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Vernita Barnes, 2011

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*Vernita Burns:* Vernita Burns, Vernita Burns.

*Jamie King:* And how old are you?

*Vernita Burns:* 64, gonna turn 65, just 64.

*Jamie King:* Okay and do you have any children?

*Vernita Burns:* One.

*Jamie King:* And how old?

*Vernita Burns:* He's 34. Next week he'll be 35.

*Jamie King:* And how long did you live in Clayborn?

*Vernita Burns:* My mama lived there off-and-on about 35 years.

*Stephanie Jones:* And do you remember what year you moved in?

*Vernita Burns:* She moved in, in '65.

*Stephanie Jones:* So were you born at Clayborn?

*Vernita Burns:* Nuh-uh.

*Stephanie Jones:* No?

*Vernita Burns:* No.

*Stephanie Jones:* How many years did you live there with her?

*Vernita Burns:* Off-and-on I lived around five or six years, or sumpin', yeah, okay, okay, dahlin'. [*Crosstalk*] --

*Jamie King:* Okay and do you know how your family came to live in Clayborn?

*Vernita Burns:* My mother – no, I don't. I only know we lived over there [*laughter*] and I stayed – I lived off-and-on with her most of the time. I moved in with her and I left and I came back and left and come back again.

*Stephanie Jones:* Do you remember – sorry.

*Jamie King:* No, you're fine.

*Stephanie Jones:* How old you were the first time you moved there?

*Vernita Burns:* 18.

*Stephanie Jones:* 18?

*Vernita Burns:* Mmm-hmm, 17.

*Stephanie Jones:* 17? And then between those off-and-on's, do you remember how old you were the last time that you moved out?

*Vernita Burns:* About 15 years ago, about, following this \_\_\_\_\_

*Stephanie Jones:* And who did you live in – in your Clayborn apartment with?

*Vernita Burns:* My mother.

*Stephanie Jones:* Just you two?

*Vernita Burns:* Yeah, nah, I had two more brothers. I got two brothers and two brothers live there and my son was finna come there.

*Jamie King:* And do you remember what it was like when you first moved in?

*Vernita Burns:* I loved it. I wish I could go back. *[Laughter]*

*Jamie King:* Yeah? What'd you love about it?

*Vernita Burns:* It was all right. It was a neighborhood and people they knew -- everybody knew everybody and there wasn't no fussin' on, it was just nice. It was a nice neighborhood.

*Jamie King:* How was it compared to the neighborhood you lived before Clayborn, was it safer or was it – was the house better or --?

*Vernita Burns:* Well, as far as I'm concerned, I can say about Clayborn Home is that it was – that it's an environment for, you know, like I say, it was like a neighborhood in the where when we first moved in, in '65, it was a neighborhood, you know, everybody knew everybody, you talked to everybody, it was a fun place, we did – I enjoyed it. I don't have anything bad to say about Clayborn Homes. The last few years before they started tearin' it down a lotta younger people, you know, they had grew up in there, they had started movin' in but we wasn't over there then.

- Jamie King:* So the years that you were there, how would you say it changed, like did the buildings?
- Vernita Burns:* The value went down.
- Jamie King:* The value went down?
- Vernita Burns:* Mmm-hmm.
- Jamie King:* Did your apartment there physically change, like the conditions, did you see anything like where the – was the paper coming off the walls or – or --?
- Vernita Burns:* No.
- Jamie King:* No? Everything was fine? Okay and then what about relationships with people while you lived there, how did those change?
- Vernita Burns:* Everybody got along all right. I mean, it was – it was just a nice neighborhood. We all got along with neighbors. Neighbors got along, you know? Everybody knew everybody, they watched out for everybody and it was just nice neighborhood.
- Jamie King:* Were there, outside of Clayborn, were there changes in the community that you noticed?
- Vernita Burns:* No, I don't – no.
- Jamie King:* And while you lived in Clayborn were you employed?
- Vernita Burns:* Yeah.
- Jamie King:* Well, what'd you do?
- Vernita Burns:* I worked at \_\_\_\_\_. I was a machine operator, a line leader and a gear \_\_\_\_\_ -- I started out as a gear \_\_\_\_\_ and I worked as a machine operator and then I went to a line leader.
- Jamie King:* And how did you get to your job?
- Vernita Burns:* Transit or drove when I had my car.
- Jamie King:* Did you have a car? Mmm-hmm.
- Vernita Burns:* I drove to work or either I carpoled.

*Jamie King:* Yeah? How far was it from Clayborn?

*Vernita Burns:* It's good \_\_\_\_\_, it's out on – it was out on **Discount** and Clayborn Homes like in down – in the downtown area.

*Jamie King:* Like how many minutes, do you remember?

*Vernita Burns:* It took me about 10 or 15 minutes to get there.

*Stephanie Jones:* Was it a full or part-time job?

*Vernita Burns:* A full.

*Stephanie Jones:* Time job?

*Vernita Burns:* I retired from that.

*Stephanie Jones:* Oh, well, great and how did you find out about this job, do you remember who connected you?

*Vernita Burns:* Through my mother.

*Stephanie Jones:* Your mother?

*Vernita Burns:* Mmm-hmm.

*Stephanie Jones:* Okay and while you were working there were you – you were living in Clayborn?

*Vernita Burns:* Off-and-on, yeah.

*Stephanie Jones:* And then did you also have your son during that time?

*Vernita Burns:* Yeah.

*Stephanie Jones:* And how was that, working, having full-time job and --?

*Vernita Burns:* My mother helped me with it.

*Stephanie Jones:* Yeah? Okay. So you said Clayborn was a community, right?

*Vernita Burns:* Yeah.

*Stephanie Jones:* Were there any neighborhood traditions while you lived there, like holiday festivals or block parties or get-togethers or anything that you remember?

- Vernita Burns:* No, you know, like, when was comin' we stay and we might have little birthday parties for the church and stuff like that, you know? It wasn't no block parties or nothin'.
- Jamie King:* Yeah, and who were the people that you trusted that most living there?
- Vernita Burns:* My family. [Laughter]
- Jamie King:* Your family? Were there any neighbors that you [crosstalk] --
- Vernita Burns:* Yeah, it was -- it was friends, you know, that you trust and talk to all the time, yeah.
- Stephanie Jones:* And what types of support would your family and friends give you?
- Vernita Burns:* It was all okay, I guess, \_\_\_\_ it was okay.
- Stephanie Jones:* Did you ever watch their kids or they watched yours or was it usually your mother who watched?
- Vernita Burns:* No, because I was workin' and when I wasn't workin' I was here and there and my mother was stayin' at \_\_\_\_ a lot for me when I wasn't there.
- Stephanie Jones:* Yeah, that's great. Did you and the people in your community ever trade goods or services and instead of money?
- Vernita Burns:* No.
- Stephanie Jones:* Like would you -- no?
- Vernita Burns:* No.
- Stephanie Jones:* Like while you were livin' there would someone do your hair for you or [crosstalk] --
- Vernita Burns:* No.
- Jamie King:* And you used -- so it wasn't like they made \_\_\_\_ arrangements?
- Stephanie Jones:* Nothing like that?
- Jamie King:* No, \_\_\_\_ no. [Laughter]

- Jamie King:* Ah, okay, well, that's better and how did you hear about the community's gossip?
- Vernita Burns:* Different ones. You know how people are talkin' and waving, different ones be talkin' and stuff. I don't dwell on gossip too much.
- Jamie King:* Yeah was there someone who stands out to you that you remember, like, was the go-to for the news? Like someone who always knew what was going on with this person and this person?
- Vernita Burns:* There'd always be someone in the neighborhood but I didn't – I was young and [*crosstalk*] --
- Jamie King:* You weren't concerned with that?
- Vernita Burns:* No, I wasn't.
- Stephanie Jones:* Okay and you said that you felt safe living there?
- Vernita Burns:* Yeah.
- Stephanie Jones:* Can you talk about some of the reasons why you felt safe or --?
- Vernita Burns:* I just felt safe because we knew everybody within – in – around us and stuff and back then it was kinda safe times.
- Jamie King:* Yeah?
- Vernita Burns:* Yeah.
- Jamie King:* So while you were there were the problems with gangs or violence or drugs?
- Vernita Burns:* No, no, we didn't have none of that. There might've been drugs but if it was, we wasn't around 'em.
- Jamie King:* Yeah?
- Vernita Burns:* No.
- Jamie King:* Okay.
- Stephanie Jones:* And what kind of activities did you do while you're livin' there with your family?

- Vernita Burns:* [Laughter] I worked most of the time and then when I wasn't workin', I was out or over to some of my friends houses or sumpin'.
- Jamie King:* Uh-huh.
- Vernita Burns:* But like I say, I enjoyed staying in Clayborn Homes and my folks did, too, my mama, we don't have anything bad to say because it's that good. If I could get back over there before they rebuild, you know?
- Jamie King:* What did you like best living in Clayborn Homes?
- Vernita Burns:* Huh?
- Jamie King:* What did you like best living in Clayborn?
- Vernita Burns:* My mother lived in **Brown Mall** and she lived in **Hendon Mall**. I think I liked Brown Mall the best.
- Jamie King:* Yeah?
- Stephanie Jones:* What was better about it?
- Vernita Burns:* I just liked it better. It wasn't as far back as Clayborn Homes, off the street, off of – you know, Lauderdale.
- Stephanie Jones:* While you were living there did you utilize the playgrounds with your son or would go out?
- Vernita Burns:* No.
- Stephanie Jones:* No? What were some of the biggest challenges of living there? Anything you can remember playing bill or getting to work or your transportation to work?
- Vernita Burns:* Maybe gettin' transportation to work or \_\_\_\_ and when I didn't have a car.
- Stephanie Jones:* How did you end up getting a car, saving money or did someone give it to you?
- Vernita Burns:* Nuh-uh, savin' my money. I bought it on my own.
- Stephanie Jones:* And do you remember being any community leaders while you were living in Clayborn? No? And were you still living in

Clayborn when they were handing out Section 8, the Housing Choice vouchers or were you already gone by then?

*Vernita Burns:* She was – I was gone.

*Stephanie Jones:* Okay, so did you ever get any case-management support?

*Vernita Burns:* Not in Clayborn Homes.

*Stephanie Jones:* No? Okay, do you feel like there were people who meddled in your community, like researchers or preachers or people from MHA coming and snooping around or like – and peoples' business that you didn't feel like they should be there?

*Vernita Burns:* No.

*Jamie King:* You didn't see any of that?

*Vernita Burns:* No.

*Jamie King:* Okay.

*Stephanie Jones:* And what was your favorite memory about living in Clayborn, do you have anything?

*Vernita Burns:* Fun.

*Stephanie Jones:* Fun?

*Vernita Burns:* *[Laughter]* Fun, I had fun, I enjoyed it.

*Jamie King:* Are you still friends with some of your old neighbors that you get there?

*Vernita Burns:* Yeah, yeah.

*Jamie King:* And did you feel when you first learned about the plans to knock down Clayborn?

*Vernita Burns:* Like I was \_\_\_\_\_.

*Jamie King:* Yeah?

*Vernita Burns:* Yes.

*Jamie King:* I'm sorry, can you say that again?

*Vernita Burns:* I kinda shed a few tears.

*Jamie King:* Shed a few tears, yeah.

*Vernita Burns:* Mmm-hmm, *[laughter]* I did.

*Stephanie Jones:* But you hoped to move back?

*Vernita Burns:* If I can.

*Jamie King:* Yeah?

*Vernita Burns:* Yes.

*Stephanie Jones:* What was the saddest part for you about them knocking it down?

*Vernita Burns:* Just seein' it bein' tore down and rememberin' the fun that we had, you know?

*Jamie King:* Yeah?

*Vernita Burns:* I guess I – *[laughter]* excuse me.

*Jamie King:* Oh, no, that's totally fine. *[Crosstalk]* –

*Stephanie Jones:* What kind of hopes do you have for your family now that maybe were different then when you lived in Clayborn?

*Vernita Burns:* Uh-hh.

*Jamie King:* How long have you been in this apartment?

*Vernita Burns:* I have been here about two or three months.

*Jamie King:* Okay.

*Vernita Burns:* I came here in April, the last of April.

*Stephanie Jones:* Do So when you were moving with your mother and your son back-and-forth between Clayborn and other places where would you usually go or what – or why was there?

*Vernita Burns:* My own place.

*Stephanie Jones:* Okay.

- Vernita Burns:* I had gotten married and I was in a rocky relationship and stuff.
- Jamie King:* Yeah? Okay and are there any hopes for your family now with you – what do you – what are your hopes for your family for the future?
- Vernita Burns:* Baby, I hope to retire and get some grandchildren up outta here [laughter] and enjoy livin’.
- Stephanie Jones:* Great, do you have anything else, Jamie?
- Jamie King:* Yeah, one quick question. You worked – while you were in Clayborn Homes, you worked at – what was the name of the place where you worked?
- Vernita Burns:* Cleo Ross.
- Stephanie Jones:* And how many years did you work there, from the time you were 18 all the way?
- Vernita Burns:* 25.
- Stephanie Jones:* 25 years.
- Jamie King:* 25 years.
- Vernita Burns:* I had to retire from them because of my health.
- Jamie King:* Okay, you had problems with your health? What particularly if you don’t mind answering?
- Vernita Burns:* I have arthritis and then I have mental disorders.
- Jamie King:* Did you join the union?
- Vernita Burns:* And then I’m a diabetic.
- Stephanie Jones:* And a diabetic, okay.
- Jamie King:* Did you join a union while you were working there?
- Vernita Burns:* Yeah, United \_\_\_\_ Work or United Union \_\_\_\_ Worker Union.
- Stephanie Jones:* And what’d that do for you?
- Vernita Burns:* Nothin’.

*Stephanie Jones:* Nothin'?' [Laughter]

*Vernita Burns:* [Laughter]

*Jamie King:* All right, I think that's all the questions.

*Stephanie Jones:* Yeah, that's all the questions we have for you then.

*Vernita Burns:* Oh, okay.

*Jamie King:* Unless there's anything else you wanna share with us about your experience?

*Vernita Burns:* I'm okay.

*Jamie King:* You're good? Okay, great.

*Vernita Burns:* I just miss Clayborn Homes.

*Jamie King:* Yeah.

*Vernita Burns:* I had told them. [Crosstalk] --

*Stephanie Jones:* And it says here there is an activation fee but we already paid that, so you have \$50.00 and that's it, so you don't hafta worry about that, that's already paid for.

*Jamie King:* I want to ask one more thing because you talked a lot about how you felt like it was a neighborhood and then you felt like you had people that you can trust there. In what ways, like, how did they support you, how did these people --?

*Vernita Burns:* They were just friends of mines, we would talk to and communicate all the time and we would trust each other, you know? I was young, too. We still friends, you know? I still communicate with them. If you can before you all leave, I'd like to give they number and \_\_\_\_\_.

*Jamie King:* Yeah, we'd like to have that, and you said just like being friends and supporting one another, you saw each other pretty regularly?

*Vernita Burns:* Every day, all of the day, most of the day. [Laughter] You know me, I just hangin' them clothes and stuff, we'd still holler to each other and stuff, you know? Pretty much is they had fun over there. It wasn't a thing with crime and drug pushin' and all that. We didn't – we didn't hafta deal with that. I'm not gonna say it wasn't

goin' on but if it was goin' on it wasn't around us, you know? We just had a good time and then the '60s, our mammas still had gardens in the back yard, you know? They grew gardens there and we just did – did all kinda things, you know? And then the church is over in that area and they were givin' church activities, you know, somewhere to go and sumpin' to do and we didn't have nowhere to go on our own because most of the peoples in Clayborn Home, they didn't – they didn't have a car, you know?

We would use the bus or payin' peoples to take us places, you know?

*Jamie King:* Was the church is a big part of your life at that time?

*Vernita Burns:* Yeah, sort of because when we moved over there, you know, they had \_\_\_ and in the '60s, you know every person and your parents were gonna see to it that you did church every time you go.

*Jamie King:* Which church did you go to over there?

*Vernita Burns:* Over there, I went to, what is it? Pilgrim Rest right there on the corner of that.

*Jamie King:* That's really helpful and also do you feel like your neighbors looked out for one another in that way, so that you had that kind of relationship?

*Vernita Burns:* Right.

*Jamie King:* Yeah.

*Vernita Burns:* Right.

*Jamie King:* That's really helpful and we would love to have their names so that we can follow up with them and [crosstalk] --

*Vernita Burns:* **Outstandin'.**

*Jamie King:* Did you get a brick when you – when they were tearing down Clayborn House and – I noticed some people got bricks from the [crosstalk] --

*Vernita Burns:* No, I didn't go. I didn't have a way at that time to go over there and get me a brick but when I did go through there because my grandson, he graduated from Booker T and he got to shake the

president's hand and so when we passed through there, a grabbed him and – graduation, you know? [Laughter]

Jamie King: Have you been by there recently?

Vernita Burns: Huh?

Jamie King: Have you seen it recently?

Vernita Burns: Yeah.

Jamie King: That whole first phase is knocked down.

Vernita Burns: \_\_\_ again, now it's a good times at Clayborn Homes and I don't even like to go that away now.

Jamie King: Yeah.

Vernita Burns: But that's \_\_\_ the years to be \_\_\_\_\_ over there, so you know?

Stephanie Jones: Did you ever go to Foot Homes or only Clayborn?

Vernita Burns: Yeah, I stayed in Foot Homes for a bit.

Stephanie Jones: How was that compared to Clayborn?

Jamie King: Was it the same or was it different?

Vernita Burns: It was different. They weren't even made. The structure wasn't even made alike but I could compare Clayborn Homes.

Jamie King: I wanna know have you lived in Memphis for your whole life? So this may be a personal question but how was it when Dr. King came to town and when he was assassinated?

Vernita Burns: That was right in the midst of this because we had just moved in Clayborn Homes when he was in town, yeah.

Jamie King: So you were about 18 then?

Vernita Burns: Yeah, I was, and I had just started working. I started working in September at 17 and then I turned 18 and \_\_\_\_\_, '65.

Jamie King: And what was the feeling like in Clayborn Homes during that time when – after his assassination and during Sanitation Workers Strike that \_\_\_ were like?

- Vernita Burns:* The same. Those feelings never change, you know? People they felt how they felt but as far as me is concerned everything was the same. It never change in Clayborn Homes.
- Jamie King:* Do you remember if that was a topic of conversation there or that people were --?
- Vernita Burns:* Some people talked about it – they talked about it everywhere, you know? Or as far as riotin’ and all that, there wasn’t none of that.
- Jamie King:* Do you think that – we were talking to another guy who lived in Clayborn Homes and he was young at the time when Dr. King was assassinated but he said he remembered how they – the National Guard that was stationed outside Clayborn Homes and he said that he felt like that that was they expected riots in that area.
- Vernita Burns:* Well, yeah, well you know by the, the projects, they always did face the less hard to them but they never got to really know the peoples in Clayborn Homes. Like I said, when we stayed over there at Clayborn Homes it was like a neighborhood to us. We had fun, we knew everybody, everybody knew us, you know, and the \_\_\_\_ the place had done somethin’ wrong and another parent had saw, they would call your mama and tell your mama, “You know your child is outta order.”
- Jamie King:* Yeah, so there was of that, like a lot of opportunity for people to sort of raise each other’s kids?
- Vernita Burns:* Right.
- Jamie King:* Sort of be each other’s responsibility?
- Vernita Burns:* Yeah, each one, they looked out for each other but they don’t do too much lookin’ out for each other no more, everybody is on they own.
- Jamie King:* Well, you’ve answered a lotta really good questions. I appreciate it very much.
- Vernita Burns:* Okay.
- Jamie King:* I think it’s always so interesting to talk to people who were here when Dr. King was shot because that’s something that’s a lot of interest to me and I think that’s really [*crosstalk*] --
- Vernita Burns:* I did the walk and marched the march.

*Jamie King:* You did?

*Vernita Burns:* *[Laughter]* Yeah. *[Crosstalk]* – When Martin Luther King got killed I marched downtown and everything, every time there was a march.

*Jamie King:* That's awesome. *[Crosstalk]* --

*[End of Audio]*