

**Carmen Errol Dean Jackson**  
**Oral History**  
**Interview 1**  
**Interviewed by Jairo Ledesma**  
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**Virginia Key Beach Oral History Project**

JAIRO: So, could you tell us your full name and where you are originally from, if you are from this area, and your date of birth or age?

JACKSON: Okay. Carmen Errol Dean Jackson.

JAIRO: I will be writing but—I am just making my own notes here. What was the year of your birth, or the birthday?

JACKSON: April 26 (Pause)

JAIRO: April 26? (Laughs)

JACKSON: April 26, 1930. I will be eighty next month. I don't even want to say it.

JAIRO: (Laughs) Wow!

JACKSON: I tell everybody it's the thirtieth anniversary of my fiftieth year.

JAIRO: That's wonderful. Hopefully, I can make it to eighty. And you are originally—?

JACKSON: Yeah, I am an original. Originally from Miami.

JAIRO: From Miami? Okay.

JACKSON: I was born in Christian hospital on NW First Place in Overtown. That's not even there anymore.

JAIRO: What's your earliest recollection of your parents or your grandparents? Where were they from?

JACKSON: My paternal grandparents came from Key West. They moved to Tampa after several years in Key West and my father was born in Tampa, Florida. Then they moved to Miami.

JAIRO: So, from Tampa to Miami?

JACKSON: Yeah, and we have been here ever since. It was in Overtown, on Fourteenth Terrace. I don't think it existed anymore. Eminent domain took the family house for years, and years ago. My mother's, my maternal grandparents were from the Carolinas and Philadelphia. My mother grew up in Philadelphia. In the summertime, she'd go and visit her.

JAIRO: Up in Philly?

JACKSON: And the [maternal] grandparents [were] in North Carolina, in a place called Tarboro

JAIRO: Okay. Did you go back and forth and visit?

JACKSON: No, by the time I came along they were dead.

JAIRO: Okay, they were already dead.

JACKSON: Except, my grandmother, my maternal grandmother was still living. She didn't die until my senior year or junior year in college.

JAIRO: Okay, perfect. So, what was life growing up like here in Miami, since you said you were a native Miamian? What was life like?

JACKSON: It was, you know, a small community. Thinking back on it now, everybody practically knew everybody else. My parents were educators they both taught at the senior high school, Booker T. Washington Senior high school and—

JAIRO: Is that where you went to school?

JACKSON: Yeah and I graduated from Booker T. Washington. In retrospect, I can that is the accepted thing, that if you were colored that you were to be in one place. I wasn't aware at the time that black people had to be off of Miami Beach by a certain time and all the other racial problems that existed. It wasn't really wasn't until I was in junior high school and I was in the high school band. I have a friend, who was in the band also who was very fair. As a matter of fact, she looked as though she was white. We had to wear special shoes with band, special black oxfords or something. And [we] went to store by the name A.S. Beck—I hope this makes it—and we walked into the store. The salesman pointed to me to go sit in one area and for her to go and sit in the other. I think that was one of the first times I realized that there—

JAIRO: That there was a separation.

JACKSON: Yeah.

JAIRO: How old were you again? You were like fourteen, you said?

JACKSON: Oh, I was in junior high school, so, I was probably about thirteen or fourteen specifically.

JAIRO: Where did you live specifically?

JACKSON: I lived on Northwest Fourteenth Terrace in Overtown

JAIRO: And that's considered Opa-Locka?

JACKSON: No, it's Overtown,

JAIRO: Overtown. I am sorry.

JACKSON: Which is between Third and Fourth Avenue, on a street where everybody knew everybody, where it takes a village to raise a child.

JAIRO: What do you remember about your house your apartment? Can you describe it a little bit?

JACKSON: Our house was a little different from a lot of the houses. And I say this—you may want to turn off the speaker. Back in those days, it appeared that we had a big house because a lot of the houses were what they call shotgun shacks.

JAIRO: Okay. And what is that?

JACKSON: A shotgun shack is something that if you go in the front door and you shoot and bullet, it goes all the way through. (Smiles)

JAIRO: (Laughs) Oh okay.

JACKSON: No, we had a very large house. We had three bedrooms, four bathrooms, and a library.

JAIRO: Would you say it was very different than other people at that moment?

JACKSON: It was, yeah. With a breakfast room, and of course, we had a lot of land in the back and in later years, well I guess maybe, I was probably about two or three years old when my great grandmother's house was moved from another location and put it in our backyard.

JAIRO: Oh, interesting,

JACKSON: Yeah, so we had fruit trees. It was basically a nice place to live in. It was comfortable. It wasn't very far from the school that I attended, Douglas Primary School, in first through fourth grade. Douglas was on Twelfth. We lived on Fourteenth Terrace, and Douglas was on Twelfth so that wasn't very far to walk. Nowadays it seems, 'Oh my God,' that it was far away. There were no school buses, you know, there were kids when I got to junior high school that would come from Broward County and they would either come on the bus or stay with someone in the neighborhood so that they could go to the junior or senior high school.

JAIRO: And you mentioned you went to Booker T. Was Booker T a segregated high school at the time?

JACKSON: Definitely. Second-hand books.

JAIRO: Oh Wow. What's your most vivid memory of your experience there?

JACKSON: It was a complete learning experience. I was lucky enough to have parents who were educated so I learned a lot of things at home about life, about social skills. We had a principal there who was no-nonsense and he would stop assembly to talk about some of the social graces, how you are to perform, or how you are not to do certain things like applauding in church after a song or a solo or whatever, certain ways you were to enter a row of seats. You're supposed to enter a row of seats facing your people rather than going in with your end in their faces. There were just a lot of things, about table manners they taught. I was just telling my husband, back the other day, they taught table manners cooking and how to set the table. Things that are gone now.

JAIRO: Yeah, I remember that. They used to call it home-economics.

JACKSON: Home-economics. Yeah.

JAIRO: Who influenced you the most in your early life? Who was your biggest influence?

JACKSON: I would say, my grandma.

JAIRO: Your grandmother?

JACKSON: Yeah.

JAIRO: Why do you think that was?

JACKSON: She was a very strong woman and my grandfather died when I was about four years old and she took over the family basically. My mother was actually her daughter in law, but she was more like a daughter. There were people who—even to this day—that think that my grandmother was really my mother. But my parents divorced when I was about four or five years old. I had a sister who was fifteen years older than I, and when she was ready to go to college, it was like I was an only child.

JAIRO: Oh, I see, because of the age difference.

JACKSON: The age difference. Yeah.

JAIRO: And who do you remember as someone important in the community besides your grandmother and obviously your parents? Who else was important in the community?

JACKSON: Oh there were so many people. There was a funeral director by the name of Kelsey Pharr, P-h-a-r-r. He was a very important man in the community.

JAIRO: What do you think? What are the things he did?

JACKSON: Well, I always remember him impeccably being dressed. He was such a gentleman; he was an attractive man. He was always very pleasant, great manners, and the whole bit. There were several doctors in town, and then I had some teachers that were very influential in helping me make decisions.

JAIRO: So, there was community support?

JACKSON: There was a lot of community support. There was a lot.

JAIRO: Do you find that it is different now, community support? Do you think it's [offered] less now?

JACKSON: Maybe I am not being completely accurate in saying this because I am not there, now that I have retired. I feel a bit isolated, but as I mentioned before, it takes a village. Well, it seems like the villages have broken down a little bit and the case of children having children and we've lost a lot.

JAIRO: I should have asked you before, but what did you do? What was your work like? Did you work in education? I don't think I asked you that.

JACKSON: Okay.

JAIRO: (Laughter)

JACKSON: I will go back. My first job was working for a doctor. I was about eleven or twelve years old. Right around the corner. You know, patients come in, you take their name and you pulled the chart. It was safe in those days. You could go out and you could be home around the corner before it really got dark. I would come home in the summer and I would work for a doctor who had a great influence on me. I met a lot of people doing that. It improved my work skills and also your social skills. 'Be careful what you say and how you say it.'

I went to college. I went to Howard for two years and I decided I wanted to become a librarian. They did not offer library science at Howard and I transferred to North Carolina Central where I could get a degree and I came out and I worked in the school system as a librarian, I think for about eleven years when I decided—is this part going on tape?

JAIRO: We decided, we could always—(Laughter)

JACKSON: I was going berserk in my head, doing the Dewey Decimal system, one more time. But actually, I went back to school and got my Masters in guidance and counseling because I wanted to be a school psychologist and I got certification for a school psychologist. I worked in the system for about thirty-three years, I guess.

JAIRO: For Miami Dade County?

JACKSON: For Miami Dade County Public Schools. During that time, I also became interested in being an event planner and that's how I met Guy because I was doing something for Virginia Key Beach, at the time when they were trying to open. I had my own business and, I was also

doing something to travel. The travel thing is what led to, you know the event planning because I am taking people on a trip. 'Okay let's have a party. Let's plan. Let's do some conventions and the whole bit.' I retired from that about four years ago.

JAIRO: Oh wow, you did it for a long time.

JACKSON: Yeah, I did.

JAIRO: I just wanted to add that in because it is important to the story. But, the next question I had for you is, how did race and racism impact your early life? I know you mentioned a little bit about that early on. What do you recall about that?

JACKSON: My second experience for me, which was one of the most troubling ones, is that we decided that we were going to go down to Key West. My dad had me drive to Key West to teach me good driving skills. You know the seven-mile bridge?

JAIRO: Yes, I know.

JACKSON: And on the way back that night, we passed a Royal Castle and I decided that I wanted, "Oh let's get some Royal Castle." He gave me the money and I went into the shop and I sat down and ordered and this white policeman comes in and he looks at the man, he looks at me, and the waiter asked him, "What's wrong?" or something. And he said, "I want to know what this nigger is doing sitting here?" That was a very painful experience for me, very painful, and the Emmett Till incident had just happened.

JAIRO: Oh wow. So it was fresh.

JACKSON: It was really. I would say that was the most shocking thing that ever happened to me in terms of racism. I remember getting back in the car. My dad said, "Where are the sandwiches?" I decided—I mean I couldn't even talk about it.

JAIRO: Did you ever mention to him at that time?

JACKSON: I really can't recall. I probably did, eventually, but it took a while for me to talk about it, and that was quite a while. When I went to Howard, things were a little different racially

because you crossed the Mason Dixon line, and so we had options of places to go, but in North Carolina, in Durham, in 1954, sorry, 1956, I'm sorry '57, it was just before the freedom riders started the whole bit and in order to go to the movies, you had to go upstairs, and I was not accustomed to that because even [in Florida] you did not have that problem. But in Durham, you had to go upstairs, and that was to was like, 'Oh this is really—'

JAIRO: So, there was an upstairs for people of color?

JACKSON: Yes, people of color.

JAIRO: And then downstairs was for white?

JACKSON: Yes. They did not call them people of color, they called them colored, 'culled', (Chuckles)

JAIRO: So, you have those vivid memories of that?

JACKSON: Yes, I do. The year that I graduated in '59, was the year I think, that the freedom marches started and my mother said, "I am so glad God has been so good to me, that he has let you graduate, because I would have had to get you out of jail because you would've been a part of the marches." I would have been. I really would have been.

JAIRO: Can you tell me a little bit about the history of Virginia Key, of what you know, of what you remember? Sorry, I am going to move the camera a little bit. What do you remember about Virginia Key? All the history of it, I guess.

JACKSON: I remember as a little girl, my grandmother used to go out sometimes. It was, I guess, an organization doing a picnic or whatever and she would be served at the stand and she would take me with her. The most annoying thing about that was that there was no boat, I mean the only way you could get there was on a boat.

JAIRO: Yes, you told me that.

JACKSON: Right. And here we lived on Fifteenth, Fourteenth Terrace and the boat left from Second—where was it? I think it was about Fifth Street, off the Miami River. We would walk

along and my grandmother knew everybody, and along the way she would have to stop, and you know say hello and the whole bit. I am like, “We got to get there. I don’t want to miss the boat.” This one time, we missed the boat, by the time we got there the boat had gone. I was absolutely devastated (laughter), so I had to wait around for the next party and was about a month later. And of course, we got the boat and the boat left at a certain time. You got on the boat and then came back.

JAIRO: So, it was essentially a day trip?

JACKSON: Yeah.

JAIRO: What do you remember, if you can describe physically what it looked like? Do you remember the color of the water, the trees? What do you remember physically? Were there places to eat?

JACKSON: I thought it was very pretty because where we lived there was no water, unless you went over to Biscayne Boulevard and that was slim to none. It was very pretty. I remember having an inner tube. I used to float in the inner tube and there would be lots of kids playing in the water and the whole bit. It wasn’t the pretty blue water that you would have at Crandon Park.

JAIRO: So, the water wasn’t as clear?

JACKSON: No, it wasn’t. But it was like ‘This is great, I can learn to swim here, and I was free to play it, and I knew not to go past a certain point.’ It was just lots of fun and I looked forward to going there. And she would work sometimes in they had the corn dog stand, that I used to like.

JAIRO: Oh, so they had like a little stand.

JACKSON: It was a stand and I am trying to remember if they had the merry-go-round at that time.

JAIRO: How old were you at that time?

JACKSON: Probably about seven or eight years old.

JAIRO: What do you remember about the people? Was that a moment, compared to how they lived, where they happy? Were they joyous?

JACKSON: Oh yeah. It was fun, yeah, and everybody was having a good time. I don't remember any problems. You never had to worry about gun violence or anything like that. People were you know—

JAIRO: I know you were very young, but do you remember conversations. What would people speak about? Or how they would interact?

JACKSON: Socially, they were fine. What the conversations were about, I cannot recall. Everybody just looked like they were glad to be free, to be out there in the water, even though it was an inlet.

JAIRO: Would you say that's your favorite memory? What would be your favorite memory that you recall of Virginia Key? Was it like a day out with your grandmother, or later on? What specifically?

JACKSON: Those were favorite memories, when we would go out. When we would go out, yeah. Whenever she would take me with her if I knew she was going, I was there.

JAIRO: Now, putting Virginia Key into a larger historical context, what did you know at the time? Obviously, when you were a little bit older, about the Civil Rights movement going on elsewhere? So, you are in Miami, you are a native Miamian. How did you—you mentioned a little bit about it when you spoke about when you graduated, but what do you remember? What was, the general feeling about the civil rights movement in general here, [compared to] I guess everywhere else?

JACKSON: Well I remember the freedom I felt when I went to Washington, to Howard. I had a chance that I could go to restaurants. Even though someone reminded me the other day, "Are you sure?" and I said, "Yeah," because I remember telling my mother not to send more money to me to the school, send it to me. (Laughs) We would go out and eat very well for the about the first week or two weeks, then the rest of the month, we would be like, 'oh my God', but it was just that the freedom of being able to walk into a restaurant. There was some that were segregated, I'm quite sure, but it was that we never selected those.

JAIRO: And, you mentioned the Freedom Riders. What specifically do you remember and how did it impact you? What specifically do you remember about the civil rights movement? You know how our textbooks have certain movements. What you recall about those movements, those Civil Rights movement here in Miami or in Washington, when you were there?

JACKSON: It, would have had more impact on me being in Durham because I felt very restricted there. I mean, there was no place to go except if you wanted to go to the movies and you go upstairs. If you wanted to go to the lunch counter to get something to eat, you had to sit in the 'black section' or stand up. It seemed to me at that point there that was the way that it was going to be, and there was nothing I could do about it at that point, even though it didn't seem like the helplessness, but it was really. 'Why we can't do this?' I remember when we bought this land here—this is probably off the record—that our builder was showing us different places that he had built. They were all in the black neighborhood, and he said "I want to show you some other houses that I built," and he brought us over here to San Suzie. I remember getting really ticked off and I said to him, "You've shown us all those other places, but we want to see what the houses are like over here. Why can't we get a house over here?" "You know why." he said, "You can." I said "You know good darn and well that there's no one who is going to sell." This is in 1964 or '65. Because we built our house in '67, and he said: "What you need to do is—I am driving you around. Look at any of these lots you want to buy and the phone number, and you get on the phone Monday morning and call and ask them how [much] they will sell it for?" And I said, "You know darn good and well that they would not sell a house or a lot to us." And, I said "The only way to do it is to get your lawyer to act on my behalf and we will send the money to him and, when they know anything, it's a done deal." That is exactly what happened. So I was on the phone that Monday morning, bright and early, calling places to find out how much they wanted for the land.

JAIRO: Wow, that's such an interesting story, but had mentioned off the record. Could I keep it on the record by chance? (Laughs) Just trying. It's such an interesting story.

JACKSON: (Nods her head yes). Yeah, yeah, yeah.

JAIRO: I wanted to follow up on that. What were the reactions of the people in the community once you moved in or once you built your home?

JACKSON: Ah! That's another story. The neighbors were fine. We had no problems. We had three little children at the time, twin girls about two years old and I think my son was 5 at the time, and they were welcomed. As a matter of fact, they have friends to this day, and my son is fifty and my twin daughters are fifty-two. To this day, they have friends who were neighbors that they are still very close to. This part, I don't know how to fly, but there were some black people who were upset about it.

JAIRO: In this community? Or in your circle of friends?

JACKSON: ‘Why did you go over there? Why didn’t you stay in a Black community?’ ‘Because I don’t want to. I mean, I don’t want to put all this money in this house and then someone has a run-down shack next door to it and the whole bit. This is an area I think it would be great. It would be great for my kids and the whole bit.’ And my husband—we had worked together on this sort of thing.

JAIRO: And yeah, like you said, ‘why not?’

JACKSON: Yeah. ‘Why not?’ That that was when I was very socially conscious as far as racial issues were concerned.

JAIRO: So, there’s an evolution of sorts?

JACKSON: I mean, there’s more to it than that. Prior to moving here, as soon as I graduated from school, from college, my mother bought a house that was in a ‘white neighborhood,’ but the whites were moving out. There was a different atmosphere altogether because Overtown was going down, and my mom wanted a bigger house. It was just the two of us by that time because my sister had married and moved away.

JAIRO: That is very interesting. Are you part of the Virginia Key Trust? You are, correct?

JACKSON: What makes me part of the Virginia Key Trust?

JAIRO: I think it may be your affiliation with—

JACKSON: I made a donation.

JAIRO: Yes, maybe your donation. Okay. How do you feel about what’s going on now with Virginia Key? Their plans are to eventually create a museum there and house—

JACKSON: I think it's a very good idea to know about what they are thinking of. They've had a lot of problems with the county. There are builders who want to place a hotel there and I am very much against that. I was there a year ago, at a Gene Tinney's birthday party and it was really interesting to see people who—I think there must have been a Hispanic group that was there for something, but the mixture of people that were on the beach. I did a couple of events for them, so I used to go out there like every day.

Mrs. Range, Athalie Range, was another woman who was very influential. Have you heard of Mrs. Range?

JAIRO: No, I haven't

JACKSON: Oh okay. She was the owner of Range Funeral Home that's been here for years. As a matter of fact, her and her husband, started out working for Dr. Far, but she was the first Black female commissioner, city commissioner, years ago and we had a great relationship because I used to work for her foundation, the M. Athalie Range Foundation, a cultural arts foundation. We used to talk about a lot of stuff that would go on. She asked me one day, shortly before she died, "We want to have a big opening for Virginia Key. Would you do it for us?" I agreed to it, and that's how I became involved in the second battle, around the third time around.

JAIRO: What would you envision for Virginia Key in the future? What would be your hope? Do you think we should preserve that history?

JACKSON: Definitely.

JAIRO: And what would you envision for it?

JACKSON: I like the idea of a museum because there is a lot of history that needs to be known and needs to be kept. They used to have little houses out there where people could go out and stay. I never had a chance to go, but I remember the superintendent or the groundskeeper around, a really nice man and his family that lived out there, and I used to think, 'Oh boy that must be the life, to be able to live out there.' I would like to see all of that preserved. The train is still running now.

JAIRO: And what would you want people to know about Virginia Key and its History? Any early recollections or your connection to it?

JACKSON: From the woods?

JAIRO: The woods?

JACKSON: Yes, the woods. I mean it was a woodsy place, and it had a lot of trees. Its sea grape trees, which I loved. But, it was our first real taste of Miami in terms of what Miami is known for, the beaches. Even though it was a secondary or third class beach, at the time, it was what we had at the time. It wasn't good enough, but we had it, and [eventually] we found out about Garth Reese and they integrated Crandon Park.

JAIRO: So, once they integrated Crandon Park, would you go there too or would you prefer to go to Virginia Key?

JACKSON: We would go to Crandon Park.

JAIRO: Did you stop going to Virginia Key, or did you like both?

JACKSON: Actually, during that time, I think, Virginia Key, wasn't really kept up. It had not been cleared off. It wasn't until a few years back, when Gene took it over that they started clearing in trying to bring it back to what it was.

JAIRO: Before we wrap up, I don't want to take too much more of your time—

JACKSON: It hasn't been two hours right?

JAIRO: No, it's been about one hour and five minutes. I wanted to ask you, because you said you took the boat to Virginia Key. How did you get to that point? Did you walk all that way to Virginia Key and then take a boat?

JACKSON: Yes. This is what I was telling you. My grandmother used to know everyone along the way, and she would stop and talk to all these people.

JAIRO: And how long was that walk, approximately?

JACKSON: We lived on Fourteenth Terrace. This was on Eight Street.

JAIRO: (Laugh) so your grandmother would stop by along the way to speak to everyone?

JACKSON: (Rolls eyes) my grandmother knew everybody and everybody knew her, and I was like, 'Come on, Mama Jean, we are going to miss the boat.'

JAIRO: If there's one thing, one last reflection you have on Virginia Key, on Miami History, on Civil Rights History, or on overall African-American History, what would you say would be that reflection, that one thing that forty years from now somebody would take with them about your experiences during that time?

JACKSON: An appreciation of what went through in order to get to that point forty years from now, which I hope is a very positive forty years. I mean, it wasn't easy. It was a fight. It's been a fight and a lot my brothers and sisters are still fighting to get that. I support them, anyway I can.

JAIRO: Thank you so much for your time, Mrs. Jackson. I appreciate your time because I know this is such a great thing you are doing for us. I am going to end the interview now.