their skin. And my friends coming from the South, they were really in it. They taught us you don't judge a person because their skin color isn't the same color as yours, you deal with them and how they treat you. And, the way they treat you is the way you treat them. And there was a problem. And I went to an all white school.

Dottie: Where did you go to school?

Stewart: I went to Garrison, Garrison Junior High. When I went there, it was the first year that we were allowed there.

Dottie: Oh! And this was a junior high?

Stewart: It was a junior high and it was in the fifties.

Dottie: And what was that like?

Stewart: That was terrible. You would be walking with your little food, and they would stick their foot out and trip you. And you wouldn't say anything because you was scared. I'm in this school with all of them and it's more of them than us. So I better just be hungry till I get home. And they would take my money... take my coat... stuff like that. Not that we weren't doing stuff to them too, but they had us out numbered.

Dottie: sure.

Stewart: But,

Dottie: How many other black children were going to school with you there?

Stewart: Uh... not too many.

Dottie: Really?

Stewart: When I first went to garrison there was not too many. And I lived on Ashburton and Baker's then.

Christina: My grandparents lived on Ashburton Street.

Stewart: What block? 116<sup>th</sup>

Christina: 2100... 2100 hundred...

Stewart: Ok, over by North Avenue?

Christina: Uh Huh.

Stewart: I was on the other end. I went to Garrison. I went to 148. That was the elementary school I went to. That was on the side close to where I lived at. But then when I got to the sixth grade, they said that I had to go to Garrison. My mother sat down and she told me: You are going to a school that is an all white school, basically. And they are putting a few of us in there. And your mouth, you have to watch what you say out your mouth. So when they called me names I, you know me, I had to call a few back. I got into quite a few fights. I was a fighter. I was definitely a fighter. I would fight in a minute at the drop of a hat. They would call me all kind's of black this and the other, and a fight would go on. Until I was finally put out.

Christina: You were put out of the school?

Stewart: I was put out of Garrison.

Christina: Where did you go after Garrison?

Stewart: I went to Lemmel. Because they had built Lemmel finally. And I went to Lemmel. But, I was put out because I fought a teacher.

Dottie: I was just gonna ask you about the teachers.

Stewart: I was fighting the teachers because, I was fighting this girl named Charlotte Gray, and she was white. And the teacher came with a yard stick. And she didn't hit her, she hit me. So I grabber the yard stick. And she had this long beautiful golden hair.

Dottie: Who, the teacher?

Stewart: Yes and when she swung it my way, I just pulled her head down on the desk and I took her yard stick and I beat her with the yard stick.

[Laughing]

Stewart: And I said; now you see how it feels to be beat with a stick. So, I was put out of Garrison Junior High School. But they suspended me first. Then when we came back for the meeting from the suspension, they told me I was no longer allowed to come into Garrison. But, yes I fought a teacher in Garrison High School.

Dottie: I won't tell anyone.

[Laughing]

Dottie: So what about the other teacher in the school, what was there attitude toward you?

Stewart: Most of the teachers were really nice. There were a couple that still felt like we shouldn't be there. We was told that we had to sit in the back. Yeah, we sat in the back of the classroom, and if you didn't sit in the back of the classroom, then you were put out of the room. At that period you had to go, you had to leave. You had to sit where the teacher told you. And I would never forget her name, Ms. Warren. And she used to always tell me: Nothing from nothing means nothing, and you are going to be nothing. And that what made my mind up to be something. Because I thought that God didn't put me here to be nothing. This one person is not gonna tell me that I can't be what I want to be. I wanted to be a nurse, but I was scared of blood.

[Laughing]

Stewart: I would run from blood.

[Laughing]

Stewart: I went into nurse's aid and all that, but no this is not for me. But that teacher, Ms. Warren, at Garrison, is the reason I am in education. Because, I felt that she was wrong for telling a student that they wouldn't be anything. The color of your skin has nothing to do with your mind. And then when I started having children and when my son got in school, I would be in school with him every chance I could; I was in there volunteering to do something. And then I found that this was something that I wanted to do. I wanted to be in education, I wanted to be something to help children to get somewhere in life. So, that's where I got my start, in education, was with my own children. My daughter was in the Ivy program at two. Summers for my children were like they were still in school. Because, everyday, we had handwriting, we had math, we had reading everyday in my house. When I was growing up, it was that way. In the summer, even though we didn't have school in the summer time, we had school at home. Not only did we have bible school, we had academics. My mother was on that handwriting, boy I got my knuckles cracked many times. "That doesn't look like an S." My last name at that time was Spell. "That's not an S; I want a good cursive S." And I would have a whole page full in my book, and she would check it. This is not a good one, this so not a good one, go back and do another page.

Dottie: So now I know where you got that from.

[Laughing]

Dottie: When you come after them, "NO, do it again, do it again!"

Stewart: Yes, so that's the way summers were. Because when we went to the park, we had our side of the park, and they had there side of the park. Even in the sixties, we still had our side and they had there side. And we had certain streets, again, that we could not cross. But, growing up we knew, we can't go there.

Dottie: how did you know?



Stewart: My...

Dottie: You were told don't go over there.

Stewart: I was told don't go over there!!

Dottie: Did they tell you why?

Stewart: Because you might not live to get back. Because there was so many Klansmen, about you didn't know that they were Klansmen. They hid it well. You might be talking to somebody and all of a sudden you might disappear. So you don't go there, you don't go this way. We had to stay to our side. Basically, that was it, you stayed where blacks stayed. And if you ventured further than you were taking a chance. And my brother was of those people that took chances.

Dottie: Did anybody in your family... did they...

Stewart: Yes. My brothers took chances and they didn't believe that nobody would do nothing to them, and they wanted to see what was different about there side of the part. Which was nothing. The parks were the same. The parts were the same park, but it just was that we weren't allowed over there. Then I went to Georgia, where my oldest son was born in Georgia. I didn't think this kind of stuff was still going on. So I'm out in my little buggy with my little baby, and I'm going to this park. Well I'm sitting on the bench, with my baby. And then these two girls come by, black girls, and say, you don't belong here. What do you mean I don't belong here, it's a public park? NO, not for you. Then she points out the sign, and I say 'Oh my God' Whites only. Water fountain, Whites only. I'm sitting up in this park. I could have been killed. And this is Georgia in '65. I'm sitting in this park, you know, I'm twenty years old. I ain't thinking that nothing like this is still going on. The girls said, you betta get up out this park. You on the wrong side sista. Come on we'll show you where we go. But I was new there, you know, and I didn't know that this was still going on.

Ester: So, In Baltimore, where there signs like this as well? Or was it just a social thing?

Stewart: I can't remember seeing signs in Baltimore, but I remember there were certain places that we couldn't go. So I knew that there were signs that said white only, in Anne Arundel County, where I was born. Where my aunts, uncles and them used to go to buy beer, they had to go to the back door of a place called Maple Inn. It was down by the river. And, they had signs there. Whites Only, you know. So they had to go to the back, they use dot take these gallon jars, that pickles used to come in, and that's where they used to get there beer at. That was in Anne Arundel County. They had signs. Whites only, and no blacks Allowed, stuff like that. They had them down there. In the city, after my mother moved from out Anne Arundel County, I didn't see as many signs as I did when I was in Anne Arundel County. The signs were there, you know. And then your parents knew where you couldn't be so, that was drummed into us. For your safety you must do as we say do. Not venture out on your own. So, it stayed with us. Everybody don't like

you. I was always friendly, I had a smile and I would talk to everybody. And she said everybody don't like you. You have to pick and choose who you do and where you go, now a days. But, I had two white friends, they were, you wouldn't know them if they were white. They stuck to be like glue when I was at Garrison. They were like a backbone.

Dottie: How did you get to meet them? At a school?

Stewart: They were in a class with me. When people would talk about me, they were there.

Dottie: Girls?

Stewart: Girls. They would be there. And they would say, all of us don't feel the same way. Your gonna be alright. They were two nice, white girls. They used to bring me food because, people used to take my food and stuff like that. They would go over and say look, this is gonna end. We'll fight if somebody hit you, but if somebody is constantly taking your lunch money or your lunch everyday, your gonna say Mom I'm sorry, but today I am not giving it up. I would fight, you know. My mom would say, there I go again, getting suspended. Banging somebody, you know. No, I'm not giving my lunch up. I'm not giving my money up. I used to ten cents a day. Eight cents for a bowl of soup.

Ester: Did any of the white kids, who were aggressive, did they you know get...

Stewart: Reprimanded? No.

Ester: So it was only...

Stewart: It was just me. I would be the one who would get punished. Oh you said this or you did that, or you was here, or you were there. And I could be sitting at my desk, minding my business and they would come along and ... pew... there go my books.

Dottie: Were these girls or where they boys?

Stewart: Boys! Mostly boys.

Dottie: And you mixed it up with the boys.

Stewart: I fought them just as hard as I could. My brothers would tell me, if you had to fight a boys always go for the nuts first.

[Laughing]

Stewart: So that's what I did. My mother ended up paying for a couple of doctor bills, but uh...

Dottie: She got some big punches.

Stewart: Yes, I did but I had four brothers, they oldest ones were the ones to tell me, stick to your guns and fight hard, and fight till the end. And if you fight a male, you go for the nuts. And that's what I did.

Dottie: It was about survival.

Stewart: Survival.

Christina: Did your neighborhood have a impact also from Rosa Parks, or Medger Evers, or maybe John F Kennedy too. Did that have an impact on you or on your neighborhood, or Baltimore itself?

Stewart: The neighborhood I moved into when I was about ten or eleven was all white. And we were the second black family to move onto Ashburton Street. And most of those people started moving. And it was two white families that stayed, that stayed through the years. Mr. Cannough, I would never forget him, he was a white man. They didn't have any children and his wife died. So he took all of us lack children as his children. And when I went to school we went home for lunch. When we went home for lunch and we were on our way back to school from lunch, Mr. Cannough would always have a treat for us. And he would always tell us, no matter what anybody says to you, you are human and you have rights. And you do your best and you'll be alright. This was a white man that was telling us this you know. He would come out and jump rope with us, and play ball with us, he was... and when days would go on he would sit and talk to us about the lack side and the white side. The bus thing, it really didn't matter. It mattered, but it didn't bother us because we knew. And most of the time we didn't catch the bus anyway. We walked. If we rode the bus, we were only going one way, because we were only getting bus fair one way. You could ride the bus to, or you could ride the bus from. But you didn't ride it both ways unless you didn't eat lunch, or you kept part of that lunch money, that five cents, and you used that to catch the bus. But we walked most of the time. My mother and them would ride the bus because she had to work. She would come back and tell us stories about how it was. But me, I didn't expect too much, because I didn't ride it as often as my parents, as my mother did. My mother and my grandmother did. They did the days work, so they rode the buses. My father he worked for a paint company. So he had a truck. But my mother and my aunts, they did work for white people. My mother used to cater, she was a caterer. And then she got into this family, The Strauss, and they were political people. Man they were so good to us. They were so good... the Yamsey's were good to us, white people and the Strauss. My grandmother worked for the Yamsey's and my mother worked for the Strauss. And, every holiday, whatever the holiday was, we had the finest. Man, the stuff those people used to give us. My mother used to work long hours. And sometimes she didn't even know that we had stuff because it would be delivered to our house, and she wasn't even there. They had boxes and boxes of clothes and food and toys. All the

white people weren't bad and all the black people weren't bad. We just couldn't mix. But my mother worked for some good people. They had to go in the back way, the back door to come in. Then me, here I was nineteen. My aunt went to Brazil. So, the month she was in Brazil, I did her Thursday and Friday people. And here I go, to the front door. So the lady looks out. Yes! I said I'm here to replace the girl that does the ironing. You at the wrong door! Where is the door that I must go in? Go around back! Go around the back, go in the basement. That's where you iron, that's where you stay. You are not allowed to come up out that basement. I was brought lunch down to the basement. I had a half a sandwich, a glass of soda, and a butterscotch crumpet. There were three crumpets in a pack. I only got one. And you might iron for eight hours. And then the kid's, their children would come look at me iron. Look at the maid!! And you know my mouth again.

Dottie: I was just gonna say.

[Laughing]

Stewart: I'm not the maid, I'm the ironer. There they would be at the top of the steps. They would look at me and call me names. And she would call them you know. And I told them, I don't think I'm gonna make this month.

[Laughing]

Stewart: Then my mom would say, you know your aunt id depending on you and she that she will have this job when she comes back. I'm gonna try again next week mom, but this is really hard. The children are calling me names, and they even brought their friends over to see the maid. To see the new maid. And the people that my aunt ironed for, the husband was a doctor. And all the kids went to catholic school. So you had all of those shirts, doctors' coats, and stuff to iron. We were taught at a very, very young age how to iron. I started with that iron on that stove, and they had a potbelly stove. I would put that iron on there and make the iron hot. That's how I was taught to iron. Cause in Anne Arundel County, they didn't have no gas stove, we had potbelly stoves, and wood stoves and we cooked and we ironed, and learned how to iron and everything on those stoves. Washing Machines, uh-uh, we had big round foot tubs and a washboard. And I was sore many days from the washboard. And if you didn't have but one pair of socks, those socks came off, and you would throw it in that water, and that Octagon soap, and all that lye soap that my Grandmother used to make. Wash it on the boards, and those socks would be nice and white. And when you got a hole in them, you got a ball and you sewed the hole up. But, you shared clothes, but you better not say it. And we wore white folk's clothes, but you better not say it. But we were thankful, we were always thankful. We were always made to be thankful because, somewhere out there, there is somebody who doesn't have anything. So if you got a little bit of bread on you r table, and some peanut butter and jelly... man... you were rocking. But it was prejudice, prejudice, prejudice.

Dottie: So when the riots went down, or disturbances...

Stewart: They were riots!

Dottie: Good. Ms. Stewart calls them what they were. But, when the riots went down, you weren't surprised?

Stewart: no. Because...

Dottie: It was kind of like...

Stewart: I felt something was coming when people, they were involved with Martin Luther King and all of his followers. And Malcolm X and his people, so I knew because they rioted with Malcolm X. But it wasn't as big or as wide spread as Martin Luther King. That baby was widespread. It was blacks and whites who followed behind Martin Luther King. They were in the riots too. They were in there looting and rioting too. It wasn't just us.

Dottie: Do you remember what parts of the city because... I'm not a Baltimore kid. And neither is Ester. Christina Kind-of.

Christina: I'm a Baltimore County kid.

Dottie: Oh ok. What parts of the city were the riots actually going on?

Stewart: West Baltimore was tore up!

Dottie: Really?

Stewart: West Baltimore was tore up. Like I said, Edmondson If you ever go to Howard Square School, I'll show it to you on my way back home, that wasn't a school there, it was just the square. Like I said, the soldiers set up camp in the square. Because, you could look out your window and you would look this way and all you would see was just smoke. Where after they looted these buildings, they would burn them up. And you looked this way and you would see fire and smoke, and you look that way you would see fire and smoke. And, you looked straight ahead and you would see a square full of soldiers. Walking with guns on their shoulders you know. But West Baltimore was totally wiped out. You wouldn't find a store in west Baltimore.

Dottie: Did they suspend school or...

Stewart: Oh Yeah! Yeah, they closed schools cause too much stuff was going on. It was wild!

Dottie: What was the reaction of the churches and stuff were they telling them...

Stewart: they were telling people to quiet down and stay in your homes and don't be involved in this kind of things, and that Martin wouldn't want this but... people were thinking about survival. How are we going to survive now? We would have markets and stores, and stuff but, they are gone. So you are thinking now, hey, I better get out here and try to get some stuff in here so we could survive for a little while till something changed or something happens to you. But, people were thinking about their own and the fact that they had killed Martin. Man... people were in an uproar. This city was in an uproar. And I had never seen so many soldiers. And they was coming by the truckloads. And they just used that square as a station. And they had their little camp stuff. But, you couldn't come out. When they said you can't... When it was dark and they caught you out, they arrested you.

Ester: was it only white soldiers?

Stewart: No. There were blacks, there were black soldiers. Black and white and foreign soldiers.

Dottie: Were they arresting a lot of people or were they just...

Stewart: Oh Man! There were a lot of people that got arrested. A lot of people. A lot of my relatives were arrested. Walking out of stores with stuff. If the soldiers would catch you in the stores they would making people. My niece almost passed out... She had to drop that ham.

[Laughing]

Stewart: Ok. We was coming form a famous store on Gilmore Street, and we were coming out of the basement. It was a trap door in the store and that's were all of the meats and stuff was. Down in the basement. And we were coming up out of the basement with these hams. Now, here are these soldiers coming into the store, They had guns blazing and they maceing people and my niece just happened to come right by when they sprayed the mace and she went down. And I had to drop my ham and pick her up and... It was something. When they came in they had big thing of mace. The whole air was just mace. And you had to go down low and try to crawl out.

Dottie: So how long did this thing last?

Stewart: So it was kinda like a habit? Every time someone was killed, for us... when they did something to them, we went off We went off that was our revenge. That was the only way, you know, I guess that yes it was a feeling of revenge. It was a way to make us feel better, now they lost something too. Anybody close to the blacks, got killed or whatever, the blacks reacted. Rioting and looting was one of our reactions.

Do you know Ms. Stewart, was anyone killed during the riots?

Oh yes!

Really?

Yes. People were trampled People were trampled When all that lootin and stuff was going on people was in them stores and people were all over the top of people. People were trampled. Trampled Hear me? It was like letting a bunch of wild horses loose. And if you fell, you better hurry up and try to get up.

You were in the middle of this?

I was in the middle of it.

You had to be a little scared.

Nope. Nope. I was more afraid that if I didn't do anything I was going to be lost. You know so, I had to stick with them blacks. You know, this is our revenge, this is our war.

If you hadn't gone in, what do you think would have been the reaction of your neighbors?

They would have still went

No, I meant towards you.

Towards me? Oh man, they probably would have just trampled me. You know, your not sticking with your people. You know, but ah...

Then the soldiers came through the blocks with the bullhorns, "Clear the streets! Get off the streets. Get in your homes, get out of the windows." But we were defiant. No we ain't staying here. All that could happen to us would be that we would die. If we did stay in the house with no food or anything, we were going to die anyway so we '11 take our chances out there.

You mentioned the preachers were emphasizing to stay in your home. Did they follow what they preached?

Yes

They did?

Yes.

The pastors that I dealt with, yes. They preached and prayed for us you know, but there was only so much they could tell us you know... anger. There was so much anger.

Were the preachers viewed as if they were turned against the people?

No they were trying to bring us together. The blacks and the whites you know, it's not that they were against blacks, but they were against the rioting. But they were for us and they would tell us this is not the way to go. But we thought we gained more doing it our way than doing it peacefully. It was a feeling of we're not going to sit still for this. We work hard too. We're not going to sit still for the stuff they want to put on us. We felt like we had the right "sit on the bus whenever we wanted to." We work, we pay taxes, and that was just it. We had had it. We had seen what our parents and grandparents had gone through had gone through this you know, my grandmother especially, she was afraid of white people. She was brought up through slavery, so she really lived in fear and she tried to instill that fear in us. Now my mother and my father they somewhat feared, but not like my grandmother. My father though was a fighter, like my grandfather who was a fighter so much so that he was run out of North Carolina. He ended up in Boston. That's how I ended up with family there. Because my grandfather and my grandmother's father and my grandmother's husband would establish homes in Boston and that's how I would establish relatives and family there. My great grandfather, he was a fighting fighter. He was real spicy, and so my grandmother would tell me, "You're acting like your grandfather." "I didn't want to go to that school, they don't want me there," Then my mother would say, "well you're going to go and you're going to try and keep that little red rag still," but I couldn't do it

So when the school was integrated, and your mother took you to the school, did she have a choice in that?

She had no choice. I had to go. It was go there, or no where. My mother said, you are going to get some education. It's going to be here. You're going up in this school and when we went to the school, they were all lined up outside, I was scared to death. They were big kids, I was little and skinny you know, walking through in between you would see a few of us. I couldn't believe that I gotta go up in here! And I went up in there and went to the principal's office and she was telling me the classes I was going to have and as she talked I could see that she didn't really want me there. You could see it and you could hear it the way she was saying where we had to stay and what we had to do, you could tell that she didn't really want us there either. But, like I said, there were a few teachers in Garrison, this white school, that didn't care about your color. They cared about your mind. Those were mostly the teachers that I dealt with. But there was this one, she was very prejudiced. You could raise your hand to have a question explained, and she would look all over you, and she would never call on me. She would call you for something she knew you didn't know, your hand wouldn't be up, but she would still call you. But if it was something you knew and you raised your hand, or for something you needed to know, and you raised your hand, she would ignore you. But like I said, there were a few good teachers who didn't care about color. They just cared about what you had up here and what you could do with it. This one teacher told me that I was never



going to be anything and nothing from nothing is nothing and I was a nothing, because I was black.

Sure did show her wrong.

I just wish she could see now you know...

She told me that I would never be anything. So since I've been in education, I always wanted to work with the slowest, underachievers, because I feel that every child has a potential to be something. You could be the worst kid in the world, but you still have a brain, you have a mind, and you have a personality. I love to encourage the slower children and tell them that they are going to be something. Maybe you can't read now, but you will read! You start out slow, and keep practicing and by the time you get to the end of the year, and this child can read you a story, what a feeling. When this same child can read fluently and explain to you what was read, it is all worth it. All that I went through to get to this point in my life, it was all worth it. In thirty four years of education, I always went for the ones that people said couldn't and wouldn't, because I was told that couldn't and wouldn't so I feel that if I can do it, they can do it. It has never mattered to me what color they were, because I worked in black schools and white schools, and always with the lower achievers. And now I see them in good jobs and doing great. And I think that it was all worth it

Ms. Stewart, your testimonial is in a little boy named Keyo. When Keyo came to our school, he had such a problem with language, he was not able to have a conversation and he went over to Ms. Stewart's room for Math and she worked with him for months and months in counting to twenty. And now Ms. Stewart Keyo is doing money Math and column Math. He has become this Math wizard and I remember those days that you would work with him and that bag of pennies!

Yes. I remember I hung in there with him, cause I knew, that somewhere in there, there was something of value. So I knew all I had to do was find a way to get in there to it. With him it had to be something he could touch and feel. He had to be shown and be able to touch, the items and he came to understand that oh, yes, I can do that I didn't give up. And now when I see him, he is always anxious to brag about his points and skills. And when I see that sometimes I wish, man I wish that woman could see this! And see some of the children that I have worked with, you know, some of the really physically challenged and mentally challenged that I have worked with, because I have worked in special ed at Ben Franklin in Brooklyn. They were physically challenged. I had children that had prosthetic legs, arms so you know if they had that to deal with, they had mental problems too. Just in dealing with that and you know how children pick. There were many days when I would see a leg at one of the hallway and April (leg's owner) would be at the other end. That's how cruel children can be. I used to tell her grandmother, April (this little girl) was like me, she had mouth, you know she was mouthy, and those boys were just nasty. And I told her many times if April didn't talk back to them, you know ignore them, we wouldn't be looking for a leg. One day, the leg was in the toilet! We looked high and low. They would kick the leg off they would play football with the leg

Now we're trying to, the vice principal, the librarian, me, and some other teachers were trying to get this leg from them. They ran from us with the leg, so we had to search the building over for this leg. So we search in the boy's bathroom and there's the leg. You know, but children are cruel Children are real cruel, but like I told her, you 're going to make it, but you 'ye got to watch what you say and how you say it. You can't say just anything to people. You have got to watch what you say. But she was mouthy, like me, she was slow, placed in seventh grade, but reading at a second or third grade level when school started. By the time June came, and after I had taken this girl to the library on my days off you know, I would meet her in Brooklyn and go to the library and we would read different books and stuff they always had to make book reports, but she didn't know nothing about making book reports. I took my time, Saturdays, Sundays, and I went and I tutored you know and I didn't get paid, and it didn't matter that they were white, purple, pink or what ever, they needed help. And somebody helped me you know and I felt that f somebody helped me, if they had time enough to help me, then I have time to help some body. And I always felt that I have children, and I don't want my kids left out there. If I'm sending them for an education, then I want you to do the best that you can for my child. I was doing what I wanted somebody else to do for mine. I was trying to give the best that I had to give and if what they need was beyond me, I went to somebody else who had more to offer than I did. In almost thirty four years I've seen so many changes in education. The programs are better, it's structured now for us so that we (teachers) can better understand what is expected. I never like history, I always liked geography, but because of my children, I got really into history. I had to able to tell them things and I wanted to understand these things myself. But my main thing (reward) was children learning and understanding what they learned. Don't just teach me this and then I don't know what to do with it. I just wanted to educate the best I could, and not "this is black (learning) and this is white." This is education. This is knowledge. This is something you need to survive in this world, so I did what I could. Talking, teaching and going where I had to go and taking them where I had to take them to expose them to different things. Things that I wasn't even exposed to as a child. I exposed my children to these things and the children that I worked with. Things like different foods, I used to have a cooking class at one of the schools that I worked at, and I did all kinds of different foods, I talked to different people and got different recipes from different countries. Then we would have a day when we would have all different kinds of food tasters. That was how I became interested in history. Meeting different people and then traveling. With my husband in the service, with traveling I met many different types and kinds of people. Many who be prejudice, oh, Fort Knox, Kentucky, I lived there, for nineteen months...

Do you recall what year that was?

66, I believe. Yes 66 to 67. I lived in Kentucky; I was pregnant with my daughter. And then I came back from Kentucky because my husband was being shipped off to Viet Nam. And there I lived in the middle of French people who were dolls, and but on the other side were some Germans, and they treated me like dirt. Where I lived was just off of Fort Knox, across the street front the gold vault and I used to walk my son, but you cold only get so close to the gold vault, before these horns and stuff would go off. Do

I'm walking my son one day, and he had his little puppy with him and the dog runs over on the side of Fort Knox where the gold vault is. So I go to get the dog. Horns go off guards come running, all because I was in an area where I wasn't suppose to be. And in Fort Knox Kentucky there were so many prejudice people there, living on the base, you wouldn't believe it. It was unreal. I felt like saying to them, our husbands are fighting in the same war, and we live in the same complex, but they wouldn't speak to you, they'd do things like throw trash over into your yard. At times my son would sit out on the back steps and their little children would (especially the Germans) would come over and throw mud at him, all kinds of things, until one day my husband said, "look, this is your home, you defend your home." And he gave my son a stick, gave him his ball and sent him back out on to the step. Every ball he had ever had they would take, until my husband said, "I'm tired of buying balls, now it's time for you to protect your own." So he gives him this stick, puts him back outside. So now he is sitting outside with his ball under his arm and his stick, and he is tapping on the sidewalk with his stick. Then here come four little kids up the sidewalk (I'm standing in the kitchen window, cooking and watching) and these little boys call out, "Hey little black boy, go in the house, give me the ball, so when they came to try and take the ball away he whacked them with the stick. My husband and I went "Yeah son, protect your stuff but then the war is on. Here comes dad and mom. We asked what's the problem, you know, and they replied "your kid hit my kid, "and my husband said, "well, my kid has been taking quite a bit of abuse from your kids. And this is about the fourth ball I have bought, and they have taken it." "Oh they weren't going to keep it," this is what the father said, "They just wanted to play with it for awhile." "Well then where is it?" "At my house, "and my husband said "okay well, I told him that this ball here was his and to protect his own. And that's what he did when they came on our steps to take his ball, that 's when he whacked him with a stick." So from that day on, we never had a problem with their children. They kept them away from him. He would go out and play and after that he didn't have to stay on the step. He'd go on the walk way and he'd play, and like I said, the people from France they were beautiful. And there were a lot of other white people there that were very good to us, there were just certain people that were racist and would accept us anytime. But well, you know we survived. We prayed for everything, prayer was the thing, we had to have the faith that we could do this, I have had to keep the faith that I could make a difference in a child's life, when I chose education as my field. I said I feel like I have to make a difference so you know, I got there and I stopped there and that's where I have been ever since. Still trying to make that difference in children's lives and in thirty some years I can say that I've seen children make progress and doing excellent now. I've seen children killed, because they wanted to be out there in that world, but like I said, I see many of my children that I've worked with over the years, that are now doctors, nurses, lawyers, and I said well, I didn't do it in vain. And I 'm still here and I'm still working for the cause, that all men are created equal. We all can learn from each other, so that's the way I felt Your skin may be lighter than mine, but your blood is the same color as mine.

So after the riots were over, and the streets were calm again, did you still have those areas that you couldn't cross the street to?

Oh, yeah, those areas were still there, but it wasn't as tight, it was loosening, but there were still those areas that you couldn't go.

When do you remember was the first time you could remember that you could walk across that square and it didn't matter.

Oh, man, hmmm, it was in 68. After the riots, you could then into the square and sit and place with our children or whatever. It was in 68 or 69. Martin Luther King dying made a huge difference, when they saw that we were not going to stand still for anything anymore.

So when in Baltimore, did the laws reflect change for African Americans?

In... hmmm. Between 59 and 60. The laws started changing, but they really didn't really hold fast or them sticking to it until later in the 60s. It was then we could go to any school we wanted to. Any school, black, white, purple, pink, whatever, but yeah it was in the 60s when the laws really started changing and people started accepting us. As much as you could expect them to, you know, there were still certain people that still and today there are still people that won't accept us. We'll never get one hundred percent acceptance.

So as time changed, did you find that the people who would not accept you, did they become more quiet about it, did they go behind closed doors so to speak?

They were bitter. Bitter. They had so much stuff done to them, they were bitter. Even with the changes, they still wouldn't change because of the bitterness in them. I had some relatives that had had terrible things done to them and couldn't change their attitudes, but in my generation, we just dealt with it. We had to survive, and if surviving meant we had to deal with them, we dealt with them.

Some times you met some of the best white people. I had a white teacher at the first school I worked at in 73 or 72, and this little white lady was the best. You would have thought she was black herself. She brought cat food and dog food to school everyday and all the stray animals that would be around the school would be fed. She would bring them jugs of water and bowls for them. This women would feed those dogs and cats around the school and she would come to my house I think more than she would go to her own. She loved pig feet. Pig feet and collard greens. She would buy them and I would cook them. And she would come to my house and she would eat my cooking and she loved it. Her name was Ms. Siedel. She was the sweetest, and we used to talk about, you know, how she felt about the prejudice situation, and she'd say, "people are people." And she never looked at color. And she really helped me a lot.

And that was in 70?

Yes, 72 or 73.

Were there like certain races that kinda got together, like I know that Hispanics would gather...

Hispanics got together and they were against us too.

Oh they were against you?

Yes, they were against us. And the whites were against them, and they were against us. And the Hispanics they were just as bad off as we were but you would have thought that they weren't because of the way they treated us. But, they were against us.

What about the Asians? With the transition from WW II and into Viet Nam, were they against blacks as well?

I don't think they were as much against us as the Hispanics were, because they had come from suffering too. And I think that they were for us, but would verbalize it. Because of fear of retribution of the whites. But they weren't hard on us like the whites were. They had their prejudice too, but not so much that you couldn't deal with it. They weren't as bad as whites. At least the ones that I dealt with. There will always be a few in any situation, but basically the ones that we dealt with, were not as bad as the white people were. Now the Jews, they were the ones that would give us credit in their stores so we could eat. It wasn't ALL whites, you know it was like anything else, part were for us and part were against us. Now the Jews that gave us accounts in their stores so we could have things that we needed, they were looking out for us. My mother didn't always have money, and we had an account at the store-a Jew store "Go around to Max's store and get some fat back and greens. We had a little card that we used to take and he would write down whatever we bought and when my mother got paid, then we went around there and we paid Max for whatever we had gotten. But the Jews were, some of them were alright to us. Because if it wasn't for them, some of us wouldn't be here, because they saw to us having soap, and food, and give us accounts in their stores where we could get things like that

So for you, the Jews weren't white. It was like a separation between Jews and whites.

Yes. Because like I said, in the Jews stores, they would give you credit that you could pay once a month. They would let you get what you wanted, milk, butter, eggs, flour, soap, soap powder, stuff like that You couldn't go into the white stores and say my children need a loaf of bread or a chicken or whatever, or have them give it to you. No way But in a Jew's store, you could get that.

It's interesting because the Jews also have a history of being oppressed...

Yes and I think that's why they did for us, because they were also downed people. And I think that s why they catered somewhat to the blacks. Because they knew what oppression was.

Do you feel like there are areas in the city now that say to your grandkids that you shouldn't go in that area? Do you think that there is anywhere around that would make you uncomfortable?

The only place that I can see are with the Mexicans that are here now. But the youth of today are so set from what has happened before. So they will go anywhere. They don't let anything stop them.

When do you think that changed? That mindset?

After Martin Luther King After he gave his life, blacks were willing to give their lives, to be able to go and do what ever they wanted to do wherever they wanted to it. So now, it doesn't matter, because they fought the struggle and that was a struggle and now they meet it as a challenge. They will break the law, we're not going to have it all come back up on us. We will try to stop them at the pass, it's like, you will deal with us, or go back where you came from because this is our land this is our country as well as it is yours, and we're not going to take the back seat.

Now was that mindset mostly with the young folk or was it earlier?

It changed mostly with the younger ones, but the older ones who had been in the struggle, for years, that had been through slavery and their parents had been through slavery, they were now more voiceful, you know, about defending your own, and standing up for your rights. Whereas before they would take a backseat to stuff. Then the older folk started coming forth and bringing knowledge and stuff that had happened and stuff that they had been through, so... the younger breed is no going for it, but it 's based on the backbone of the older generations that we get our backbone from. In a quiet kind of way, they were strong They made something out of nothing So the younger people fell that the sacrifices that our parents and grandparents went through should not be in vain. We should not take a back seat to anybody, I don't care what race. No race should take a back seat because we are all humans. We are all made by God, and this is His land. He created it and gave it to us for awhile. So you can't tell me that I can't sit on this side of the park, because this is God's. So that has changed dramatically, there are no more signs in the parks... but it used to be that we could only go certain places, but things changed when we took a stand. And now, with this younger crowd, they really won't tolerate. Their tolerance is really short, even my own children. My oldest child is 41, my son. He wouldn't have made it then. Back when I was coming up, because, like me, he's mouthy, this is the one I told you about-the stick- it took him a while, but he did eventually defend himself. But now, he's a bookworm and he's read about so much and he's heard the stories from his grandmother and great grandmother and the things they 'ye gone through, and my son... don't take no stuff. He will not tolerate it. My son is a Muslim.

Does he encounter that a lot now?

Well right now my son is in prison, and it's in there. The guards... He is in the Eastern

shore, but before he was in Cumberland and oh my God, it was... Well, both of my sons are incarcerated, one in Cumberland and one is in Ocean City, and uh, they don't take no stuff. They wouldn't take half of what I went through. They have their own beliefs now, of their people that were slaves, or former slaves, they have heard and read about our family history and whatnot, you know... "Well, it's not going on now mom, I'm going for that" And when I tell them about Garrison and how it was when I went there, they'll say, "Man they ought to be glad that I wasn't there." That's my son, and then I say yeah, I'm glad you weren't there too! Because they probably would have hung him from one of those trees. But the younger people now, their mind set is no way, we're not going back to that Martin dying was an inspiration. He was an inspiration for a lot of us that sat back and took what was dealt out, you know... and made fighters out of those of us that weren't fighters. Fight for the rights, not like my grandmother, whatever whitey said, was the law to her. Because her parents were slaves. All they could do was to follow what they said to do. She would try to instill that in my mother, but growing up, they saw different things and you know, hangings and such. My mother saw a hanging, a person being hung in North or South Carolina, because they were on the wrong side of the street, or they bumped into a white, or they said something to a white person. I've had relatives actually killed because they said something to white people. And beaten. But now days, these people will not take it