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INTERVIEWEE: Rosetta Jones Vickers

INTERVIEWER: Nadia Aybar and Cherrie Bush

TRANSCRIBER: Andrea Benitez

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Interviewer 1: (?) and we're here at the John A. McKinney Information Center at William H. Turner Technical High School--

Interviewer 2: To interview--

I1: Ms. Vickers about her personal history. Thank you for being with us.

Vickers: Thank you for inviting me.

I1: You're welcome. I'm quite interested in your outfit and I'd like to have you explain why you decided to wear it and what it means.

V: Well, as you know, this is-- February is Black History Month and even though I believe in all kinds of clothing, this week especially I decided to wear some African attire. And this outfit, perhaps, is more than twenty years old. What's beautiful can last a long time, like you.

I2: Where did you get it?

V: A lady from Africa was here a long time ago selling them and that's where I bought them from.

I1: Okay. I'd like to know a bit about your early childhood. Can you please describe, you know, how you grew up and your parents and your grandparents if you may?

V: I'm very excited about that and I always like to tell [inaudible] that I'm a living testimony of what can happen when families work together. I was born in Dublin, Georgia--

I1: Oh, interesting.

V: --The youngest of ten children. And I'm always happy to say-- [audio cuts] --had ten children. If she had nine, I wouldn't be here. And I'm also happy to-- [audio cuts] --that I just called a niece of mine who is my oldest brother's child and asked her to ride with me- (Ms. Jenny Jones Edmond?)- and she rode with me this morning because I am so happy to celebrate family, friends, and all the beautiful things that it takes for us to pull together to get ahead in life.

I1: So growing up, you enjoyed having a lot of brothers and sisters?

V: Well, I didn't know what it was to be poor; I wasn't poor, I was 'po' - not quite had enough to add the 'O-R' on it. But we were so happy with everything we had. We had plenty to eat, plenty sisters and brothers, and my nieces and nephews were my age since I was the youngest of ten.

I1: Oh, that's great.

V: So we were excited. But we didn't have a high school in the community where I grew up for little black girls and little black boys. So I had to go away to school when I finished grade six.

I1: Grade six, huh?

V: When I finished grade six. I have not stayed home since I was grade six. But, oh, how blessed I've been. Oh, how happy I am.

I1: Were you unaccompanied when you left?

V: I went to live with a sister who lived near a high school. And that's where I lived until I finished high school. And even though I went away and my mother could not read, she was my first student. She told me just before she died, she was so proud of me. She wanted me to be a teacher so I could teach others the way I had taught her. And that's where I spend my life now, -- [audio cuts] --that I teach others.

I1: That's great. Can you tell us about the high school: name,--

V: The high school was Millville High School in Dublin, Georgia. It was a little country school, but that's where I was motivated because I had two teachers to tell me, "Zip your lip or sink the ship. You can be smart. You use your head, you can get ahead." And you know something? They motivated me so, it was shocking. I had never heard of the word 'valedictorian', but I was valedictorian of my class. I was very proud.

I2: When, like, you moved to Miami, where did you live?

V: Well, it wasn't quite like moving to Miami. When I finished high school, my mother died. I wanted to go to college so badly. College scholarships were things I hadn't heard about. But I met a young guy named (Zebedee?) Vickers. I was seventeen and he was nineteen and we married and he sent me to college.

I1: Oh, what a nice--

I2: What college did you go to?

V: I went to Fort Valley State University in Fort Valley, Georgia. And you know something? I just celebrated my fiftieth anniversary from Fort Valley State University last year.

I1: Congratulations. Did you enjoy the school very much?

V: I enjoyed it very, very much and I still support it and because someone was so helpful to me, I make sure now that I provide scholarships to young folks who want to go to college. They don't have to be 'A' students; they've got to be a determined student to hang in there. So, I've helped 200 children to go to college.

II: What do you remember about the days of segregation?

V: I don't -- [audio cuts] --about the days of segregation. I remember about-- well, we lived in a community, my parents and family still own the land that I was born on. But I won't ever forget the little white children were riding in a little bus, and we had to walk to school. But I'm so glad we walked to school- it made me have good health and it made me see that even though you can be down, you can still make it in this world and still have love in your heart. [audio cuts] --walked to school, enjoyed it, but there's some things that happened I won't ever forget but they made me strong. Not quite about segregation. The house I bought in 1965-- I brought an article because I would not show it to my children, I did not want them to be afraid. A white lady sold me the house and before I bought it and moved in, the people had written on there 'KKK'. But you know what? Three years later, I was the principle in the area and I was a principle of all those little children and they were so beautiful and their parents were so beautiful, too. So something bad can turn into something beautiful.

II: When did that happen?

V: That happened in 1965 when the house had 'KKK' all over it. And I made sure I wouldn't show it to the children because I didn't want to scare them to death, but I made sure I saved that article and it says, "Negro buys home, hate rears head." I didn't see that

article, someone else saw it and showed it to me and that's still the house I live in today, very close by here.

I2: So, were there any haunting memories of segregation or anything that you went through?

V: I still keep them in my mind but it's still something to make me move up. I remember when I was a youngster, my daddy went to vote in Cochran, Georgia. He was colored and told that blacks were not gonna vote, so he had to go home. But, he wasn't bitter, he just made sure he told us, "Hang in there, and things will work out great." And they have.

I1: Do you remember any family outings that you enjoyed, particularly in Miami?

V: In Miami?

I1: Yes.

V: Well, you know the Virginia Key Beach?

I1: Mm-hmm.

V: When whites couldn't go to-- blacks couldn't go to the other beaches? Well, we went there and we enjoyed it. My husband would hold my hand and we'd just eat a few little things that we'd take and we just enjoyed it immensely. The Hampton House was- that's already dilapidated now- was a place that someone could take the young ladies out. But, I didn't worry about those things. I was a reading specialist. I went from school to school. I worked with two other whites-- two whites, and I heard things as we'd go to eat at the counters. I won't ever forget because I was so fair and my hair was very red when I was young. I heard the lady say, "We're not gonna integrate schools, we don't want our children to go to school with the blacks." I wanted to say something, and the girl who was with me said, "When people are rude and angry, ignore them and let your light shine

and say something beautiful.” And that’s just what I did. In fact, I continued to go from school to school- black and white- helping children who needed reading.

I1: I’d like to bring you back to the subject of Virginia Key Beach. A couple of student here in the school are going to go down and help restore the beach. What are your feelings on that?

V: I think it’s beautiful. I’m glad that someone is doing that. There are some other things that I’m more interested in, and that’s touching the life of a young person. I do like historical sites and I’m glad that there are people who like different things. But, I believe that the young people can make the history, so that’s what I’m trying to touch is young people. That’s why eleven years ago when I retired, I started a place called, “Zeta Community Center” on Fifty-Fourth Street and Seventeenth Avenue, where we provide free tutoring and mentoring for children. And some nice attorney, and guess what? He was a white attorney gave me a computer lab- a Dell computer lab so we could help other people. So, it does not matter by color or anything as long as you know when you work together, you move up. When you pull one person down, guess what? You go down, too. When you lift somebody up, you go up, too. Okay?

I2: So, like, on your trips or visits to Virginia Beach, was it painful to go there knowing it was segregated?

V: It was not painful to me because when I’m with my family, where ever I am, whether I’m with an integrated group or with-- alone, it does not matter with me, I like to cherish the moment and enjoy it. Though only a couple of things happened that made me very sad when I was young: number one, I stopped at a traffic light right here in-- not too far from here, and two white guys pulled my husband out of the car because he’s dark and

they thought he was with a white girl. Now that made me sad, but guess what? I didn't have to worry about it. Things worked out just fine. He stepped back, hit his head on the thing and had to be rushed to the hospital- the guy who was gonna hurt my husband. When we went to court, the judge said, "Why would a--?" They were gonna pretend to tell a lie that my husband wanted to beat them up. But the judge said, "Why would a man with a wife and little baby in her arms get out of his car?" So, I told the truth. I said, "May I speak? I believe they thought I was white, because stopping at a traffic light, why would someone want to pull someone out of a car?" And the judge says ("They knew.?"?), so they charged the men for that. And that's the only thing that I see every time I pass that traffic light, I think about it and say how grateful we are that we can still hang in there and never let evil [inaudible] hold us down.

I1: What do you remember about the area before the school was built?

V: The area--

I1: This area.

V: I live right down the street. I was principle of Van E. Blanton Elementary. It was beautiful. My children went to Miami Central Senior High School. I saw a lot of plants out in the back, that's all I remember seeing. But I was so happy when they named the school after my good friend William Turner. I call him--

I1: Oh, did you know him personally?

V: Yes, yes, yes. Yes, yes, yes.

I1: Can you tell us a few memories you have of days with William Turner?

V: Well, we called him 'Bill'. He was a person who really wanted to do what I wanted to do: help people get ahead in life. And he was one of the persons who encouraged me.

After I was principle, I didn't want to leave there. Others wanted me to be (over?) schools. I didn't want to leave because I love being right in the school. But, I took his advise and I took the advise of a few others to accept the directorship and serve over fifty schools, so I did accept that and he was one of the persons who encouraged me to do it.

I2: Speaking of-- when you were principle at Van E. Blanton, is there, like, any memories you have about the school? (?) principle?

V: Those were the most beautiful days of my life. I was principle at a very [inaudible] age- twenty [inaudible] years old. My teachers were beautiful in my age- forties, fifties, sixties, some getting ready to retire. But I know when I looked in the mirror-- short dresses were in style in those days, I wore very short dresses. And when I looked around, all of my teachers had on the long dresses, I ran to the store, bought myself some dresses so I'd be in the right company. The teachers were kind to me. They said I worked them to death, but they didn't mind because I worked right along with them. When they filmed the school to show how beautiful things were in Miami, they came to Van [inaudible] We kept it clean, the children were well-behaved, they had to look the part. I told them they have a choice: they could be champions or little clowns. They all chose to be champions, and that's why I wrote a poem called 'The Champions Creed' because I wanted to tell them what it takes to be a champion.

I2: I'm sure the experience was lovely. And--

V: More than lovely.

I1: Once again, I'd like to thank you, but is there anything more you'd like to add?

V: I just want to say to the young people: set your goals early in life, work hard toward those goals. You can achieve anything if you believe it. You can achieve it if you believe

it. And I want you to know the Champion's Creed. And all the young folk who work with me get that, and I'm gonna give you a copy because when children can do it well, they get some nice little prizes- scholarships and different things. I just want to say a little of it for you. May I?

I1: Yeah, sure.

V: 'I'm a champion, can't you see? I need you and you need me. I will follow the champion's creed to lead. [inaudible] everyday to succeed. I'll work hard everyday. I'll study and I will pray. I will be all that I can be, it's as plain as A-B-C. My attendance and attitude will be top of the line. I believe in myself, my behavior will be fine. I'll be courteous, cooperative, and have courage to care. My life will be a role model for others to share. I'll dream big dreams and have goals I'll set. Dedication, determination, what I give, I will get. Education. Education is what is [inaudible] about. I believe in myself, without a doubt.' Thank you.

[audience claps]

I1: Thank you for being with us.

V: You're beautiful. You're beautiful, thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW