

Mrs. Marcia Martin Saunders

Oral History Memoir

Interviewed by Philip Kenlon

March 19, 2018

Miami Shores, Florida

Project: Virginia Key Beach Park

KENLON: Good morning.

MARTIN SAUNDERS: Good morning.

KENLON: Today is Monday, March 19, 2008.

MARTIN SAUNDERS: Eighteen.

KENLON: Two-thousand-eighteen. Thank you. My name is Phil Kenlon. I'm a graduate student in history at FIU University and I will be interviewing Mrs. Marcia Martin, who will share and tell of her memories of Virginia Key Beach during it's heyday in the period of 1945 to 1982. And once again, I just want to say thank you for your participation in this project.

MARTIN SAUNDERS: My pleasure. Marcia Martin Saunders.

KENLON: Okay. Marcia Martin Saunders. Thank you then. My first question is: what was it like growing up in Miami or elsewhere?

MARTIN SAUNDERS: Well, I grew up in Miami—in a part of Miami called Overtown.

It was from like Sixth Street to Twentieth Street. And from North Miami Avenue over to Twelfth Avenue at the time—not Twelfth— North Miami Avenue over to Seventh Avenue. It was at that time called Overtown. And we had good times over there. It was a segregated community. So as children, we saw all [of our] role models. The ministers lived in our community, the schoolteachers, the doctors, the lawyers, the maids, [and] the gardeners. So we had a perception of all life—middle class, low income—and we could make goals from there. It was a delight. People looked after their neighbors and their [neighbors'] children. We don't find that too much today.

KENLON: True and agreed. So, my next question would be—thank you for sharing— [what was it] like, growing up and where you lived? Who did you live with? Did you have any siblings?

MARTIN SAUNDERS: No, I was an only child.

KENLON: Okay.

MARTIN SAUNDERS: Yes.

KENLON: Only child.

MARTIN SAUNDERS: Interestingly enough. Yeah, living with my mom.

KENLON: So it was you—so just to clarify on my end— it was just you and your mother?

MARTIN SAUNDERS: Yes, and relatives [like] my dad's aunt. I stayed with her after school. And like I said, it was a fun neighborhood. We had English teachers. Mrs. Dean on one end. And we had a math instructor. The Seventh Day Adventist Church was on my block. Everybody from school principal—the elementary school principal lived across the street. It was a delightful neighborhood.

KENLON: Very good. What was your mother's— if you don't mind me asking— what was your mother's occupation? And what was your father's aunt's occupation?

MARTIN SAUNDERS: Well, my mother's occupation—she was a housekeeper for three families. She sent me to Hampton University off that salary. I was able to complete college, and it was a delight. My father was an insurance man when he lived in Miami. He sold African American life insurance before he went to New York.

KENLON: Okay, before he went to New York.

MARTIN SAUNDERS: I would go to New York during the summer for two weeks.

KENLON: Just curious, was he originally from there or did he just—?

MARTIN SAUNDERS: He was originally from Miami. Both my parents were originally from the Bahamas.

KENLON: Both your parents were originally from the Bahamas.

MARTIN SAUNDERS: Yes. My mother was born here, but her parents were from the Bahamas. And when her mother died, she went back over there to be raised.

KENLON: Ah, okay. Very good. Thank you. I think you might have already stated this, but I'll just ask it again. So, living with your mom, did you all live in an apartment or did you live in a house?

MARTIN SAUNDERS: We lived in a house. It was a wooden house; it wasn't cement. But she kept it beautifully decorated. The Davises—they owned a printing shop—lived a couple of doors down, and the Newbolts lived on the next street, and I was best friends with their daughters. So I didn't have to feel like I was an only child. I had friends to play with.

KENLON: Okay.

MARTIN SAUNDERS: Delightful childhood.

KENLON: Very good then. Just back-tracking a little bit, you said you went to Liberty University?

MARTIN SAUNDERS: Hampton University in Virginia.

KENLON: Hampton University. My apologies. What was your major?

MARTIN SAUNDERS: I majored in elementary education. I wanted to be a doctor, but back in those days you understood that the jobs available were either teachers or nurses. Unless, you know, you go for doctor. I worked in a doctor's office, Dr. Styles, for summer time, but I just felt that wouldn't be much right for my mom to put me through

undergrad and medical school so I majored in elementary education. Came home and taught for a year before I left.

KENLON: Okay. Excellent. You've already said [something about this] but I'm just curious, were there any other important like influences in your life? Or [was there] somebody in the community you looked up to? Anybody else besides the people you mentioned, or [was it] as you have said pretty much, everybody was looked up to as a role model?

MARTIN SAUNDERS: Yeah, we had role models right within our block, you know, which was good. And at the time, I guess it was just the radio when I was very small, but radio personalities and that kind of thing [lived] in the segregated community, [they were] the stars of the community, the Nat King Coles of the world. And they would perform on Miami Beach, but they lived over in our community. There were hotels that they lived in, so we could walk down the street and see famous people.

KENLON: Oh wow. Very interesting!

MARTIN SAUNDERS: Yes!

KENLON: Very interesting. My next question is—how did race or racism impact your early life? Besides, as you have said, living in a segregated community.

MARTIN SAUNDERS: I don't think I really, I guess, let it influence me too much. In that, the other black community was Liberty City, which started on Sixty-Second Street and up to, I guess, about Seventy-Fifth. And my grandparents lived in Liberty City, but

the bus that went from Overtown to Liberty City mostly had African Americans on it. So we didn't have to sit in the back of the bus and I didn't even swallow that concept because the bus that I took from Overtown to Liberty City—or I took the bus from Overtown to downtown Miami—was used by African Americans for the most part. Now if a white person got on the bus, more than likely, they sat in the seat behind the bus driver, but I wasn't very conscious of the fact that we couldn't go here, that kind of thing. I didn't digest that in that sense because we did get to go to the theaters probably on particular dates for plays and what not, or performances that came to town. So I wasn't eaten up by the 'You can't go here. You can't sit here,' kind of phenomenon.

KENLON: Okay then. I would say now, moving on to Virginia Key, could you tell me about the history of Virginia Key?

MARTIN SAUNDERS: Probably very little. It was very special to us to go to Virginia Key. Now that was black only. The activists who were in the community at the time—if they petitioned to the politicians to go to the other parts of the beach, they would just improve Virginia Key Beach. They gave us more trees over there because they knew that African Americans were already brown and black and didn't want to get sun tanned, in that sense. If there was a noise or petition about going to the other parts of the beach, they improved Virginia Key Beach. We had a merry-go-round, [and] what do you call that thing? The Ferris wheel.

KENLON: The Ferris wheel.

MARTIN SAUNDERS: Yeah. They made it a carnival over there somewhat so that we would not want to go to the rest of the beach. And, as I recall, we didn't go that often. Special holidays. Fourth of July maybe. And I think the last voyage over there would be Labor Day. However, it was a fun activity. As I recall, when I was very little, we had to catch a ferryboat to get from Biscayne, Miami part of Biscayne Boulevard to the beach. We went on a boat.

KENLON: Okay.

MARTIN SAUNDERS: I remember being on that boat a couple of times. A ferryboat or whatever you call it. I am probably misnaming it, but we couldn't drive directly to Virginia Key as you can do today. You had to be on some water vehicle.

KENLON: Well, did you have a good experience going on the ferryboat?

MARTIN SAUNDERS: Oh yeah. It was exciting. I still remember it.

KENLON: My next question would be, can you describe [the beach]? I know you said there were of course merry-go-rounds and they made [the beach] very nice, so that it was an enjoyable and good time.

MARTIN SAUNDERS: Yeah, they tried to make it as attractive as they could. So the people in the community who were about making things better for all of us would not be saying, "We want to go to the rest of the beach!" [To them they would say:] "Why, look what we're getting you!" That kind of thing. So I'm glad we're able to preserve Virginia Key Beach for its history's sake, and I hope that we can continue to do that.

KENLON: Yes, yes, indeed. Just to double-check, you said you really only went to Virginia Key on like holidays and special occasions?

MARTIN SAUNDERS: Special occasions. It had to have been organized by a church or a community group. That kind of thing. My mom just couldn't say, "Let's go to the beach!" It was an organized activity.

PK: Okay, it was an organized activity. So you—so you didn't go with your mother? So it was really through groups that you went?

MARTIN SAUNDERS: Yeah. I mean she would be with me, but it would be organized by either churches, their annual outing for the youth. That kind of thing.

KENLON: Okay then. Since you've mentioned the groups and then you also said you lived by a Seventh Day Adventist Church and that [it] was near your house where you grew up. I'm just curious do you remember the few times, or however many times you went? Do you remember there being any weddings or baptisms taking place there?

MARTIN SAUNDERS: No, not really. The only thing I remember—I think they met on Saturdays, and we went to church on Sunday. But the reason I was saying that [was to illustrate] that [the] block encompassed so much. The English teacher, Mrs. Dean, at the high school lived on the corner. As I've said, the school principal of Dunbar Elementary, Nelson Adams, lived right across the street from me. A retired math teacher. So we saw a scope of professional people within our realm, which you know, we could all aspire to be in those professions.



KENLON: Excellent. I know you've, you've said and talked about the ferryboat and the merry-go-round. Did you have a favorite activity or something else that you did when you went to the beach? Because from what I've done with research on my end, I read that there was a little mini train and a dance floor.

MARTIN SAUNDERS: Yes, yes. The mini train and the dance floor. Like I've said, there were activities so that you could have the best time in the world at Virginia Key Beach. Unfortunately, because we could not go swimming everywhere, they built a pool in my neighborhood, but my mom didn't let me go over there. I grew up not swimming because my exposure to water, with water all around us, was quite limited. And so, I didn't learn to swim until I went to college because we had to take swimming at Hampton. But the beach was out of our—out of my grasp. Other people did okay. I didn't go to the swimming pool. We did have one that wasn't too far away.

My mom was very protective.

KENLON: As all mothers should be.

MARTIN SAUNDERS: Yeah.

KENLON: When you went to Virginia Key, with it being in a group setting, did the group that you were with, did they ever rent any of the cabanas or cabins that were there?

MARTIN SAUNDERS: I don't remember that. My sole memories were how I felt whizzing by on the rides or looking at how beautiful the ocean waves were. That kind of thing. That really fascinated me.

KENLON: You might have already mentioned it. Could you tell me what the people who went to Virginia Key Beach [were like]? I can just imagine that it was a great mixture. So you had the church groups, and the families, and then maybe tourists from the North coming so—

MARTIN SAUNDERS: Yes, tourists came often from New York. I had relatives in New York; they would come like once a year.

KENLON: They would come once a year. Okay. So how did you learn or first hear about Virginia Key Beach? Or actually, maybe a better question to ask is, how old were you when you first went to Virginia Key Beach?

MARTIN SAUNDERS: Oh, I know I was five or six years old. I do remember I was quite young when I went and looking over at the waves, you know from the boat, yes. But like I said, it wasn't something you did often, you did maybe once or twice a year. That kind of thing.

KENLON: Okay, once.

MARTIN SAUNDERS: The special occasions.

KENLON: Okay, special occasions so it wasn't like in some places where you would go every weekend.

MARTIN SAUNDERS: Until I got older.

KENLON: Okay, until you got older.

MARTIN SAUNDERS: But I'm happy that the beach is being restored and its history can be in place for generations to come. Hopefully, cause sometimes Virginia Key Beach is not mentioned in the last Herald article I saw.

KENLON: I do agree with you. I'm just curious myself in how it kind of seems that it doesn't get as much attention as maybe the sit-ins in North Carolina or some of the other Civil Rights events that occurred during that time. I know you mentioned that where you grew up that a lot of famous individuals and figures would stay in the hotels there. Do you [remember]?

MARTIN SAUNDERS: We had two hotels, the Lord Calvert and the hotel in Brownsville. But they would come over after their shows. Some might have lived over on the beach, but my recollection when I was little, was they lived at the Lord Calvert Hotel. That was on about Second Avenue and about Eighth Street or in Brownsville, which is forty something street. Mrs. Pinkney renovated that building. But Sidney Poitier—and I mean all the real big guys from, and ladies songstress.

KENLON: Songstress.

MARTIN SAUNDERS: The old days.

And they would come to our high school and talk too.

KENLON: Oh, they would come to your high school and talk?

MARTIN SAUNDERS: Oh yeah and give inspirational messages. So we got to see a lot of people.

KENLON: Wow, very good. And I hope I'm not sounding repetitive at all with my questions. If I am, please just let me know and—

MARTIN SAUNDERS: Oh, that's fine.

KENLON: Okay, thank you. You mentioned Sidney Poitier. Is there anybody you remember distinctly or just one individual?

MARTIN SAUNDERS: Well, I remember passing a barber shop on Second Avenue and Nat King Cole was in there getting his hair done cause he wore it straight. And some of the women vocalists—my mind just went blank—but anybody who was kind of famous during the late forties and the fifties and sixties. We were delighted to see them.

KENLON: I bet so. Did you hear or did you experience—like when you went to Virginia Key—was there somebody famous or did you hear about somebody famous who went there? I know Dr. Martin Luther King went there to vacation.

MARTIN SAUNDERS: Oh yes, yes.

KENLON: Did you personally experience seeing a famous person or hearing about a famous person at Virginia Key Beach?

MARTIN SAUNDERS: Very definitely. I was there when Dr. Martin Luther King made his speech—yes—under the trees.

KENLON: Okay. What year was that when he made his speech?

MARTIN SAUNDERS: It had to be in the sixties. I graduated from college in 1962.

KENLON: Okay.

MARTIN SAUNDERS: So it would have been after that because I was home. Yeah, my husband was in the military and so when he was in Vietnam, I was here during the speech.

KENLON: Okay.

MARTIN SAUNDERS: But, yeah, and I guess Miami is still that way. Stars are here. We don't see them because they're immersed in all the big hotels, but back in those days, you did see them and many were gracious about coming out to be role models and interact with the students.

KENLON: Okay. That's very good to know then. Since you've mentioned Dr. Martin Luther King and his speech. My next question would be—what did you know about the Civil Rights movement going on elsewhere? And how [did you know]?

MARTIN SAUNDERS: Well, I was in college from '58 to '62. And we had marches on the campus. And when I came home, I joined marches here. I'm really grateful that young people are marching today so that we seriously do something about gun control, but it reminds me so much of the marches of the Civil Rights Movement, and I feel very blessed that the energy is working right now.

KENLON: Agreed. A very true and valid point. My, or another question—were there—do you remember, or do you recall any other civil rights leaders or figures that came to Virginia Key, or just the Miami area, besides Dr. Martin Luther King?

MARTIN SAUNDERS: Well, as I recall, Father Gibson, the Episcopal priest, who served as a commissioner with the city of Miami. He was very instrumental in making sure that laws were passed in some way to give us equality. And Mrs. Athalie Range. I don't know if you know that name. She was a female director and also an activist during that period, and her voice—she was a very small lady. [She] had a beautiful speaking voice that carried throughout Dade County and Florida.

KENLON: Okay. I read that she was the first African American—and correct me if I'm wrong—the first African American and the first woman elected to the Miami City Council.

MARTIN SAUNDERS: Yes, City Commission. Yes.

KENLON: Okay. Did you—just since you mentioned her, did you know her very well? Did you meet her?

MARTIN SAUNDERS: Yeah, very well. Her children went to school with me at Booker Washington High School. No, I knew her very well.

KENLON: Okay.

MARTIN SAUNDERS: Like I said, in those days you knew everybody. Whether they were in Coconut Grove or Miami—even the leadership from South Bay. So we had people living down in the farm area.

KENLON: All right. You might have already said this—and thank you for your answers—you're doing an excellent job! I really appreciate it, once again. My next question is how did the story of the civil rights movement in other places compare to what was going on in Miami?

MARTIN SAUNDERS: Well I think in some places in the Deep South you were having murders and that kind of thing. I hate to answer off the top of my head. I know we had some serious things happen here, but I don't believe that there weren't that many, you know, deaths as a result. We had very organized [activism]. Mrs. Suringe and Father Gibson and others, during that period—they were devoted to carrying out the mission and encouraging. We got through some tough times. I know that at the Liberty City housing project, there was at some point, some violence, but not to the degree that it was in other parts of the country.

KENLON: Wow. Just to follow up on that. What type of violence was that? Was it just racist whites coming in trying—stirring up trouble?

MARTIN SAUNDERS: No, I can't recall right now. I remember marching at the Liberty City housing project called Sixty-Second Street. But I think that was more about their trying to make those people move and make those apartments available to others. I'm not very strong on remembering the details.

KENLON: That's quite alright. Thank you for your explanation. With what I've read from Virginia Key or for and about Virginia Key Beach, I know that very early on in the founding of Miami, that there was actually a very strong Ku Klux Klan presence. But from what you've said, it seems like you didn't really experience much racism as in other parts of the South. And was there an? Or did you know of any Klan presence that was going on at the time? Or by that point, had they really lost power or become so small that they weren't really a recognizable force?

MARTIN SAUNDERS: I'm sure they existed. We didn't, I guess, have the pronounced division like that in the [the rest of the] South. They grew crops and farms and had farms and that kind of thing so the interaction between the whites and non-whites was more stringent. Then here, those kind of farms did not exist. But you did have the African Americans with the low-level jobs. For the most part, people came here from other places. African Americans came from the Bahamas, where they were the predominant culture over there. And the other Islands. So it was sort of different from the rest of the South.



KENLON: Okay then. Well backtracking a little bit to a more kind of positive question I'm asking. What's your—or do you have a favorite memory of going Virginia Key?

MARTIN SAUNDERS: Yes.

KENLON: Or if not, at least one of your favorites.

MARTIN SAUNDERS: Well, being on that ferry was a beautiful moment when the waves were coming over. And I wasn't frightened; it was just a beautiful sight. It was just good to be there and see the scene itself. It was a beautiful memory. [I have] beautiful childhood memories.

KENLON: Okay. Would you say a lot of people know—and this is backtracking a little bit again. My apologies. Would you say a lot of people know about the ferryboat? And maybe this is just lack of knowledge on my end, because at least where I've read, it said that after War World II, a lot of people had cars and they were able to drive to Virginia Key Beach. But you said really that the main mode of transportation was the ferryboat?

MARTIN SAUNDERS: Yeah, they couldn't drive over there until they built the bridge over there.

KENLON: Okay.

MARTIN SAUNDERS: Yeah, that was the problem.

KENLON: Okay. When was the bridge built?

MARTIN SAUNDERS: I have no idea; [I] left my folder. You'd have to research that, but like I said, when I was very young, you had to take the ferry over until they built the bridge.

KENLON: Okay. How many people could the ferryboat transport or hold?

MARTIN SAUNDERS: I have no idea. But, I don't know, probably fifty maybe. I have no idea. But you would have to wait for the ferry and go.

KENLON: Okay.

MARTIN SAUNDERS: But I hope we can preserve Virginia Key. There has been a lot of effort by a lot of people. Ms. Enid Pinkney, the committee, and the trust, the Virginia Beach Trust. They have worked diligently the last couple of years, few years to do that.

KENLON: Alright. Well, very good. I hope they are continuing or they continue in their successful efforts with the preserving. How long was—or my next question, is how long was taking the ferryboat? How long was the trip over to Virginia Key?

MARTIN SAUNDERS: I have no idea, probably thirty minutes. I have no idea. But, I know, I guess by the time I got in high school, you could get over there without going on the ferry. Yeah, I finished in '58, 1958.

KENLON: Okay. For my next question, I know you said you returned to Miami after graduating from college?

MARTIN SAUNDERS: I would say for a year, and then I got married.

KENLON: Oh, then got married. Well, for that short period, did you ever go back to Virginia Key Beach at all or—?

MARTIN SAUNDERS: Yeah. I'm pretty sure I did.

KENLON: Okay.

MARTIN SAUNDERS: But I'm glad that the renovations that have taken place are there, and I sincerely hope we can keep it.

KENLON: Okay. Just, hopefully not getting too personal. So, you said your husband, he was in the Army, correct?

MARTIN SAUNDERS: Yes. And my mother was alive then so I can home with my two kids while he was overseas. And I took them to Virginia Key Beach too. Although at that time, you could go to any of the beaches. But [I took them] just for sentimental reasons.

PK: Okay. Your children—a boy, girl?

MARTIN SAUNDERS: I had two girls. My older girl was an attorney. She finished [at] Duke. And there's a street named after her in front of Miami Shores Elementary School. She was a White House Fellow during Clinton's Administration.

KENLON: Oh, wow!

MARTIN SAUNDERS: She died of breast cancer, and my other daughter is in Chicago with her family and she's an educator.

KENLON: Following in the footsteps of you.

MARTIN SAUNDERS: Yeah. But Miami is a good place to be.

KENLON: My condolences for the passing of your one daughter.

MARTIN SAUNDERS: Yeah, it has been difficult. Eleven years, but feels like yesterday.

KENLON: Yeah. I have just a few more questions and then I think you—we should be good. So you returned to Miami for a short period with your two kids and took them to Virginia Key, and this was when your husband was off serving in Vietnam, is that correct?

MARTIN SAUNDERS: Yes, but then the beach was closed for a while I think. But you can get the real years. You know, I'm just doing it from my recollection. But I'm delighted that we're trying to hold on to it. Hopefully. It's important to the history of Miami.

KENLON: Oh, most certainly.

MARTIN SAUNDERS: Let's cut.

KENLON: What?

MARTIN SAUNDERS: Let's cut.

KENLON: Do you want to stop? You want to stop recording? Okay, one second. I most certainly can.

*Pause in recording*

KENLON: Alright then. We are resuming after taking a short little break and this will be my last question for Mrs. Martin.

MARTIN SAUNDERS: Saunders.

KENLON: For Mrs. Saunders. My apologies.

MARTIN SAUNDERS: That's all right.

KENLON: Well, thank you for just answering all the questions and giving really great in-depth answers. My last question is—I know you've mentioned how you really desire and you really want to have Virginia Key Beach preserved because of its importance and how important it really was. And I know you've mentioned names and people who were involved with making sure it got designated a historic landmark and all that. So all that is, that is all very inspiring. So I would say really my—my only last question would be in the movement or the efforts to try and preserve Virginia Key Beach and make it designated as a historic site, was it an individual, or a group, or a combination that really pushed or tried in the efforts to get it designated and preserve the site?

MARTIN SAUNDERS: Well, over the years, I know Mrs. Range, Athalie Range, put up quite a fight. Father Gibson followed her. And many of the people today, old timers I should say, like me. But Mrs. Enid Pinkney and [other] people on the Virginia Key Trust, are working diligently and I really appreciate the fact that they're trying. But it's a big fight. Still, it is a big fight.

KENLON: And hopefully it will continue to be successful, and the stories [get] told, and will be told for future generations.

MARTIN SAUNDERS: Absolutely! I appreciate the fact that you took this on as a project.

KENLON: Well, thank you. I am appreciative and I'm very thankful for your participation and aiding and helping with this project so thank you once again.

*End of interview*