

KENNESAW STATE UNIVERSITY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

***HISTORY OF THE COBB COUNTY BRANCH OF THE NAACP AND CIVIL RIGHTS
ACTIVITIES IN COBB COUNTY, GEORGIA***

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INTERVIEW WITH IDA BELLE FREZZELL MINNIE

COBB NAACP/CIVIL RIGHTS SERIES, NO. 25

CONDUCTED BY ROBYN GAGNE

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Kennesaw State University Oral History Project
Cobb NAACP/Civil Rights Series, No. 25
Interview with Ida Belle Frezzell Minnie
Conducted by Robyn Gagne
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Location: New Friendship Baptist Church, Powder Springs, Georgia

RG: Would you first start out telling me where you were born and when you were born?

IM: I was born in Cedar Hill, Tennessee, near Nashville in 1939. At three years old my father [Benjamin Thomas Frezzell] moved to Pennsylvania, and he worked in the steel mills. My father and my mother [Alma Elizabeth Northington Frezzell] are deceased now.

RG: And you moved to Pittsburgh?

IM: No, we went to thirty miles south of Pittsburgh in a place called Monessen, Pennsylvania.

RG: It says here, "My dad was a sharecropper."

IM: My dad was a sharecropper.

RG: Was that in Tennessee?

IM: That was in Tennessee, and when he came to Pennsylvania he became a steel worker. He worked in the steel mills until his retirement. He worked there, and also he would clean up all over town. I went along with my father—most of us went along with our father. We cleaned up different places like the Beer Garden, the Shoeshine Shop, he cleaned up Dr. Barry's office, a shoe store, the jewelry store, so we always had good shoes and nice jewelry to wear. Our life revolved around the church. Most of the activities we did were in the church. We went to Sunday school and stayed in church all day. I belonged to the Union Baptist Church in Monessen where I was baptized by Reverend Cook. I just showed my Sunday school students here my Bible and my book and all of our activities. Like I said, on Sundays we'd go to fellowship with other churches. We belonged to the junior choir, the junior missionary, the usher board, and I was in the Girl Scouts. Of course, we had an all black Girl Scout troops at that time. Although we were in the North there were some things that were not integrated. There were certain places that we knew we were not welcome. The signs of colored and white were not up but you knew that you were not welcome there. There were certain places like, if you went in you could get a hamburger and a Coca-Cola or you know, those days of the bob socks and the skirts, but you couldn't drink or sit in there. So until this day I don't really like Coca-Cola [laughter], but I do eat hamburgers though. And in our schools we went to the integrated school. I know some of the mothers here, my same age, did not go to integrated schools. I'm seventy years old this year, and I've always gone to school. I think that's one reason my father and mother went to Pennsylvania because they wanted us to go to college and school. I have two brothers and two sisters; I'm the middle child; and my dad made sure all of us went not only to high school but also to college. It was so funny, my father tried

to take a night class in Pennsylvania, and he did this with a lot of the other immigrants that came over. The community I grew up in you had all nationalities, the Croatians, the Catholics, the Polish, the Jewish, you name it, and you had all different churches, Lutheran, Presbyterian, a lot of Catholic churches, Italian, the Irish-Catholic—but then they were consolidated—but I grew up in an integrated neighborhood. We went to school tougher; we came home together. I was involved in art. I liked art, and after I graduated from high school, I went to the Art Institute of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and I just attended. My husband and I graduate high school together and then later on my husband, we got married. We were high school sweethearts. He went to Westminster College, and he was a star basketball player on a full scholarship at Westminster College in Pennsylvania.

RG: What's his name?

IM: Ronald A. Minnie. We had three children, one son and two daughters. Ron, Jr., and Zenobia and Kenya.

RG: How do you spell Zenobia?

IM: Zenobia.

RG: And the other girl?

IM: Kenya.

RG: Oh, like the country.

IM: Yes. I became involved in the revolution of the 1960s so I named them . . . Then, let's see, after Ron finished college we moved to New York City, and he worked for Heinz Company. At that time they really weren't hiring blacks and especially professional ones. You know, there are a lot of blacks with bachelor's and master's degrees that couldn't be any more than a custodian because that's just how the racism ran through America. But there I worked in different places. I can remember vividly the one place I worked was the Protestant Council. I worked doing the bulletin boards, and I worked as a Bible school teacher. I would go out and teach Bible class to the Spanish community. It was run by the Catholic Church, and on my way to the Protestant Council I ran into people who were picketing. They were picketing against—the Brooklyn hospital was being built, and it was around the revolution time, and I decided to get involved. So I went back home, changed my clothes, and went and sat down in front of a cement truck.

RG: So it was just completely coincidental that you happened to run into those guys at that time.

IM: Yes, yes. I was on my way to catch the subway. I was on my way downtown to Brooklyn to work, and I lived out in Flatbush. I was on my way downtown, and I saw them, and I said, "Wow, they're all of America, the protesting." So, I went back and I

changed my clothes, went back and sat down, and that's the one and only time I got arrested in my life. They put us in a paddy wagon. They came and said, "How old are you? Oh, you're old enough, put her in the boogy car, the paddy wagon." They put us in the paddy wagon and took us downtown and put us in jail, and it was packed. It was hot, and there was this one lady kept saying, "Keep singing, keep singing." I remember I called my husband and said, "You need to come and get me." He said, "Where are you?" I said, "I'm in jail." We were allowed one call. He said, "Well, I don't think so." He was not always involved in my activities; he wasn't involved in my activities. So it was during that time that I remember seeing Malcolm X on a corner. He was telling people that we should not want to integrate; we believe in nationalism. At that time I didn't know they were important; I just remember them standing there; and I remember that was the same year that the march on Washington happened. And where I worked I had a white co-worker. She said, "We need to go." I said, "Jen"—her name was Jen—"You think so?" She said, "Yes." I said, "Well, I'll ask my husband to see if he wants tickets, and we'll get on the bus, and we'll go to the march on Washington." So I went home and I said to Ron, "Guess what, there's a march on Washington, and it's going to be one of the greatest civil rights movement marches in America." He said, "Really?" Actually we should have divorced then. I said, "Okay, I'm going. If you don't want a ticket, I got tickets and reservations; we're going to bag our lunches." He said, "No, I don't want to go." So I went, not knowing this was going to be the greatest march ever. I marched and we were in the back and it was hot, oh that day was so scorching hot, but everything was so peaceful. Now remember I was living in Brooklyn, New York, and I happened to run into people from my hometown, Monessen. They had a bus. The NAACP, they had a bus and they said, "Oh, what are you doing down here?" I said, "Tell my mom and dad you saw me." We had our signs and really, I just got rid of my signs about five or six years ago when I moved here to Georgia. I had them all. I wish I had saved them. I kept the passes getting on the bus. We went down in one of the real large churches in New York City, one of the big, large, white churches, and they had buses flowing out. We got on the bus, Jen and I, and the bus was packed. At some place we stopped, and they didn't welcome us into the restaurant because once you go across the Mason-Dixon line you're in the South. That was kind of strange for me although my mother and father had relatives, like my grandparents were down in Tennessee. We would catch a Greyhound and go down and at that time, I can't remember being told to sit in the back, but when my mother and father came North, they had to sit in certain parts of the bus. But, of course, we were in a bus talking about integrating America and Martin Luther King. I think I have my feet over in the water, the wading pool, but it was so hot. We took pictures and I did have those pictures up until I don't know when. But anyhow, that was a day, and when I got back home I told my husband I said, "Oh man, that was so great! Martin Luther King gave the greatest speech in the world. He was so good! I have a dream, I have a dream!" He said, "Okay. I imagine it was great."

Then let's see, I was in New York and I had a sister who had finished Institute of West Virginia. She went to a predominately black school but now it's integrated in West Virginia, and she became a dietician. She worked in the hospitals in Brooklyn and also in New Jersey. She got real sick. She got Lupus, and we never knew what Lupus was, and Annie died. I called my mother and dad, and they came up, and they couldn't believe

it. The doctor said, “We’re going to operate.” And before they could get back to Pennsylvania, she died. She was very young. That was devastating for my whole family and my dad and mother. Until the day they died they never got over that. They never thought they would lose a child, and she was the only one they had lost out of all four of us. I didn’t really want to go back to New York City. I came to a funeral and I didn’t want to go back there. My husband said, “You need to come home.” “Okay.” My son and I picked up and we came home. I had one child at that time.

RG: So Ron, Jr. is the oldest?

IIM: Yes, Ronnie is the oldest. He’s a senior master sergeant, and he just retired from the United States Air Force as of this year. And his commanding chief sided with Barack Obama. I love it! I have it sitting on my table! Then I was involved in civil rights; I became a state education chairperson for the NAACP.

RG: Was this in New York?

IM: In Pennsylvania. When I went back to Pennsylvania I became involved. Also, I went back to school, and that’s when I got my first degree in education, and I taught in Ringgold school system until I retired, and I have my master’s in reading specialists.

RG: What grades did you teach?

IM: I taught secondary. In Pennsylvania secondary is from middle school to high school and I’ve taught them all. My major was English, and I taught English in all levels because they can reassign you to any school. Then my latter years I taught reading to the sixth grade, middle school. That’s how I retired. Even in Monessen when I was younger, before I became a teacher, I had a group called the Young Black Council. We met in the church, and I was a Girl Scout leader at that time, so I always kept pretty active. Then I had my next two children and Zenobia went to California State College. She only went two years, and she’s now a paraprofessional at Lovinggood School here. Kenya, she went to Michigan and she finished college at the University of Michigan. She got married, and she moved here to Georgia, and then she divorced. We all lived together in Oakleigh Valley down the street here. I’m not familiar with subdivision, we don’t have that, we just have streets where we go up and we walk to school and you can walk to school, you can walk to the store.

RG: You can’t really do that most places around here.

IM: That’s why I’m thinking about a small town, you can walk and everybody knows everybody. Just like everywhere else, people have consolidated the schools, you know, building these large schools, so that’s what happened also then. Most of the time they took the school out of the community and built it in a bigger facility, bigger school—you know, students have to ride the busses. Before everybody could walk. Now, everybody has to ride the bus. I can’t get from here to home unless I get in my car. I like to walk. I’m an avid walker, and I play tennis. My whole family plays tennis, and I’ve always

been involved in the church. No matter where we moved, me and my husband have moved throughout the years, not that often, we didn't move that often from Monessen to New York to Pennsylvania and then here. I've been divorced about ten years now, maybe twenty, fifteen? Sometimes it seems like a lifetime. Sometimes it seems just like yesterday.

RG: For Zenobia and Kenya, did they move down to Georgia first and then you eventually came?

IM: Actually Zizzy, she was married—she's divorced now—she was married to a young man who was in the Air Force, and he was stationed up in Anchorage, Alaska, and she lived in Alaska for ten years. Then they went through a divorce, and she moved to Pennsylvania, the year 2000. We all wanted to be together. So she came to Pennsylvania, she and my granddaughter, they never left. My granddaughter and my daughter live with me. And then Kenya, she came here, and then she went to South Carolina, but most of my children are in the North, and then she came, and then she finally moved here with us from South Carolina. My kids have been around a little bit. Anyway, my son was stationed in the military, and that's when I was able to go because as an English teacher I went to England, and I went to Italy. I've been to Paris. I was going to go to Turkey, but the Desert Storm broke out, so his family had to be shipped out, so I never made it to Turkey. That would have been very close to Africa.

RG: That would have been cool.

IM: That would have been cool. Plus I wouldn't have had to pay to stay. I would stay with him.

RG: Right. So you and your husband moved here first and then your daughters came down here to be around you.

IM: I was divorced when I came here. I was divorced. My son was in the military here at Dobbins Air Force Base, and he's the one that said "Mom, you going to retire?" He convinced me to move here five years ago. I said, "What, come to Georgia, are you crazy?"

RG: What's in Georgia?!

IM: What's in Georgia? I know we came here for the national NAACP convention. I was here and I came down, but that was all. But my son said, "Oh, no, mom, you should see what's going on down in Georgia." And when I came down I was really shocked because Georgia surprised me. It wasn't that antiquated. They still fight the Civil War down here though, you see that, the Civil War, the Yankees, you can feel it. Like they call us Yankees. I don't care whether you're black or white, you come here you're still a Yankee.

RG: Yes, my dad was born in Massachusetts and we joke with him that he's the Yankee of the family.

IM: He's the Yankee. You're a Yankee and they don't let you forget you're a Yankee.

RG: No, and he's been down here since he was in the eighth grade.

IM: They don't care. I think a lot of people in my subdivision are from the North. So eventually we all ended up here in the last six years, and I've been a member of this church [New Friendship Baptist] since August 2006. So we're Johnny-come-lately's. But we go home every summer though. I didn't sell my house in Pennsylvania because I can't take the heat. It's so hot I can't believe it. You talk about hot. I run outside at twelve o'clock and I run back in the house. Oh my gosh. I came down during the rough time, and I do miss the snow, but I don't miss driving to school in the snow; I don't miss that. I miss the students that I taught. I liked teaching. I loved teaching. I teach Sunday School here now to the intermediates, the middle school years, and I am now mother of the church. I wasn't sure if I was going to be a mother of the church because the mother of the church was old women I thought.

RG: What does the mother of the church do?

IM: The mothers of the church oversee communion; they help with communion every Sunday. We work along with the pastor; we try to counsel the pastor. Really, the mothers of the church are highly respected in a black church. That's a very prestigious position, religious, spiritual position. You have a special place to sit.

RG: Was there a sign?

IM: Yes. I remember I went down to Bishop Eddie Long's church [New Birth Missionary Baptist Church, Lithonia, Georgia] that big one down here in Georgia. My pastor, Rev. A.L. Zollicoffer, took us all down one Monday just to go around. They let us in, and they showed us where the mothers of that church sat, so most black churches where the mothers sit. Most mothers are the ones that you see wearing the hats all the time. We wear white dresses first communion, we wear white. I've been there only once; I've been to some association meetings here; and they tell me, "Don't forget, on Friday we have to wear white." So I really didn't have any white dresses, so I have like a whole bunch of white clothes.

RG: You're outfitted now.

IM: I'm outfitted now, white shoes, white hats, white stockings. [laughter] I've gone from a militant Minnie to Mother Minnie! They still sometimes think I'm militant.

RG: You'd go to jail to be . . .

IM: Yes, hm.

RG: I want to go back to the civil rights stuff. You said you did the sit in and that's when you got arrested in front of the cement truck. Did you ever picket or do anything like that?

IM: Well, that summer, I'd never been involved in going back South, I didn't go South but I stayed in Pennsylvania, and I've come close to having confrontations while I've been in Pennsylvania. I'm involved with the NAACP, and we went down when the Ku Klux Klan was walking; we marched, the NAACP, my friends and all went down to counteract that. So I'd been involved heavy with the NAACP. I'm also under the governors. I'm on the history advisory to the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission. I was on the black advisory group, and we would bring different speakers in to speak all over Pennsylvania. And I also taught in the Afro-American studies department in Penn State simply because of my activity in civil rights and my involvement. I was an active involver. I haven't really gotten involved here because there are so many things that it's kind of close-knit, and you just can't come from one state to another state. And I was kind of burned out; I was tired.

RG: After all that activity!

IM: And every time something came up in Pennsylvania we were boycotting or the movement was going on, especially the NAACP. As you know, we have our national and state conventions, and we're always at the front, the oldest and most respected civil rights group in the world, so I've been strictly involved, and I led up a young group in there. I had a young group that I counseled. Being that I was the education person for the state I had to be responsible for conference time and speakers, and we generally had good ones. But whenever the NAACP was called to march I was there, especially the Pittsburgh branch. In our hometown we made sure we had our politicians come in and tell us about their agenda, how they were going to help out, and I would attend those. Those groups are just like sororities sometimes; it costs money; and NAACP is a volunteer group, you don't get paid. The only one that gets paid is the top person, and that comes out of Baltimore.

Everything else is you do it because you love it. Like they said to me, why did you get involved? I said, "It's something you do because you love it." I just felt the very fact that my mother and father were denied the right to be educated and denied the right to sit at the front of the bus, and they went through it, and I wasn't going to go through it. I wasn't going to sit at the back of the bus. I wasn't giving my seat up. I was going to—and that's another thing, even our small towns, even today, you have where there are certain places where you can't live.

I remember Monessen, this little town here, when my mother and father went to buy in the white section they were not permitted. When I went to buy a home, my husband and I, it was called a restrictive covenant. You couldn't buy, and I would go tell them off to the people, and they said, "Well, that's how it goes." And they couldn't do anything; there was a clause that they're not going to support it because most people feared the blacks moving into your neighborhood—and that still exists today—the fear that the

value of the house would go down, and it's just people in general, if you get people moving into the neighborhood that don't keep their house up, no matter what color they are, you can lose the value of your home. But more us more so, and it's a shame that it's based on the color of our skin. I'm still active and I still believe that. I still believe with all my heart that racism exists more than ever, and I think Barack Obama being President of the United States—yes, I think he should have gotten the Nobel Peace Prize, just being President of the United States, if he didn't do nothing else, just for a black man to be president. That's an accomplishment!

RG: Did you ever think that you would see a black president?

IM: Never. I have the newspaper where they called me from my hometown and asked me, it's on the front page and I said to them, "I never thought in my lifetime." My son said, "Look, Mommy, everything you believe in and everything you worked for." I said, "Now you know you can be anything. You can't say I can't be a president, give you no scapegoat." Of course, we came up in a family that my father and even myself, I've never been on welfare. We always worked for everything because we didn't mind working. I told people, don't use your color as a scapegoat, you just work hard. Sometimes people don't believe working hard will achieve those goals, but I do. You just have to have the stamina and consistency, and I think as a teacher in a predominately white school district I pretty well think that my students, white or black, know that's how I feel, and I try to be a fair teacher.

Just because I'm pro-black doesn't mean I'm anti-white. You understand? All of my white friends respect me because I am pro-black. I have a lot of white teachers, my good friends, and they respect me for what I believe in. As a matter of fact, some of them went to the inauguration, and they sent me from Pennsylvania a Barack Obama shirt because they knew that's what I like. Sometimes even here in this church I have to make sure that I don't let my first priority supercede—I say, "No, I'm not letting it supersede God, its just that's what I like to do." So that keeps me focused on Jesus! I think Professor Scott's a preacher [Sunday School teacher].

RG: Is he now? He hasn't told us this in class. I'll have to ask him that.

IM: Yes, ask him!

RG: He's going to be hearing this tape before I see him.

IM: Yes, I did enjoy talking to him. He came to the church also. There's just so much to be involved. I think once you are active it's in your blood. You don't forget it, and every now and then someone will remind you that you're black—especially if you go somewhere that you know that the majority of whites are there. You can still feel it. Maybe I'm just paranoid, but I think Oprah and everyone felt they should know me. She went to Paris, and they didn't know her. They said, no, they weren't going to open up the store for her. She said, "Oh, that's it." Someone said, why do you always talk about that. I said, because you know, say you walk into a store and they have those guards

watching, and especially if it's a classy store or one of those big ones, they're going to make sure you're not going to steal nothing. But meanwhile these little white ladies, they just run around taking all their stuff! It's just something that you grow up with. Even in high school, coming through high school there were times that you knew you couldn't be in a certain play; you know, you just couldn't be in the play. You knew that you just couldn't be a cheerleader or you just couldn't be a majorette. There were certain things, even though it was a predominately white school, there were certain things you know as a black person that's going to be hard to make it.

That's why I have no problems with the black brothers playing sports and everything, because they have been denied so much of everything else, and so if they have in their idea maybe I can make a difference by being the first black pro in my town, let them have that dream! They may make it, they may not. Everyone can't be a doctor or lawyer either but you shouldn't take their dreams away from them. I think I see a difference in being a teacher and making a difference. When people say we miss you and you need to come back, no, I was tired, you get burned out. Like I teach here and I taught children to be sure and get all the education you can get, all the education. My dad pushed education. The church I joined when I was small pushed education. Religion and education were the top priorities. Religion and education, those were your top priorities.

RG: That was with your dad and with the church, in other words you got it at home and at the church.

IM: Yes, my mother and my father. I was blessed to have a mother and a father who were strong in their beliefs, and I didn't know what a blessing it was to have a mother and a father who raised their children religiously, who provided for us religiously. We had the basics; we didn't have a whole lot of glamour, but we never went hungry. My dad always worked and my mother was a very clean housekeeper at home. She was a better housekeeper than I am! I miss them dearly.

RG: So your mother stayed at home?

IM: Yes my mother was a stay-at-home mother. My dad made up his mind that my mother would never work for any white folks. He made up in his mind he would work all those jobs; and we had five, we'd come and we'd go and we'd always smell food, in the days that mothers did cook, white or black, they cooked. Pots of beans, greens, we always had dessert and I just took it for granted. But I do remember my mother said, "Well, I don't care what your dad says, you're going to still work, so when you come home from school you go to work." So my mother sent me out, and I worked for this Jewish lady after school for fifty cents. I had to give my money at the end to my mother to get food. I learned a lot about the Jewish people because when you work for people in their house, you learn a lot of their customs and habits. I found out years later the one Jewish family I worked for, they were from Poland and they were survivors of the Holocaust.

RG: Wow. What did you do for them?

IM: Clean. Baby-sit. Clean. Baby-sit. Didn't do the toilets, just cleaned. Every day I came in for two hours, she washed, I ironed. Then Saturdays I cleaned and then she had Clara and Gayle. I remember many times when I was asked to be a speaker at some of the campuses—they knew my involvement, and I remember Penn State, the black history conference, I was there, and this gentleman came up to me, and he said, "I was waiting until after you spoke. I just want to let you know that I'm married to Clara Huffman." It was Gayle and Clara. I said, "Well, that's nice." He said, "She went into education." I said, "Good." He said, "I don't know if you would want me to say this." I said, "What?" He said, "We live here at Penn State." It's what we call happy village. I said, "Oh, that's good." He said, "And she just had a baby and I was wondering if you would go to the hospital, we saw your name on a program, if you would go to the hospital and just say hello to her. I don't know if you want me to mention." I said, "I am not ashamed of anything I've done in my life. I cleaned for her mother and father, and I wasn't ashamed, I was honest. It was an honest living. But certainly if you'll wait until I'm finished . . ." and he drove me to the campus hospital where she was and she had her baby and she said, "Oh, I just wanted to see you." So it didn't work out but I never would have been ashamed of anything I've done. My dad wasn't ashamed when he cleaned up; he was honest. He shined shoes. Martin Luther King said whatever you do, do it well. I tried to help boys and girls to stay out of jail. I'm not a big advocate of going to prisons to visit people.

RG: You've been there, you've done that.

IM: One time in my life was enough! It was hot, it was sweaty and I said, Lord, if you let me out of this here I will march outside!

RG: You'll never go there again.

IM: Never go. That's when those jail cards, you had one little window and it was hot, and they packed us in like rats. It was so hot. I said I was going to die in here. I remember I saw this old lady, she was singing, "We Shall Overcome." Then they took us down this winding road into the jail cell, and they put you in there, and you had one little toilet in the big jail. If you've never been to jail in your life, you don't want to go. Of course, they're nice now, they're like happy to go now. I mean, they have speakers, but not at that time. I was so glad. Who bailed us out of jail? I think NAACP people bailed us out. They didn't keep us in because the jails were packed. And that was the idea was to pack the jails in America. In one place, I even had the Black Panther signs up. That was miserable. I was like Angela Davis. I had a big Afro. My dad said, "Do something about that hair girl." I said, "Oh, no, free the people more power to the people." I would say, "Oh, we're going to burn America down." He said, "Yes, you're going to jail too."

RG: You're going to go back in the sweaty place.

IM: You know what? Once you put your life on the line for freedom or something like that, you're not afraid of dying. I knew that if I went down I would die for a cause. I think

many of us, at that time, thought that way. I was willing to sacrifice my life. I was going to fight for my rights. I wasn't going to be like my mother and my father. I was ready.

RG: Do you think a lot of the people who were in the cause with you felt the same way?

IM: Yes.

RG: There was no question at all?

IM: No question. As a matter of fact, I carried a rifle. I had a big rifle right in my house. They said, you let the government see it then they won't bother you because I remember there was an incident that happened in our town that I was very outspoken, and I think the government sent people into the house. You know, they come in those trench coats and he came in and I had the shotgun, and he said, "Well, as long as you're out there." I said, "Just to protect myself." Because someone had just thrown some bricks through my new Mustang. I think a young brother had been shot; they were in a bar and this white guy shot him; he disrupted the whole town.

RG: Was that in . . . ?

IM: Yes. But I did have an article where Jeff Oliver, a white writer called me, and when I was getting ready to retire he said, "Ms. Minnie is just like my mother. I know people don't know her. You think she's racist, but Ms. Minnie is the next thing to my mother, so unless you know Ms. Minnie—either she likes you or she doesn't like you." I'm going to have to make sure I make copies of that; I'll make sure you get that. That was excellent. He said, she went through a lot—and he mentioned that I answered him too. I guess it's been in my blood. I'm glad I was up North and not down South because those people down South, I mean, they were strong, crazy. Not only were they strong but the whites down here, they'd burn and kill you and put you away at nighttime. I still, even Pennsylvania I'm very careful where I go at nighttime anyway. See, I'm not one to stay out at night. I told my kids, "Nobody stays out at night, whether white or black." Not with all those crazy people out there shooting people and home invasions, and even I guess your parents may say the same thing, in our town we can leave our back door open, front door, sit on the porch; now you can't leave anything open.

RG: Yes, my mom said they used to do that when she was a kid.

IM: No, you can't leave nothing no more. Scared. No, I've been involved all my lifetime, and I haven't regretted a moment of it. I've had some run-ins with mayors and every mayor. I remember one time we had a problem. Angela Davis¹ went in to kill someone. My mayor—we were supposed to meet with him to get for my youth group a place for them to have parties on weekends and have dances because they didn't have any outlets.

¹ Ed. Note: A nationally known educator and activist, Dr. Angela Davis was arrested in 1970 as an accomplice in the kidnapping and murder of a California Superior Court judge: she was found not guilty in her 1972 trial.

The mayor said, "You know, Angela Davis just went in and shot someone up." I said, "Well, I'm not scared of dying. She did what she had to do." He was the mayor; he was like mafia, Godfather of the town! You know, they were talking to me; they were crazy too! But I think growing up in the community I grew up was a blessing because you learned to respect each other's religions and you learned to respect, even though you may not have the privilege of certain things, you still went to a nice, decent school and your parents still came on Parents' Day. You had whites you didn't like, but you also had very good whites. Even with the abolitionists, if we didn't have them we would have never been able to make it this far, so you've always had your good whites who are not racist and people who march. We couldn't have made it without them. That's one thing; we have to give credit, especially the Underground Railroad and all that. You needed that. In order to survive, like Barack, he couldn't have won with just the black votes; he had to carry other groups. I do believe in human rights. I believe if you do the right thing everything will turn out right. I do. My children and my neighbors where I live now, I try to be fair, and if you know me you'll know I'm fair. Some things I'm just not going to take.

RG: Right. You shouldn't have to.

IM: Right. I know sometimes I get paranoid if someone says something to me and I think they're racist or something like that. I was up because my granddaughter had to have something at her school. I went up there, and they told me I wasn't permitted to do something. I said, "What is this here? You can't let a grandparent come to school? My God, I should have joined the NAACP down here; I want to know what's wrong." The man said, "Is that a threat?" I said, "No, it's a promise." [laughter] So anyway, my daughter says to me, "Mommy, don't come, don't come." Because she works there. I said, "No, I'm going to call the superintendent on them." I did, but they wouldn't let me in there. So that was kind of cleared up, they had a bad day, that was a bad day. Yes. So I don't let anything go. I just don't. I was in the WalMart right over here and the young man said, "You know, I sure do hate them Yankees." I said, "Young man, what did you say?" I just asked him to stop; don't pack another thing. A lot of us are leaving. My daughter said, "Mommy, walk right out." He told me, "I sure hate those Yankees. They're still coming down here," or something like that because I was talking while they were talking. I looked at him, and I said, "What did you say? I suppose I should talk to your manager." But on second thought I'm tired today. I just left everything. You take all this food and now you got to make sure you put it back on the shelf. [laughter]

RG: Wow.

IM: What more do we need?

RG: You said that your Mustang, somebody had thrown bricks into the windows?

IM: Yes, and broke my glass.

RG: Did you have anything else besides that or was that the most?

IM: That was the most. Then when I was teaching school, I was in school, and I was suspended because someone put in my teacher's mailbox a noose. We felt it was one of the racist faculty members who had done it, and with that I went into my principal's office and said, "Did you put this in my mailbox?" He said, "Are you crazy?" He looked at it and then, so I was wrong, going up the steps to my classroom on the second floor, the brothers or somebody was coming in my room and I said, "Listen, look what I just got." They said, "No you didn't." I said, "Yes, I did. This racist thing." And they had a man hanging and it was like a form. I kept it, you know. So anyhow we led a protest after school, the kids did, so we were out of the school, I just took out of school, I said, "I'm not getting it. You better do something about that." The students knew how I was. I would call newspapers in a minute, so the newspapers and television were up there and parents saw it on the television, and they thought here was rioting at our high school. So my superintendent said, "Ms. Minnie, you should have thought carefully; you didn't understand." And he was right, he was absolutely right. I had to have a board hearing, and they felt that because of my actions that I should be suspended for three days, which I was. I was suspended three days and I filed a grievance—we were unionized—I filed a grievance, and I won my grievance, so they had to give my pay back.

RG: They paid you for your three days off.

IM: Yes. So that was the big story. And in the high school, which was predominately white, we did have incidents that happened every now and then, the bus, and children would call me or the parents would call me so I—although I got along with my colleagues, you know, there are some that you never get along with, in any job. But I don't know who put that in my mailbox so now they make sure that people couldn't go in, even the teachers lounge or the teachers office and their mailboxes. It was closed so you had to go through the back so people would see you. Then another incident was that my superintendent told me that I could attend the first day to commemorate Martin Luther King's birthday nationally. The governor had sent me a letter that he would like for me to be there, and the superintendent told me, "Okay, you can go. But that's for the school district." I said, "Oh, thank you." Then I get a note, I get an assessment saying, "You can't go." I said, "What do you mean I can't go? To commemorate the first national holiday for Martin Luther King? I'd already made my airplane flight." I was going to fly from Pittsburgh to Harrisburg, the capital. I said, "I can never miss this. This is a national holiday." I think Richard Thornburgh was the governor of the state at that time [1979-87], and I said, "Oh no, Governor Thornburgh [invited me], no, I'm out of here." So I went and they docked my pay. They didn't tell me they had docked my pay until I saw my paycheck. I hardly had any money. Well, I went down to the office and I said, "Where's my money?" I kicked a couple of garbage cans on the way. I was suspended. I was probably suspended more than any teacher in the school district. I got suspended three times in my life from school.

RG: All the kids were going, "Oh, Ms. Minnie. . ."

IM: She got suspended and I got it done and we went to grievance again and yes—I had something else I did that I took them to grievance; I filed a complaint on them. Oh, I filed a complaint because see, I don't like the word "nigger." We're trying to get it where we say racial slurs. So this guidance counselor calls me in and she says, "Oh, the students were fighting." And every time if you're the only black they want to consult with you, you know, how do we deal with this situation. I said, "I told you, don't mention that word. Just say racial slur." She said, "Well, they were calling. . ." and she used the word again. I said, "Oh no." So I went to the office and I told the principal, "I don't like this; you can't be calling people names, these racial slurs. Racial slurs are no good for any group. They have a certain category and they cause people to react." So he said, "Well, you know. . ." and he said the word. I said, oh no he didn't. Honey, I couldn't get out—because I have a friend who is the human relations commissioner in Pennsylvania who deals with this, and I wrote a letter on all of them. So I got called in again. This time they wanted me to know they were not trying to be disrespectful to me and then we had to make some policy that that was not to be used in our school district. Also, I've been on, in dealing with *Huckleberry Finn* in our school, I complained about the use of Steinbeck's book where he mentions the word and they said, "Well, if you take the word out, you would take the word out, the historical context won't be the same." I disagreed with that, and that's on the record somewhere. All these things, they're on the record. But we had a big meeting, and we decided it was optional; it wasn't a required reading. Some teachers were upset with the required reading, and I said, "Well, you want to use that then you use all kind of profanity you want. I can call anybody all kind of names." They said, "We won't have that." So there are some things that you have to step up and I'm known as a civil rights activist. If something comes down—when I was at the NAACP, they would call the house, and I've taken in complaints. We've tried to deal with the complaints whether it's the school district or someone not getting a job or someone thought they were discriminated against but we had to make sure it was accurate. That they weren't lazy, and they did go to work and make sure, and many times they have been wrong, the complaintee has been wrong. So it's just like anything else, you just have to weight it out. But I'm known for that. She's gone, thank God she moved to Georgia! Every summer I'm back, it's like, "She's back in town." The first thing I do is I go down to the mayor's office.

RG: How you doing?

IM: I noticed the neighborhood's gone down, you don't pick up the garbage like you're supposed to. I go see the police chief. I taugth him. He says, "Oh you're back in town." I says, "Yes. Did you know the children were up all night on the street now? Don't we have a curfew?" "We'll send a police car around there."

RG: Yes, Ms. Minnie.

IM: Georgia celebrates, she's back, she's back!

RG: Wow. That's really cool that you taugth the police chief.

IM: Yes, I taught the police chief. I want you to read this; take this and return it. I'm going to try and look up the little articles, and I think, did I have them all in one book, the complaints and what I've gone through and the newspapers, because every time I did something it was like front page, even down to Barack when they called me, so I'm pretty good friend with some of the reports. I do miss that friendship too.

RG: But they still call you and say, "Hey, what's your opinion on this?"

IM: Right. How do you like Georgia and I tell them I'm doing okay, but they wanted to know how I felt about Barack or—what was it they called me for?—there was something that went down.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

IM: You had to legitimize it and make sure it was authentic. Like this little restaurant here. This was called Johnson's restaurant in Monessen. Now you knew that you didn't go in there and eat, you didn't have colored or white.

RG: You just knew that you weren't allowed, even though there was no sign or anything?

IM: Right. You just didn't go in there. I think at nighttime my brother helped and most places like this, blacks worked, they cleaned up and so my brothers would clean up in the nighttime.

RG: But they weren't allowed in until closing?

IM: They had a big banquet room upstairs, you know, where you have functions, and I remember that the man who hired my father as custodian was having something upstairs. This man told him you couldn't bring the custodian; you can't bring him. He said, if you do I'll take it out of here. This is another thing, my father, as you see, was dark in color, and my mother is very light. Sometimes, yes, that does make a difference. My dad said he felt he'd go places that would accept my mother more so. Now here I am right here. This is the older white church that has shut down, and we use this now. A lot of kids here, one, she's a doctor, one's a lawyer—here I am right here. I was the leader and we would clean up so after football games. That was called the Martin Luther King Center. Here is my husband, Ron. We were high school sweethearts. Here's my march on Washington. See it says here, "Monessen was there when Martin Luther King, "I have a dream." This is the pass they gave us.

RG: Wow, that's awesome.

IM: I think I have that at home right here in Georgia. I have that in my living room—the march on Washington. I kept that. I kept that pass. I'm glad I kept it. August 9, that was our pass to get on the bus. James Farmer, that's all the people that were involved.

This is the health center; this is the town we lived in. You can see the Italians, the Polish, it was just a typical small town. If you had three or four blacks in a class that was out of thirty, that's what it was. We lived thirty miles—most blacks you would find in Pennsylvania lived in Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, or Harrisburg. The little small towns were just sparsely.

RG: So do you think living in such a diverse neighborhood helped in your later life like especially when you were working for the NAACP and it helped to be able to work with everyone?

IM: Yes. I really had friends, I was avid, but I had friends. Bubba was a name for Polish, and he would come out in the morning, and I would say, "Hi Bubba." And we didn't know any different. You go into a supermarket and people would be talking in different nationalities and you respected them. "Good morning." Nothing supercedes manners. Then the fire department and other things, oh, that's another thing; they didn't have any black firemen; so we protested that.

RG: This is going to sound kind of like a stupid question but would the white fire department come and put out fires in the black neighborhoods?

IM: Yes.

RG: So it was just more the fact that there were no blacks in the fire department that you were addressing.

IM: That's right. See, for African-Americans community there was the NAACP, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. And it was so amazing because—have you ever heard of W.E.B. Du Bois? Well, we had a black dentist in our town. He went to school with W.E.B. Du Bois, and I found out this later because I was in a big conference in Philadelphia and someone wanted to see me and it was his daughter and she said, "Oh, I remember my father." She said she had donated her papers to Temple University. Her father had gone to school with W.E.B. Dubois.

RG: That's amazing.

IM: [laughter] Most of the small towns, like these are no longer there; most of the small mill towns have really gone down. The mills are gone.

RG: Right, the mills are closed.

IM: The mills are closed. Look at that. That's our town. They tried to pick up any paper, they wanted anyone that had anything and Vivian was nice. She started this little historical thing and she got mad, I don't know if she's still with them, but every time I go home I go down to their center, I go down to the historical place in Monessen and visit them. It's a typical steel country town. This is down by the college and they used to put this out. That's about it.

RG: All right.

IM: What's in here? I think they asked me for—these are different nationalities—Greeks, Italian, the different ethnic groups. All the ethnics set up a different booth. It's really nice.

RG: So you got to go around and learn about everybody?

IM: Yes. And in our center in town they have that too. Ties with church—most of the ties in the town are very strong; you know, their culture is related to their town. I sometimes don't understand I guess, when I was coming through the 1960s how we could worship the same Christian religion as the ones who had enslaved us. Many of us had to go through that period. We did go through it too. They were just respectful, everyone had their own club, you had Ukrainian club, you had different clubs and people just—we had our own club. That's the town from the distance. That's when the mills were booming, money was big. I have in here somewhere, let's see, big churches, the churches are still—there . . .

RG: Oh, that's pretty.

IM: That church is still there. That's Irish because the Pope made them consolidate. They were all fighting amongst themselves, the white folks were fighting. The Slovaks, the Irish, and the Italians, they didn't want to go to the same church, so the Pope said, "Oh, no, it's going down, they're all up on the hill going to church." And they hate it. Here's our church; here's the church I grew up in and I was baptized in. This church right here. It still stands here. It's still going down. People died, young people leave, like myself, my group left. They have different bands, big time bands. You see this—they say Al Capone came through our town and shot up some walls. Yes, there are a bunch of crooks!

RG: You had all kind of folks in there.

IM: All kind of folks. And actually I remember being a little girl and I would wait for my father to come out of the mil. The mill workers walked along the streets going home because a lot of people lived all over, you know, and the big owners, the Carnegies, the ones who owned everything, they lived on the hill. You know rich people have money who kind of exploit the newer immigrants just the way they do the Mexicans here or anywhere in the world right now. They got the best jobs, and many people came from the old country, came through Ellis Island. They would get into trouble, just like the blacks who migrated from the South. I remember as a small girl when the whistle blew—you had an eight o'clock whistle, four o'clock whistle and twelve o'clock whistle and my father worked different shifts. When those men, like school was out at three or something, well four o'clock our parents, the men would come out of the mills, and when they were walking down the street you couldn't tell who was black or white, that's how much soot they had on them. You couldn't tell a black man from a white man.

I have a lot of respect for those old-time white and black men. They had the hard buckets. That's why the [Pittsburgh] Steelers are tough. We're Steelers fans, and they came out of there with their tar shoes on, their buckets, proud men, glasses on, soot, just soot, and that's why the black lung from the miners to the steel workers. It was hot, and they worked in devastating conditions. They should get all the benefits that were coming to them.

My father retired with good benefits, and my mother and my father, and I thank God they had good Blue Shield coverage. But they had unions. They worked till the CIO unionized that. I remember one time I disagreed with our union in our school, and we strike, union teachers, and I didn't agree with them, and I went across the picket line, and I was in the papers again there. I fought with the union, and they wanted to suspend me, not expel me. They decided to kick me out completely, but then they said, no, because she has so many people around the state that know her! So I had to meet before my union, and I had to pay membership with no privileges of a membership. I had no privileges, but then they reinstated me a year later.

RG: So it was just for one year that you had to pay your dues.

IM: I had to pay my dues.

RG: And you didn't get any of the benefits of paying the dues.

IM: No benefits. We had a big meeting that had lawyers; I had a lawyer. I had a civil rights lawyer, and they had a union lawyer, and when the union lawyer came in he said, "Ida B. Minnie, Ron Minnie's wife? I went to college with your husband." [laughter] It's like God was always with me. God is always with me. Always believe that you live right and God will always send someone to protect you. So I had a lot of faith back then, I always had the faith and when I was small I used to get scared because that was during the War, the Germans, I would crawl up under my bed and say, "Why is there war?" So we had meetings at church and I do believe that there are some people that God just keeps on blessing them. Well, all my kids are gone and all my kids have gone away, my children are all grown up and I was all alone. These coaches came to me, they're real nice, one was a basketball coach. They help after school, and his wife was a lawyer. He said, "Why don't you take in this [foster] child?" "Are you crazy?!" They said, "This kid, he's homeless." His name is Lorenzo. I taught him in sixth grade and he was going into seventh grade, and we had middle school, and I took Lorenzo in. First time I became a foster parent and the last time I'll ever be a foster parent. But we were on Oprah Winfrey; we were on the Oprah show. Yes, someone sent it in as a teacher who was going to be on the call of duty. I have a tape of it too, it says Oprah had the mothers who go beyond; they had a mother who was blind, a different kind of mother. Anyway, she flew us in there and the Cadillac was waiting and we were chauffeured and Lorenzo was on there and he did get a scholarship to Indiana and about six months later he was in jail. [laughter] Today he met a young white lady, it's a biracial relationship; he did the jail time and he's out; he's working making pizza. But I kept him, I never gave him up

because you know when you take in your foster child you can give them up any day, but he was such a good football player. He became the quarterback, because I come from a school where Joe Montana graduated from and Ken Griffey, Jr, yes, I came from a very good school. Lorenzo was excellent but he liked to sneak, go out the back, and he couldn't stay. Like Michael Vick, you know, they got in trouble and he was a quarterback and he says, "I think Ms. Minnie saw me turn my life around." And Oprah said, "How would you feel Idabelle?" Man, she came back to scare you, like ohh! I bet they call you Ms. Idabelle." I said, "Yes." Lorenzo said, "They don't call you Ms. Ida, they call you Ms. Minnie." I was like, "Shh, it's Oprah." [laughter]

RG: She can call me anything she wants to.

IM: She can call me anything she wants to! I said, "Yes." [laughter]

RG: That's cool.

IM: For taking a foster child in. But that's something I'll never do again because you do want to see them through and it's hard because they can't get over the fact that nobody wants them. His father and his mother [both had problems]. But he's one of my children now. He calls me down here.

RG: Ms. Minnie?

IM: Ms. Minnie, Mama Minnie! "Mama Minnie are you still in the church?" I said, "Yes." He said, "You still going to church?" I said, "Yes, I am." "That's wonderful. I'll see you when I'm out." So I went home. He was there earlier, I had to take him over to try to get a job at Pizza Hut, and he asked the manager to give him another chance. They gave him another chance, so he still works pizza because coming out of jail it's hard to get a job. He did about two or three years in there, selling pot, drugs, the same thing. This young lady, she stayed with him all the while and they married. I didn't go to the wedding. They got married this summer. Yes, I've been busy, I've all kind of events in my life!

RG: You have, you've had quite an eventful life.

IM: But it's being involved with civil rights. I think that's been the greatest thing. I'm still there. I'm seventy years old. Now I work at a church. I'm the librarian here, and I still have civil rights books up there. Sometimes people come up here and say, "This is supposed to be for Jesus and God." I said, "It is. God is in all of our literature."

I liked being a teacher and especially a public school teacher because you see everything that comes in, everything, you name it. Even the ones that go to the private schools, we get them! And I think it's a task. You want to be a teacher?

RG: I am going to be a teacher, actually.

IM: Excellent. You remember public schools, be a teacher for advocates.

RG: I think you're one of the first people who has said good, excellent. Everybody else says oh . . .

IM: Excellent. Be a good one because good teachers are hard to find. Be a good teacher.

RG: I plan on it.

IM: And the children know a good teacher. Know your subject matter.

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