

Sandra Kimble Rucker

November 18, 2021, 2 pm

Interviewer: Fulton County Schools Archives, Teaching Museum South, Hapeville, Georgia

Interviewee: Topeka, Kansas

Interview conducted via Microsoft Teams

Sandra Kimble Rucker is a native of College Park, Georgia. As a child, she attended Jefferson Franklin Beavers Elementary School. Her as a student at Eva Thomas High School overlapped with the integration of the surrounding high schools and by the time Rucker graduated from College Park High School in 1971 (a formerly all-white high school), she had attended three separate secondary schools – Eva Thomas and Headland being the other two. At the time of this interview, Rucker lived in Topeka, Kansas, where she founded Sandra Rucker's Angels, a non-profit organization dedicated to American Service veterans.

Michael Santrock (MS):

So, my name is Mike Santrock. I'm with the Fulton County Schools Archives. I'm sitting here today with Sandra Kimball Rucker. She's a former student at Eva Thomas High School in College Park. She's joining me now from Topeka, Kansas, where she resides today. It is two o'clock, roughly quarter after two in Hapeville (Georgia) where I am and it's about quarter after one where she is. Thank you for joining me.

Sandra Kimble Rucker (SKR):

Okay. Oh, you're most welcome. I'm happy to do this.

MS:

I want to make note, first of the shirt that Sandra's wearing says, "shout out to College Park where the story all begins". We're going to put it together today. So generally, what we'll do is we'll just kind of start with, you know, with your background. First thing I would ask is, you know, where did you grow up?

SKR:

I grew up in College Park. My address was 817 West Princeton Avenue.

MS:

And your family. Tell us about your family.

SKR:

Okay, I'm one- I'm the oldest of four. I have a sister who's deceased, Diane Kimball. She was born 1956. I have a sister named Cheryl Gonzalez. She was born in 1961. And a baby brother, but he's the big brother, Al. We call him Al. But his name is Alfred Gonzalez Jr. and he was born in 1963. So, by me being the eldest, I was so happy to have my little siblings. I don't think they were that happy to have me. But I was very happy. And we came from very humble beginnings. But growing up in College Park was- it was a community within the community of College Park. Because I grew up during the time- it was segregation. So, there was

College Park outside for the whites. And then there was the little village of our village, College Park. And that's why Eva Thomas was built. It's right down the street from College Park High, but we were not allowed to go to that school. So thus, was born Eva L Thomas. But I went to JF Beavers Elementary School. Then I went to Eva Thomas.

MS:

Sure. So, did this- the- the neighborhood where you grew up? You said it was segregated? Where- Did that neighborhood have a name?

SKR:

We were still College Park.

MS:

So, there wasn't specific parts of town with different names?

SKR:

No, just College Park. That's why I said it was a village within the village of College Park.

MS:

Okay.

SKR:

Now, I came up during the time on Princeton- Oh, let me go back to my parents because we were raised with people who taught us ethics and morals and although we didn't have that much, we had love. Disfunction and love but more with love. My mother was Sarah Gonzalez. And my - I don't like the word step - But my dad that God chose for me and my sister Diane, his name was Alfred Gonzalez. Now Diane and my daddy- biological dad, his name was Harley Field Kimble and he was from East Point, Georgia. But- And we were raised in the house with my grandparents that was Eva May Hays and Isaac Hays. But we called him Papa. In our back yard, it backed up to a chicken factory. It was called Goode's Brothers Chicken Factory. And as a little bitty girl like 5, 6, 7, 8, my hobby was to catch the chickens and wring their necks, that was the entertainment.

MS:

Wringing their necks.

SKR:

Wringing their necks, I would just run them down and dive and do it. Or either we would throw rocks, you know, we didn't have that much to do. But on Harvard Avenue, there was an American Legion. And that's where the Klan would have their rallies. And you could see from our back porch, them light that cross. And I would be afraid. I would ask my granddad "are they going to come and get us?" So that was like traumatizing. But still, and then on certain days they would- the Klan would drive their trucks fast down Harvard Avenue. Going there. And the kids, if we were on the street playing, we would have to jump off very fast. And-

MS:

What you- how old were you the earliest memory of that? Of seeing the Klan in your neighborhood?

SKR:

7, 8, 9. We could- I could stand on the back porch and actually see a cross in the other neighborhood with- across the street and observe that. And that's why as an adult, when I was in my 60s, my husband now took me to Minnesota where he's from. And we went to an American Legion. And I just sat in the car and he said "why are you not getting out?" And I say, "that's for the Klan." And see that was trauma from a childhood. That's the first time I ever went to an American Legion since I was a little girl.

MS:

I would imagine so. So-

SKR:

I also will tell you this: I experienced... by being very light complexion, in my little neighborhood, in the first grade. The kids did not want to play with me because they said I was a white girl. So, they would tell me to go be with my people. They wouldn't let me swing. I couldn't do anything on the playground. So, I was crying. And I was walking back towards Brady Gym. And a little girl came running by and she saw me crying and she backed back and she wiped my tear. And she said, "Why are you crying?" And I said, "Nobody would play with me." Well, that little girl we've been best friends since first grade. Her name is Gloria Amanda Lloyd.

MS:

Did you end up going through school with her? Eva Thomas as well?

SKR:

Yes. Eva Thomas from- we were in the same class from the first grade to the 12th grade.

MS:

Sure, sure.

SKR:

And then another good friend of mine. Jessica Allen. She came later. Not as little kids, I think maybe 6/7 grade.

MS:

Yeah.

SKR:

Can't remember, but then we became very close. And it was like a click of us.

MS:

I had, I was lucky enough to speak with Jessica Allen. Her name now for our researchers is Jessica Muhammad. But back then her name was Jessica Allen. We got to speak with her yesterday.

SKR:

Oh great.

MS:

Pleasant conversation, a wonderful conversation. So, what did your, um, what did your parents do? Growing up what- what was their job? How did they make a living?

SKR:

Well, my mother was a stay at home with us. And my dad, he did work like I don't know the proper name for it, but they were put in like marble floors. They did the airport; the old airport and he would travel doing that. But my grandparents. My grandmother was a maid, and my grandfather was the janitor at the city hall. So, I was raised with people with very little education but they always wanted me to be a better person. So that's exactly what I strive for and that's exactly what I did. But just growing up there and me trying to climb a tree and mess with the Blue Jay's eggs and they- they got me they ran me around that, that yard and I ran in the house screaming. My granddaddy said, "I told you that was going to happen." And I miss- I really miss those simple days that we- that I had back then, just a simple thing is throwing a rock just sitting down looking up in the sky, counting stars although all around us, we- it was like we were controlled within the neighborhood. Even if we played softball down the street from me, and if that ball went across that street was called Fairway Drive onto the golf course, we could not- we were not allowed to go get that ball. Because during that time it was for whites only. Even- one of my friends tried to do that. And this white guy told him. No, n-words could come across there.

MS:

So, there was kind of a fear of invading that space? Or-

SKR:

Yes.

MS:

Wonder what would happen if caught, besides being verbally told to get off.

SKR:

Oh, probably they would hang him.

MS:

Wow.

SKR:

Because I actually got to witness that- a body hanging over at Brady Gym. When you drive into the driveway. The gym is over to the left. And if you go straight, there's a little- like a little road they made. And it was a body hanging, hanging from a tree there.

MS:

Do you remember about what year that was? Just a range.

SKR:

I had to be around 12. And let's say I'm not that fast with that math now. So I was born in '53. So what you tell me what year was that?

MS:

Six- six- Mid 60s, early- mid 60s.

SKR:

Yeah, it was in the 60s. Yes.

MS:

Wow. in College Park.

SKR:

In College Park.

MS:

I know that tal- from talking with Jessica, Brady's gym was a hangout for a lot of youth in that community. Whether they played sports or not or- so for that, to be in proximity of Brady means- seems to me, somebody would have had to come in and invaded that space to get somebody-

SKR:

Oh, they did.

MS:

And euthanize him, yeah. You think that was the Klan?

SKR:

Yes, we knew- we couldn't prove it... yeah, we saw them. But we knew. Because it was like a fear- like they had already instilled the fear in us.

MS:

Yeah.

SKR:

And I got to live there more- longer than Jessica had to witness this kind of stuff. From even when I was- started dating. we would leave my street, go up Princeton, cross- one time- we get ready to cross on Conley then continue on (to) Princeton. There would be two white cops in their car. They would pull Larry over, that's the guy I was dating then, and they would shine this big spotlight in my face to make sure I wasn't a white woman.

MS:

Oh.

SKR:

See, I was- I've been traumatized from a kid.

MS:

Sure. You mentioned a few minutes ago that your light complexion could be a- could be problematic when dealing with other, other black children.

SKR:

Yes.

MS:

Right?

SKR:

Yes.

MS:

Did your siblings face the same thing? Where they as light complected or-

SKR:

No, I'm the only one that was as light as I am. Actually, I actually had a- when I was around darker complexion women, I would, like, try to make them be at ease with me and like me, even as an adult. Because I found out that they thought women that were very fair- a light complexion, they call it "light bright nearly white," that we were snooty, uppity. It goes back to me, like the house, you know back in the days where the slaves were some in the house, some outside?

MS:

Right.

SKR:

As that mentality continued on and with the par- somebody- they- the kids had to get it from somewhere?

MS:

Sure.

SKR:

So even when they treat me like that.

MS:

Sure. Well, so tell me about you're going off to school for the first time. Where- Did you say you went to JF Beavers?

SKR:

Yes. I went to J- that's the elementary. Uh, the first grade my granddad- they got me a beautiful red apple. And he said- he called me Sanders not Sandra. He says "Sanders, I want you to take this shiny apple, hand it to your teacher and you will be the teacher's pet." Okay. It worked. Then we had a garden, and he would grow like collards and turnips and- all in the back by the chicken factory, you know because our property- The fence was the chicken factory. Back of the chicken factory. But he would sit there and call us. And then I would say "Mrs. Coleman, my granddad sent you this." It was just- I think about things like that little bitty kid and me running around the yard, chasing chickens. Throwing rocks, picking up a stick. That little community that we live in, there were dysfunction, but there was a lot of love, a lot of support. It's like, we- every child was the parents' child. You know, if I was doing something wrong, then they will correct me. But I never did do anything wrong. I was always a "miss goody two shoes."

MS:

Well, I took this- you know, there's a common thread that I've heard in, in talking with Emma and Lawyer Dudley, Jessica, Charles and Ursel, Charles Dill. Is this sense that, you know, there- there was- it was a village that was raising a bunch of kids together kind of- and in the sense that if you did something, your parents would know about it.

SKR:

That's right.

MS:

And also, other adults would parent you by proxy, right?

SKR:

That's correct. Yes.

MS:

And so, um, you sa- now you said you were on- you lived on. Forgive me. You lived on Princeton?

SKR:

Princeton. West Princeton.

MS:

And so that, and if I- am correct that JF Beavers was on Princeton as well?

SKR:

No, it was on the next street over I think that was Rose.

MS:

Okay. So, you would walk to school?

SKR:

Yes, we would.

MS:

Okay.

SKR:

I would walk to school and that was a big thing. We would walk to school and unless I got rocked- they would rock me home.

MS:

You know, we've, we've learned quite a bit here about Jefferson Franklin Beavers. When you were young, and you were going to that school, did you have a sense of, of him and his family his- the role he played in education for Black students in College Park? Did you have a sense of that at the time?

SKR:

No, I didn't. But I'll tell you this.

MS:

Please.

SKR:

I would say the name to myself. I was- Jefferson Franklin Beavers. This is an important man. I mean, like in the first, second grade, I would just say the name out to myself. And then I would think, and that I was actually proud to be going to that school. But getting older, I never did really research what he did.

MS:

Yeah, he was, um, his daughter ended up writing a biography about him. And we just, we learned that he was a postal employee, but an advocate, kind of a mover for that school, which wasn't named after him until the 50s. But that school there, in that area. So, there's a whole story behind that. But so was there a teacher there that maybe made an impression on you at an early age?

SKR:

Yes.

MS:

More than another? And who would that be?

SKR:

Her name was Mrs. Reese. And I think that-

MS:

Why was sh-

SKR:

Was she my seventh-grade teacher? You said why?

MS:

Yeah, how did she make an impression? What- what- impression did she leave on you?

SKR:

It was her manner- her mannerisms, the way she would treat us, the kids- she treated us with respect. And that made you feel that you want to learn.

MS:

Right.

SKR:

And she was very into education. I wish I knew- Well, I don't know if she's deceased or not, but she really had an impact on me.

MS:

Were you a good student?

SKR:

I think so.

MS:

And so JF Beavers was- would take you from first grade to seventh grade and that would be it?

SKR:

We had those two little schools. I keep trying to remember it was one from the first grade over by the gym. I'm trying to remember was that- It was part of Beavers but when you get to a certain grade then we went to Beavers. First grade started over, I forgot the name of that school.

MS:

A different school.

SKR:

But in the same area.

MS:

Okay.

SKR:

You can walk from Beavers over to this school. And then over to the Brady gym. Everything was right there together.

MS:

Sure. Sure. So, after Beavers, you- Well, you grew up in College Park, so do you remember when Eva Thomas was being built?

SKR:

Yes.

MS:

We know that it opened in 1964. But we also know that it was part of a larger Urban Renewal Project. And urban renewal in the 1960s could mean different things for different people. And we know that it displaced a lot of people. Do you know anybody who might have been displaced, not by the construction of Eva Thomas, but by the Urban Renewal Project in general?

SKR:

No, no I don't.

MS:

No? But you remember the school being built? Well, what do you remember about it?

SKR:

Uh, I remember as being- I remember me being excited about getting a high school. And it was named after a Black woman. So that was exciting to me and couldn't wait to go there.

MS:

What year did you start there?

SKR:

Now see you're making me think I'm really, really old by not.

MS:

I'm forcing math on you again. I'm sorry.

SKR:

Yes.

MS:

Were you there when it opened? -I guess, was the question.

SKR:

Yes. Yes. I was there when it open.

MS:

And-

SKR:

And then we, I don't know if Jessica told you but we did a sit-in when they tried to close it. And they were going to-

MS:

Yeah, we're getting there. We're definitely getting there.

SKR:

Okay. Well, I don't remember, I can't remember.

MS:

Do you remember the first day of school that you went there?

SKR:

Nope.

MS:

No? What memories do you have of Eva Thomas, as far as you know, attending there? Was there a particular activity or... that you were involved in?

SKR:

Oh, yes. Let me- I have to go back to being a little girl and bring you up-

MS:

Sure. Oh, please.

SKR:

Okay. When I was a little girl, I'd get out of school. My mother and grandmother- they might not be in the- Oh, my mother and my father then were traveling. But we were with my grandmother and granddaddy. So, they were working. So, my granddad's twin brother was the janitor at the gym. So, we get- Me and my sister got to go inside, before they open. So, I will be sitting inside the gym, just sitting there. Think I was like, seven, eight. And Mrs. Brady asked my uncle, could she start playing with me with the basketball. And so, she did. And she started out by just rolling the ball to me. Roll it back. Then she had me dribble it. Well, to

make the long story short, Mrs. Brady turned me into a very good basketball player. We won and I have to land because I was- if I had a been playing now with the- they have women('s) professional- I would be playing.

MS:

You'd still be playing?

SKR:

Yeah.

MS:

What position, what position did you play?

SKR:

I was forward. And never played second string.

MS:

Right.

SKR:

And never played B-team. I went straight to varsity. And Coach Chapelle at Eva Thomas, she would come watch us play- because Miss Bessie had a team. We became a team. And she asked Mrs. Brady, could Sandra come and scrimmage with her team. So, I got to go- that was a big thing for me. I got to go scrimmage with the big girls.

MS:

Yeah.

SKR:

And Coach Chapelle said she couldn't wait until I got there to play with her. So, I played with Eva Thomas, I played at Headland, when they was just there for a few minutes. And then I played at College Park. Right. So, you actually- And I have pictures. I have pictures of the team. And if you need that-

MS:

Well, we would love to see them at least. And if not get copies of them too. That would be great.

SKR:

Oh yeah, I'll be more than happy to send you some copies.

MS:

So, basketball was your thing outside of class?

SKR:

Basketball. At first, I started out in the band playing the clarinet. And Mr. Patterson- I had to choose between basketball and band. So, I chose basketball. And Mr. Patterson, who was the band director, was a little upset with me because he said I was really good with that clarinet.

MS:

Sure.

SKR:

But I just love the game of basketball.

MS:

So, when you were at Eva Thomas, now we know this- you know, (the) 60s is still segregated high schools. Did- did Eva Thomas- Did you all play white schools' basketball teams? Or was it primarily just other Black schools?

SKR:

No, it was just other Black schools.

MS:

Got it. So, just kind of rounding out your academic experience. You ended up graduating from College Park?

SKR:

College Park High.

MS:

In what year?

SKR:

'71.

MS:

Okay.

SKR:

And we were the first graduating, first class, integrated class.

MS:

Sure. So, for the next few minutes, I would like to talk to you about the events with the closing of Eva Thomas, but also wanted before- to give you an opportunity, now that we've talked about your background, your childhood, some of those traumatic experiences, some of those great experiences. Is there anything else that you would add to that, that maybe I haven't asked about? Any other memories that you would want to share of that part of your life?

SKR:

Before we talked, I had a lot of memories. And then my mind just went blank.

MS:

That's okay. We can revisit them. No problem... Go ahead.

SKR:

Another thing I got to see was, this was traumatizing. We would be downtown Main Street, that, you know, the Klan would just have their parades. And I have an uncle who was killed by the Klan. He was working for the city. And he went to, I think it was Chicago. But he didn't come back. But they pushed him off the train and killed him. And the cops in College Park said that no investigation would be done. And that was it. So, they closed it. And he- his body was so messed up, back then the bodies would come to the house. He had to have a closed casket.

MS:

How old was he?

SKR:

Uncle looked- I think he might have been in his 50s or 40s.

MS:

50s. It's a difficult question to ask. Do they- Why would that happen? What reason would they have to target someone?

SKR:

I think because he was moving up as a Black man and- with the city. It was something to do with the union then. I'm trying to remember but I had to bring up a little bit- let you know about that incident.

MS:

Sure.

SKR:

And they didn't want a n***** -what they said, to have that much power. So, I remember my grandmother and my granddad his sister, because that was his brother, baby brother. They were trying to get him not to go to Chicago. But he said he wasn't afraid, and he went.

MS:

It's disturbing to hear about that kind of violence, especially today even though, you know- Well, I'm going to leave it at that. So, we'll, we'll go back to Eva Thomas and talk about your being a student there. And I've, I've come to understand that there was a really, a sense of pride in having a school that new and having a nice, you know, brand new facility, state of the art, which up until that time was not real common-

SKR:

No.

MS:

for the Black students in Fulton County.

SKR:

That's right.

MS:

Am I correct?

SKR:

Correct.

MS:

So, it must have been some surprise when you find out that the county Board is getting ready to close the school. Do you remember when you found that out?

SKR:

No, I don't remember exactly when. But I can remember the pain. I'm revisiting the pain of shock. Anger, what do we do? Now that's when we tried to sit in and then the parents going to tell me- so I couldn't continue, that I was going to be bussed to Headland High. And I felt like I was- I felt like I was betraying my students that were there that continued. But I couldn't be disobedient. And still a minor, but that, that hurt.

MS:

Sure. So, um, I kind of have a little timeline of the events that took place that summer as they were getting ready to close the school. And not to stick so much with the timeline but to kind of keep an- an idea of the events that made up the larger event, right? So, what I've learned is that they were going to close the school and then the students from Eva Thomas were to go and register... and there's a- and there's a report that students from Eva Thomas were being turned away during registration at College Park. Is that- is that correct?

SKR:

I really don't know because I didn't go. I just remember them not wanting us there.

MS:

Not wanting you at College Park?

SKR:

No.

MS:

And so, what did you do then?

SKR:

We had to go there anyway.

MS:

Tell me about the sit-in and as far as- was it a mass move or kind of, individuals collecting in one place all together? Or how did that begin, I guess- the details on how it went.

SKR:

Oh, okay. It was like- (I) can't remember how we- it was organized. And the students- I can't remember who started it. But we- that was our protest. I mean, "how dare you come and take something from us when you didn't want us at your school?" Yep, that was wrong, I mean I still don't understand that. To this day.

MS:

Right. There's some-

SKR:

I mean, I know what it is, its hate. That's why I have an article that I've worn: this blue ribbon and the way they worded it that they did- really did not want to give me the credit- but that beat out two white schools for the county.

MS:

And this is a blue ribbon that you won for what?

SKR:

I did a science fair and I did anthropologies about the Aborigines and in the seventh grade they said most kids didn't even think like that. But I've never been normal. [laughs] No, I've always been silly, happy-wanted everybody else to be happy around me. Jessica, they'll tell you that I've been a nut all my life really? [laughs] I'm still one.

MS:

That's okay.

SKR:

A good nut now. A good nut

MS:

That's right. That's right. Were you there when the sit-in occurred? There's some images from some WSB newsreel footage of a gymnasium full of students singing, clapping, you know, almost joyously, right? This is the sit-in as it's taking place. Right at the opening of the 1969 school year. Were you in that gymnasium at that point?

SKR:

The first sit-in. Yes.

MS:

You were? Do you remember what happened in that gymnasium?

SKR:

No.

MS:

No? In this footage, it shows a sheriff- Fulton County Sheriff Leroy Schtynchcombe reading a court order to the students. Do you recall that at all?

SKR:

I do now that you said that.

MS:

Yeah. Do you remember what happened after that?

SKR:

No.

MS:

No. Were any stu-

SKR:

Well, as far as students, I remember saying that we're still going to do it.

MS:

Still going to stay?

SKR:

Uh huh.

MS:

Yeah. How long did you stay?

SKR:

I can't remember. I don't know if I was one of the ones that had to just go on home. Because I think if- the parents probably heard about it, and they came up and they got some of us. I might have been in "some of us" groups.

MS:

Right now, I know you were the oldest of your siblings. Did any of your siblings participate in the sit-in at all?

SKR:

Oh, no.

MS:

No? Too Young?

SKR:

Um, too young. I'm seven years older than my baby sister- 10 years older than my little brother. And my little- my sister, Diana. She was three years younger. I think she probably wanted to come, but they didn't let her come.

MS:

Sure. There's also reports of parents taking- participating in it. Is that a memory from yours, too?

SKR:

Yes, it was. But mine didn't.

MS:

No?

SKR:

No.

MS:

If you had to guess how many people were participating in the sit-in when you were there- What would you say? How many, 200? Maybe more?

SKR:

I would say 200 or maybe more.

MS:

Yeah?

SKR:

I'm trying to go, think back.

MS:

I know.

SKR:

I can recall it being packed.

MS:

Did you have a sense then of all the newspaper articles, and the news cameras of what was taking place as far as the media covering it, because they were covering this thing almost daily? A lot of the information I've got is from the newspapers or, like I said, this newsreel footage I've seen. Did you have a sense back then that it was a big deal?

SKR:

Yes, yes. It was a very big deal. And we were proud that we made it a big deal.

MS:

Yeah.

SKR:

History making. We didn't realize (it was) going to be, like, history- history making, but it was.

MS:

Yeah.

SKR:

Our little area should not be forgotten.

MS:

Right. Now, if I say the name Morris Dillard, how would you describe him?

SKR:

Trying to remember, Morris Dillard.

MS:

NAACP?

SKR:

Oh, yes. Yes. Powerful. Determined. For justice, equal rights. Those words come to my mind when I think of him.

MS:

Yeah. So, who were your friends? Your close friends? Was that Jessica? I mean, were you all participating in the sit-in together?

SKR:

Yes.

MS:

So, there was a sense of belonging and friendship and community there?

SKR:

Yes. And we were close about it and I felt, I felt that I betrayed Jessica because I had to do what my parents say versus what we had already agreed upon. But-

MS:

Which is stay and then your parents-

SKR:

Which is stay and fight?

MS:

Okay. I think actually, they- Julian Bond, actually spoke there as well. There were some- a lot of people have come to light that actually participated or came by the sit-in that, um, that I didn't realize before when this story first came to my attention. It looks like that there was also, and Jessica kind of described this, kind of this rally at Friendship. I guess it was at a Baptist church, or is it-?

SKR:

That's the church I was a member of. Friendship Baptist church.

MS:

Yes, and so it sounds like there were several rallies there-

SKR:

Yes.

MS:

During this time, right?

SKR:

That's correct.

MS:

And so, after the sit-ins- Well, let me ask you this looking back now, do you feel like those- the sit-in was successful? Into what you set out to accomplish?

SKR:

No, no.

MS:

Why not?

SKR:

Because the s- well, the school did stay open. I mean, reopened. But it wasn't- I didn't graduate from there.

MS:

And you mentioned after, after Eva Thomas became, I guess, I think a middle school.

SKR:

Yes.

MS:

You moved on to Headland first. Is that correct?

SKR:

Yeah. We were bused to Headland first. Because they did it according to the area where you live. Which school it was, before we all ended up going to College Park High. None of that made sense to me. Why do all this 'going around about?' When, I guess they was trying to do- when I think about it now- they were trying to not have a lot of Blacks at one place. That's what I'm thinking. That just came to me. And I'm 68 now just came to me, I just know we were forced. We were a community of people, Black people that were forced to do something that we didn't want to do.

MS:

Right. We've seen that there's kind of a pattern that the Board followed as far as desegregation. It seemed that they desegregated the north end of Fulton County first, where the African American population was smaller. And then, within a couple of years it had worked it- That process had worked its way to your community, which was, which was one of the last schools to be integrated with others. So-

SKR:

I want to share- Can I share this with you? It's something I just thought about.

MS:

Please.

SKR:

When I was maybe six, seven, you know, my granddaddy was the janitor at the College Park City Hall. And one day, I had to go up there with him to get his check. And they needed him to take the mail down to the post office down the street. I don't know if you're familiar with College Park, Main Street and all that.

MS:

Yes.

SKR:

Okay. But I remember coming out the front door, they had not widened the street to be big, like it probably is today. I haven't seen (it) in a while. But as we were walking down the walkway to, I'm not good at North, South, East and West. But we would be coming out, we're going to go to the right. Yeah. Towards the post office. And my granddad said, across the street was coming a white guy and a little boy, about my age. And my grandfather said "Sanders, in a minute we go have to get off the sidewalk. So that man and that boy can pass." And I looked up at him and I said, "Why?" And he said, "Don't question me just do what I say." So, I said, "Well, Papa, we step out on the street, we might get hit." So, he said, "Don't- just hold on to me tight." I'll never forget us stepping off the sidewalk to let them pass by and me and that little boy. We kept looking back at each other. And that- to this day, I wonder, was he thinking the same thing I was thinking? Why do we have to, why do those people have to get off the sidewalk? I just- I watched him talk to my granddad like, boy, you know, he's older than them. Like it was stripping him of his pride.

MS:

Sure. This is College Park, 1950s and 60s.

SKR:

That's right, College Park. Yes.

MS:

When you were young, in school, as a student, were you, what were you thinking your future? What did you dream about doing?

SKR:

Oh, I always wanted to be a judge.

MS:

A judge?

SKR:

Yes, first, I wanted to go to law school. And then I wanted to become a judge and hopefully got- get appointed to the highest court. But that didn't work out. The day I graduated from high school, I told my mother that I want to go to Morris Brown, then to John Marshall Law School. Start me a practice. And I forgive her for what she told me. But she said "I don't know how you're going to do that because we can't afford that. You need to get you a job with some benefits at the McDonald's." And I'm saying, I'm looking at her saying "What?" So, I got married and, right out of high school. But I did go on to a school, tried to get out of school fast and ended up being at a mob laundering-money place. That was in East Point. It was called Career Business Institute. Went all the way to time to graduate and then there's a padlock on the door.

MS:

Why?

SKR:

Because it's- Oh, yeah, that was federal. It was mob, mob money.

MS:

Oh.

SKR:

Mafia.

MS:

I see.

SKR:

They were laundering- laundering money through that business.

MS:

So, what did you do after you- after that?

SKR:

Well after that, let's see, I started- Oh, I worked for MARTA.¹ I was the first receptionist for MARTA. Then I started selling Mary Kay Cosmetics. So, I say there's more than one way to skin this cat. Because my idea of success was to make six figures. That's the- and that was a young girl back then I did it, at age 20. And my mother said, "Do you realize how much money is going through your hands? It's too much money for a young girl." So, I'm saying "Wait a minute. What? Okay." But I found out my mother's mother, the one with the fifth-grade education, is the one that said "Do better than me." Because I would go to her on, on Rugby Avenue where she was working in the houses for the white women. And I would just walk around in that house. She said, "Don't touch anything." And I said, "I won't grandma but when I grow up, I'm going to have a house like this." And she said, "Well, I hope you do, baby. I want you to be better than me." So, I've always wanted to not think I'm better than anybody else. But I did not want to just remain at the level where some people think if you come from humble beginnings, you don't go above that. But I've never thought that- I always say the sky is the limit and just like my granddad told me- said, "Sanders I don't care what kind of job it is." I don't know about profanity so- on, on your show so I'm going to leave that part out, what he says *beep, beep*. But he said, "I want you to be the best, *beep* person there is."

MS:

A lot of *beeps*.

SKR:

Yeah, a lot of *beeps*. And I grew up with those good working ethics and every job I had, I've always excelled.

MS:

How much- how much is your experience at Eva Thomas and the sit-ins and, you've- you've really hit on some, you know, some powerful and disturbing kind of things. How much is, you know, that whole collective experience growing up through high school in College Park at Eva Thomas, what is that- What have you taken from that as you look back now and how has it affected your life afterwards?

¹ Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA)

SKR:

Thank you for asking me this. I've taken all of that, it was really traumatic sometimes and the happy times- I've let myself not ever want to be bitter for somebody else's hateful heart and I look at every individual as a human being regardless if they like me or not. And it has taught me to be strong, loving, with my faith- I think I'm a- I think I'm that girl. If I can't help you better your life, because I know what it is to be discriminated against. I know what it is, within my own people. I wasn't wanted there as a little child. I couldn't go up the street, so I used to say "Well, where do I fit in?" But I just treat- some people will have taken all that and become very bitter and hate white people. I just believe one day still, it's all going to be- everybody's going to understand that this outer shell is only an outer shell. Inside, we are all the same. So, some people say "Well, good luck with that one."

MS:

Well, you know, I mean, clearly the past couple years, well, we certainly haven't achieved, you know, perfection here in this world. And-

SKR:

Nope.

MS:

It makes me- it makes me want to ask you, um, you know, because of what you just said, you've experienced, you know, kind of discrimination from different angles. What would you say to, you know, our students who may hear this message through an exhibit or through your oral history? What would you say to them about where we are today? And what would be the message you would want to deliver? You'd want them to hear from all this? Now that's a very heavy question. But-

SKR:

Yes.

MS:

I'll give you a minute. Take your time.

SKR:

Yes, I would want them to hear that you must look beyond your obvious dislike, if you are feeling like- get to know somebody first before you judge. None of us are the same. But because a person's economic status, social, or you know, however, don't judge them by that. Get to know the individual. And I'm still thinking what else to say- because you, that was a heavy big question.

MS:

That was a heavy question.

SKR:

Repeat it to me again. So, make sure I-

MS:

What would be your message today, to our students, or to any youth? What would be your message that's going forward, that you've learned from all this- and you would want them to know going forward?

SKR:

Well, another thing I would say is don't let hate deter you from striving to be your best person.

MS:

Perfect.

SKR:

So that's exactly what I did. Do you know how I felt when I'm in the Black community and the kids don't want me there?

MS:

You experienced that a lot?

SKR:

Yes. To this day, I still- there are women, Black women that are dark skinned. They don't like me from just viewing me.

MS:

When- when you went to a formerly all-white school, or predominantly all-white school after (the) Eva Thomas experience. I mean, how were you treated by white people, as a high schooler coming to their school? "To their school," I say in air quotes.

SKR:

They accepted me better than my Black people did.

MS:

Is that right?

SKR:

And someone will say, "Oh, I can tell you got some of our blood."

MS:

Hm.

SKR:

That's right. I was accepted. One young lady. I don't think I- I'm not going to call- Can I call a name?

MS:

That- sure. You can always, we can always- edit it out. It's not-

SKR:

Okay. I'll never forget, we play basketball together. Her name was Woo Woo. A nickname, Carolyn. Carolyn comes from a very racist family. She was an only child.

MS:

She's white?

SKR:

She's white. And Woo Woo- They lived in this big old, beautiful house with the big columns and everything. And she told me she said, "San, I come from a racist family. I don't ever want to be nothing like that." So, it was me, and I thought it was my best friend with us, Amanda. We were in her car, but anyway we went to Woo Woo's house. And Woo Woo's mother came to the door and said, "What you think you doing?" And she said, "Well, I'm here with my friends." Now I'm light, Amanda is dark. So, Woo Woo got out to bring- said "Come on y'all." And her mother pointed and said "that n-word. That n***** can't come in but that one right-" pointed at me, I was okay.

MS:

She was pointing at Amanda first. Said she can't- she can't come. But you can.

SKR:

And I ask Amanda does she remember this? And she said she didn't remember that. Well, of course, we all are getting older, but she was with us. And Woo Woo told her mother. "If both of my friends can't come in, I'm not coming in." and she got in her new car. And she sped off. And we said, "Ooh, you going to get in trouble." She said, "I hate that. I hate racism. We are all the same. What's wrong with folk. I saw, I heard with all this about Black people, Black people." Well, that Black they then use that word, it was the N word.

MS:

Yes, ma'am.

SKR:

For that, I often think about Woo Woo. She said she would never ever raise her kids to be like they brought her up. Last time I heard that she was at a country recording studio, where her name was Carolyn Woods. Yeah, that was- I just wish more people with these kids today, especially young Black kids, these gangs. I wonder, do they think? What is obvious, they do not think. They don't know the struggle.

MS:

Right? Well-

SKR:

I mean, up. We were- let's see, I went to- it was an Amoco service station on Main Street. And I didn't pay any attention. I wanted to go to the bathroom. And they said "You can't go around there, can't you read?"

And that's when I saw the sign 'colored, whites only.' They haven't experienced that. But that experience has made a lot of people, Black people, bitter and they are still bitter. I understand. I mean, I try to empathize with them. But I was brought up in this- but they would say you, you really not Black so you can't talk. Oh, let me tell you about when the 'I'm Black and I'm proud' came out.

MS:

Okay.

SKR:

I was told I didn't have the right to say that.

MS:

And this was when you were- when you were like-

SKR:

In high school.

MS:

In high school. So, you were kind of stripped of those rights by others.

SKR:

Well, I- I know. I'm just saying that the meanness to- they don't realize how this still affected me. But it still didn't stop me. It didn't make me a bitter person. At all. I had a Facebook post one day and I said to some of you College Park people who used to call me the white girl. Um, hey guess what? I'm still that person. Which I know what y'all can do for me now.

MS:

That's great. Anything else?

SKR:

Well, I wish- no, no, I'm saying this first. Thank you.

MS:

Thank you.

SKR:

Thank you for caring, thank you for caring, to want to keep the memory and the injustice, to let it be known what we went through. I mean, it was- we- I'm from College Park, but I'm from a village-

MS:

Yes.

SKR:

-within a village. That's the only way they look at that because we were segregated. We could- Oh, did anybody tell you that we can even go up and watch the white kids play at- Anybody told you this? Okay. The little community. Are you familiar with the area?

MS:

I am- You know what? Just in the past five years.

SKR:

Oh, just in the past five years.

MS:

Yeah. So, I don't- have a frame of reference for what College Park used to be beyond it's- what it is now.

SKR:

Okay.

MS:

That's kind of why I asked you about the- or I asked everybody about the urban renewal and how it changed the city. Because a lot of our researchers won't know College Park historically either, if that answers your question. But you go ahead with your story. I'm sorry.

SKR:

Okay, we could not even- there's Conley Avenue, and- but that's- Princeton continues on up. And it's, if it's still there. But the baseball fields used to be on the left.

MS:

Okay.

SKR:

At College Park High. Well, we would go up there just to watch the kids play. And the white people would come and tell us we couldn't be there, like shooing us back. Go back to where you belong. It's an invisible line. We were segregated by an invisible line. And we knew not to cross those lines. First, there wasn't even a fence there. Then they put a fence up. That's to keep us out.

MS:

Wow.

SKR:

And I remember going- see, every day, they would stop us and shine a big spotlight on me. But I can remember people when the class- Oh, this is another story: in our little street where I live, the back of our house was like a little alleyway. And we would take the shortcut, me and my sister, to go down Mr. Mac's drive in to get some cookies. Okay. Well, this guy had on his Klan outfit, but his face was showing. So, he told us, he said you little n***** gals don't come through here. So, I grabbed my sister's hand then we ran back home. And I told Papa, what we just witnessed. And he said- Well, I was saying in a little child's voice

back then. But he said, um, "Y'all- y'all need to go the long way." So, I said to myself, "I wonder, have they actually caught some of the older people going through there and beat them?" Just, they would do stuff like that. I just, it was a fear. We were raised with fear. And that's traumatic. So, I think everybody in College Park should be paid something for all- what we went through.

MS:

Sure.

SKR:

But, I'm serious about- that was trauma.

MS:

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. From what I've heard today, I can understand. I can see that. Um-

SKR:

Oh, and one more thing. One more thing.

MS:

Sure.

SKR:

Okay, when I was 13, I was at the Winn Dixie store off Main Street. My mother and I were shopping, and I was pushing the buggy. And the little white girl had to be about six, seven. And she said "Mommy look. There's a n***** girl," and I turn. And my mother said, "We need these groceries, let's keep moving, don't pay attention." That's and- they instill this- well, we know that, they're still going on: hatred.

MS:

So, there were businesses you could or could not go into?

SKR:

Oh, yes, that's right.

MS:

Were there businesses that were strictly for the Black community in College Park?

SKR:

Yes, those- those would be the little mom and pop stores in our village. Like Mr. Mac's Drive In, where they tried to make it nice to drive in. You go in there and they fix little sandwiches and stuff for you. Then we have Mr. Barnes. All these were little mom and pop, little neighborhood stores.

MS:

Sure.

SKR:

And then they would let the- our parents have a- run a tab because you know they didn't make that much money. And I'm trying to remember how many stores. I know missed that one. 1, 2, 3 maybe four that remember? Then they built Black-owned, Bussies Grocery Store. Has anyone told you about that yet?

MS:

Um, I- it- the names familiar, but they haven't told me about it.

SKR:

Ross Bessie, it was his family. He was in my class. Now that was a big deal. We get our- they had the laundromat and grocery store. So that was a big thing. There are a lot of successful people that came out of College Park. I guess you already know this.

MS:

I've- Yes. And in particular, your age group.

SKR:

Uh, me?

MS:

Your- Your generation has been- The names have been passed around that I've heard. So, yes. Have you been back to College Park? When's the last time you were there?

SKR:

I haven't been back recently since all this change. I mean, they said, you can't even tell what was what?

MS:

Well, yeah, it's changed. I mean, it changed a lot in your time. And I know, it's changed a lot just since I've been here. And I've been in the area since the '90s. So, it's taking on a different look. But I can sense it's still, like you said, the village within the village and your, your group being, staying so close is, you know, is a product of that, and speaks... So, what took you to Kan(sas)? And I should say that Sandra right now, we've been on this call for about an hour and I don't if you have other obligations. Just let me know. If you don't mind, I'd like to ask another question or two.

SKR:

Oh, no, no problem.

MS:

Okay, great. Thank you. So, what, what events- what took you to Kansas? Where you are now, in Topeka. How'd you get there?

SKR:

Oh, okay. When, um, when I worked for General Motors in Atlanta, they closed the executive office where I was and my brother had come to Olathe, Kansas. And he started a business. And I've always loved fashion. And I had got my business license. And I was actually selling out of the trunk of my car really. In Atlanta, when I was dressing everybody at GM. So, my brother said, "Since you're not working now- Kansas, they need you up here with fashion." So, he said, "I will help you open up a place." He did. I have a beautiful store. Then I got depressed. When I came from Atlanta, I was married to somebody. Now you get a minute, I will take you around then (and) tell you about this story. Okay?

MS:

Okay, that's fine.

SKR:

Okay?

MS:

All right.

SKR:

When I- Okay, I was married to a guy by the name of Robin Johnson. Now, when I started getting depressed, Robin said that I just, I was lazy. So, my depression kept getting bad till I was really full blown depressed. Now, my husband that I'm married to now, his sister and I worked together at MARTA back in 1973. Excuse me. I hadn't seen Pat in about 20 years. So, she wanted to come visit me in Olathe. I'm still married to Johnson. I didn't want her to come because I was depressed. I even made my dog depressed. I had a Chow Chow. But she never knew she was a dog. Because she was small. She thought she was a human.

MS:

I have one of those. Yes.

SKR:

You have a chow?

MS:

Not a chow. I have-

SKR:

But a dog. Okay.

MS:

Dog slash child.

SKR:

We have so- you understand me.

MS:

Yes.

SKR:

Her name was Lady Pebbles Johnson. Well Pebbles- they sit stuff with- they love when they love you. So, I would just lay in the bed all the time. And when we would- I would take her for a walk. And do you know she would just sit? She did not want to go back in the house. She was trying to tell me it wasn't healthy for me. But that husband told me that I was no more use to man, that I wasn't any- wasn't beautiful like I used to be and he wished I would just die. So, he let the house actually go into foreclosure. The lights, everything was turned off. So, what I did- that's why I believe in honesty, I called the light, power, everybody, I told the truth. I'm married to man who no longer loved me and I don't have the money right now, or know what to do. Now that's- no, that's after I opened the business because I had to close it because I was too depressed. Told my brother it wasn't going to work. Okay. So, my dream of having boutiques- Were you about to say something?

MS:

No, no, no, no, go ahead.

SKR:

Okay. So, my dream of having stores and all major cities and abroad is on the back burner now. I'm still holding on to my license. But okay, so I used to lay there and look at the bed, at the ceiling and pray and say, "Well, what am I going to do?" So, I called the mortgage company, told them what was what. Do you know, those people let me stay in the house a year? I mean, it was like favors whether it's called here with me, which you're about to hear how blessed I am. Okay? So, when Pat came to see me, she stayed four days. But on the way back, she didn't tell me this right away, but on the way back, she says she cried. She called her brother, George. That's who I'm married to now. And she- George was married during the time, but his wife died. They had been married 30 years. And she died at the VA hospital here. Okay? So, Pat said, "You know, my brother I told you about, lives in Topeka?" I said, "Yeah." "Well, you know, my sister-in-law passed." "I saw, I'm sorry to hear that." And, but she didn't let me know that she was talking to George. Let George know about her girlfriend. And the relationship I was in wasn't right. So, George said, "Your friend can come stay with me. I got this three-bedroom home. Just me." George took me and my dog in. Because we were homeless. They closed- foreclosed the house. George took me and my dog in as a favor. Not as this woman. But as his sister's good friend. Now, George did- He's a Vietnam vet. He did six tours to Vietnam. He was aboard the Enterprise. He was in the Navy over the Enterprise when she got blew up. So, he's 100% total permit service connected. George was the perfect gentleman for me. But wasn't anybody going to be looking at me as- a woman, the way I was looking. But he took me in her- he was dating the judge here and-

MS:

The Judge.

SKR:

[inaudible]- judge and I was the little, his little administrative assistant. I was sending flowers. And they would go out on dates. And when George come back I said, "George how did your date go?" he's all, "I don't think that's going to work Sandy." because he's like, he's 11 years older than I am. So he said, "I don't think

that's going to work." So, I said, "Why?" I'm all serious. He said, "Nah, just think God wants me do something else." Okay. I had no idea he was thinking about me. So, when only- when one day he told me he said, "You know, my sister told me what I see is not you." She said, he told "She, Pat, said that you are moving the shaker, a go getter." And I would just cry all the time. He said, "You (are) my- My dove with a broken wing." And I lost it. I said, "Nobody never said that to me." He said, " Well there's more to you than what- you're just depressed." So, I said, "Yeah, I'm depressed." But he still didn't say anything like he was thinking about marrying me. So, this was like, let's say I moved in with him (in) 2004. Okay, March, the end of the year going into Christmas. He said, "Sandy, you want to see my papers about me? My PTSD and stuff?" I said, "No why?" And he said, "Well, I want to marry you. If I marry you, we're going to get you taken care of. And you're not ever going to have to worry about nothing." He said, "Well, I only make a Social Security and my veterans pay." Well, he knows I've been used to big figures and big houses and all that, right? He had just a little house and a little raggedy truck, right? So, I said, "Wow, George." He said, "I promise you things will get better." Now my birthday is February the second, his February the fifth. So, we have a lot right there, that Aquarius thing. But um, we got married that July. And this is like I'm living the best life I ever lived. On the fixed income. The judge when I was married, you would've thought it was some high profile divorce with Johnson. He wanted half of my pension from GM. He wanted proceeds from the business that I had started, but the lawyer told me to close the business account and just let everything be zero. He said- had a detective- private detective following me at George's house saying that George was my man. All the while, the lawyers laughed and said they (are) not going to- judge won't even believe that. This- that's not what happened. The man actually fell in love with you after the fact. So, I teased George. Said "You know what, I beat the judge." But it's- That's how I got to Topeka.

MS:

Yeah.

SKR:

George is in Topeka. He came from Minnesota. He wants to bring me back to Atlanta. But the VA misdiagnosed him. I want you to- You got a pencil, can you write my website down? And you can look at it.

MS:

Actually. Yes. And I'm- I was going to ask you to tell- tell us about that before we get off. So, but go ahead. Yes. What's your website?

SKR:

It's www.SandraRuckersAngels.org.

MS:

Dot org. That's S A N- for our researchers S A N D R A R U C K E R A N G E L S dot org.

SKR:

Rucker's. With apostrophe. Sandra Rucker's angels

MS:

With Apostrophe S angels. Perfect. Go right ahead.

SKR:

The VA misdiagnosed George. Said he has- the doctor never did check him or anything. He just pat him on the back and said "George I think, you have the flu." Well, for three weeks, we (were) thinking it was the flu, but he was getting worse. He didn't have symptoms of a flu, I mean, sniffles, no signs of a flu. So that third week, we went back, and they come to find out it was congestive heart failure all the while. So, they had to rush him to another hospital. And I didn't know anything about advocating, then. I just knew that I had faith. And that something had to be done. Because the VA was trying to bring him back. I have written up a complaint. So, the doctor in the ER told me that there were blood clots in all his major organs. And that they didn't have the medical staff to save him so they could send him to [inaudible]. Okay, we all had been married like 15 months then. So, they send the [inaudible], the next day. The VA calls me so they want to prove to me that they are (a) good hospital. So, they want to bring him back. And I said no, no, no, you're not going to kill him. What changed overnight? So, I will- it was snowing during that time. So, I will walk around I said "God, what am I going to do?" And someone would say call the news people. And it's like, maybe 4:40, because everybody closes at five. So, I call the new station. They say "Well, ma'am, why don't you call Nancy Border. Congresswoman Nancy Border." So, I call Congresswoman Nancy Border. I'm going to speed it up a little bit here for you, I call Congresswoman Nancy Border's office, told her what was going on. I would just cry. And this guy said, "Don't worry. I (will) call you back in a few minutes. 10 minutes to five now." Do you know in 10 minutes he was at the hospital. George stayed there for 32 days fighting for his life. I was going to, because I was depressed, I told you that when I got with George, so I was going to see the psychiatrist at the VA and group therapy. And I was sitting in a group with these 20 vets. And I say, "You know what? I could say, well, I didn't help George." And I looked at the psychologist, I said, "Dr. [inaudible], I got something else in mind." And she said, "What's that Sandra?" And I pointed around I say, I'm going to spend the rest of my life fighting for all you guys. Because I don't want anything, you should experience what I experienced with yours." So, when I got home, I started, I called and said, "I want to start a business." So, they said, "What you want to name it?" Said, "Sandra Rucker's Angels. The veterans are my angels." So, the lady said, "Wow, that's a good name." So, it's been like, maybe 14 years now I've been in business. And I've been to DC with my cause. I've been interviewed by the law professor here. I've been on TV several times. They tried to figure out how the only difference between me, the American Legion, and the DAV is- they have all those millions of people. Just me, myself and I. I've been to court several times, (a) judge told me I was most impressive. I've won all my cases. And I found out too that before like I wanted to be a career person. But the best job is this job right here being an advocate. And to see the looks on the vets' face when I give them their 100%. My nickname at the VA is the Pitbull. Thank you for listening to my story. I just, I made it short. But I want you to go to my page and you read about me.

MS:

We'll encourage, encourage, everybody to do that. That's wonderful work. Maybe everything else has prepared you for that. I don't know. You could speak to that. I couldn't but...

SKR:

I think you're right. You're right. Yeah.

MS:

Thank you once again for-

SKR:

And I'm going to say thank you.

MS:

...all your stories. And I am, I'm stopping the recording right now.