

# Rhodes College Digital Archives - DLynx

Rita Kendrick, 2007

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Interview of Mrs. Rita Kendrick. Interviewed by Francesca Davis of the Crossroads to Freedom Project, Rhodes College.

Mrs. Rita Kendrick is a native Memphian who witnessed and experienced long-term changes in Memphis. She also discussed a viewpoint of racism that is not widely talked about. She experienced more racism from those in her own race because of her skin tone. Mrs. Kendrick was also an educational professional who was employed by the school board for an extended amount of time. She made her contribution by teaching and educating her children to be proud of who they were and of their heritage.

This interview was conducted in 2007 to be included in the Rhodes College Crossroads to Freedom Digital Archive Project.

The transcripts represent what was said in the interview to the best of our ability. It is possible that some words, particularly names, have been misspelled. We have made no attempt to correct mistakes in grammar.

*Francesca:* On behalf of the Crossroads to Freedom Project here at Rhodes College, I would again like to thank you for coming in today to share your story with us. And I'm sure it'll be an amazing one. So, to begin could you state your name and current occupation?

*Rita Kendrick:* My name is Rita Kendrick. And I'm retired. I'm retired from the city school system as an elementary counselor.

*Francesca:* Okay. And could you talk a little bit about where you were born and raised?

*Rita Kendrick:* I was born here in Memphis, have lived here all my life. I have family who, have migrated to other states. And most of them to California who tried to get me to move out there, but Memphis is my home. It's always been. And I like it here.

*Francesca:* What part of town did you grow up in?

*Rita Kendrick:* I grew up in South Memphis. I don't know how to get you to see where South Memphis is, but South Memphis.

*Francesca:* Okay. Can you talk a little bit about your neighborhood?  
[01:00]

*Rita Kendrick:* My neighborhood, my father was a Pullman porter. And he was also a master plumber. We lived in a home, but the neighborhood that I grew up in there were apartment buildings, not rich. Not rich, not the poorest, but working class families. My mother was a housewife. I think she worked maybe a week or two weeks in her lifetime outside the home. And that was for a maid to fill in with, at that time was Mr. Goldsmith's to keep his children. So, Memorial Gardens, I grew up in that area.

[02:00] Where LeMoyne is now, in that area. Did not actually live in Lamoine Gardens, had always wanted to live in an apartment, and still haven't had that chance. But home was good. We were not rich. There were seven of us, but there was real good atmosphere. We grew up in love. We were not afraid of, we didn't live in fear of anything, not even God. That was somebody that or who we turned to who would protect us, who we prayed to. And so we just ran around happy kids.

Francesca: What were your parent's names?

Rita Kendrick: My mother's name was Buella, my oldest sister was named after my mother, and Buella Grace Neal, and then Lonshae after she married my father.

[03:00]

Francesca: And what was your father's name?

Rita Kendrick: My father's name was Walter, Walter Robert Lonshae. And I have one brother who was named after my father. He's a junior, makes my father a senior.

Francesca: You mentioned that you grew up in a house full of love. Did religion at all play a great part of your life?

Rita Kendrick: At that time, what I really remember is there was one parish in North Memphis for Catholics, Black Catholics, and then they started St. Augustine in South Memphis for Black Catholics. And when that parish started that's where my family, you know they came down in the neighborhood and recruited parishioners and that's the parish that I was baptized in and I'm still a member of that parish.

Francesca: Could you talk a little bit about where you went to school and what was school like for you?

Rita Kendrick: I went to school at St. Augustine, the name of that parish was St. Augustine.

[04:02] I went to elementary school there, junior high, high school, graduated from high school there. When I go to bible study classes now, I hear a lot of people who are in the class talk about color and the prejudice that they endured. And they tell me I'm naïve because I don't remember a lot of things that they told about. And they talked about prejudices from even the nuns who taught us, but that was something that I didn't experience. And so I couldn't contribute to that.

*Francesca:* Do you ever recall while you were growing up in Memphis, experiencing any acts of discrimination or did you see someone get discriminated against?

*Rita Kendrick:* No, not really. I think the biggest act of discrimination I experienced when I was growing up was from my own people because of the color of my skin, they called us names.  
[05:07] We were segregated against. And I think the one experience that I really remember, as a little girl was my mother took us shopping and we went in Goldsmith's. And they made her get out of the line so that they could wait on a White person. And that was an experience too because I knew what race of people I belonged to, and had no desire to belong anywhere else. But, we experienced some prejudices and my mother did also. And I remember that.

Video Cut:05:44:08

*Francesca:* Was it because of the fact that you got discriminated against because of your lighter skin is that what—

*Rita Kendrick:* Because of my lighter skin and I think, and even when I hear now from adults who were in school, adults now who were in school when I was in school and they talk about it, but those were the things that I didn't know existed.

[06:04] You know, because they had names that they called us when we were growing up. And I don't know why they did that because we got along well. We did things together. No fights, but every now and then somebody just decided whatever was going on inside them that they wanted to impose that on us.

*Francesca:* That must have been hard for you.

*Rita Kendrick:* A little difficult. But I was shy in school. And so there were a lot of things that just kind of went over my head.

*Francesca:* Could you talk a little bit more about the activities you were involved in, in school?

*Rita Kendrick:* There were not an awful lot of activities and I remember being involved in a Catholic Youth organization. I sang in the choir.  
[07:00] Every year the seniors at St. Augustine would have an operetta and I participated in that. Other than that, they were church related things. I remember being a Girl Scout.

*Francesca:* And were the Girl Scouts segregated at the time?

*Rita Kendrick:* I'm sure they were. You know, when you grow up happy and you have parents who just love you and encourage you, there are a lot of things that just kind of go over your head a little bit because you're not out in the street all the time. And when you come home you're safe, you're secure. You have your parents there.

*Francesca:* Absolutely. And what year did you graduate from St. Augustine?

*Rita Kendrick:* I graduated from St. Augustine in 1950.

*Francesca:* Okay. And, what were your plans after high school?  
[08:00]

*Rita Kendrick:* Well, after high school I always thought I wanted to go in the military, which didn't materialize. And I'm glad now that I didn't because I hear so many stories about females who did go into the military. And I don't know why I chose that and that's interesting because my whole education was with the Catholic education with nuns. But I never wanted to be a nun. And I received an **A. Case** Scholarship from LeMoyne and that just seemed to be the route you take. LeMoyne was in walking distance from my house. St. Augustine was in walking distance from my house. In fact, LeMoyne was closer than St. Augustine was, so everything was just right in that little community.

*Francesca:* What were your experiences like at LeMoyne?

*Rita Kendrick:* It was a small environment.  
[09:00] When I first went to LeMoyne, I graduated when I was 16. And I just, you know I love nature, trees, flowers, and you know when I got to college that was the time to sit out on campus. But, I had, fortunately, I had a girlfriend who would literally take me by the hand and take me to the library. When later, when I started working for Memphis City School System I gave her credit for me being there, had it not been for Annabelle, I probably wouldn't have made it through LeMoyne. But she literally made me. I was 16 when I started and I met my husband when I was 17. And we married the next year.

[09:57] He promised my mother that he would send me to college, you know finish the four years and he did that. So, being married you don't experience a lot of things and then being young and naïve you don't experience a lot of things.

*Francesca:* What's your husband's name?

*Rita Kendrick:* My husband at that time was **Louis Jones**.

**Video Cut 10:22:08**

*Francesca:* Could you talk a little bit about what you were experiencing in LeMoyné at school, in college in terms of what was going on in Memphis during that time?

*Rita Kendrick:* My world was just where I was right then. And I think that whatever I experienced or and I can't think of anything that just sticks out at me. Being shy, I just held it in. There was so much that I held in. I didn't talk about the names we were called in high school.

[10:57] I didn't talk, my father was a Pullman porter and he was also a master plumber. I do remember that they would not give him a plumbing license because they didn't give Blacks plumbing licenses at that time. So, he was a bootleg plumber. And he worked in a lot of White homes. They called him. You know they wanted him as opposed to somebody else. Church Hardware and I think that's in Memphis, now. They would give him credit for plumbing tools and things that he needed. But they were the only ones who reached out and would do that.

[11:55] So, when my father was not on the road, then he was doing plumbing work. My mother with I think every two years, she had another baby.

And that pretty much kept her company. So, we were loved and we were allowed to grow, but just sitting and having long talks with momma or long talks with daddy. That was not in our home.

*Francesca:* Okay. I want to backtrack a little bit. Did you ever experience any tension from other African-Americans or other people in Memphis because you're Catholic?

*Rita Kendrick:* I don't remember any.

*Francesca:* I know a lot of people sometimes talk about being an African-American and being Catholic at the time was difficult.

*Rita Kendrick:* Well, you know I find that there were a lot of boys and girls at that time, they were going to dances, and you see, most of my schoolmates were two years older than me.

[12:58] So, they would be experiencing a lot of things that I wasn't even ready for and sometimes I think that maybe I still haven't caught up. But, so they were exposed to more than I was exposed to. And I guess I can't speak to that very much.

*Francesca:* When did you start gaining awareness of the Civil Rights Movement? Was it in college or later --

*Rita Kendrick:* I think when I really began to, when you say Civil Rights Movement, you know that that went back long before the marches and everything. And I think the biggest impact it had on, the situation that had the biggest impact on me was when they came out with "Black is Beautiful." Black is beautiful. And they pushed that. That was in the schools. That was everywhere. Black is beautiful. I pushed it also because I had in my mind there was a different connotation.

[14:04] I belong to the Black race. But, I think what they meant was Black is beautiful. It was taken in so many ways that if you were Black-skinned, you know you were beautiful.

And I as a classroom teacher, I taught that to my children because they needed to know that also. So, Black was beautiful, but down deep you know if they meant the color of your skin, I wasn't so sure that applied to me because in my mind Black was a race, a group, a whole group of people and that was where I belonged. I remember my youngest daughter when she was in the third grade she came home and she, I don't know how we, what we were talking about, but she said momma, she said, you're Black she said. But I'm White.

[15:00] And I said your light-skinned sweetheart. She said the color of my skin is the same color of the skin of the boys and girls in my class. She said so I'm White. And that was an opportunity for me to give her a lesson on her heritage and where she came from. And then she did, her skin may have been that color, but she belonged to the Black race.

*Francesca:* Okay. When, what time period was this "Black is beautiful?"

*Rita Kendrick:* Black is beautiful, I have to think, that had to be somewhere between 20 and 25 years ago.

**Video Cut 15:50:07**

*Francesca:* Okay, wow. And you mentioned you were a teacher. Did, were you teaching in segregated schools during the time or they were integrated?

*Rita Kendrick:* No.  
[16:00] They were segregated schools and the children, we taught children that we loved to see them progress was really wonderful. I started off in Magnolia and then I had a break in service after five years.

And then I went to Leath School. Leath School was down on the corner of Wellington and Linden. And those children came out of the projects. They came from over storefronts down on Beale Street, but they would eager to learn and it was a pleasure to teach them. That was my most favorable time teaching was the children who came to Leath School. I got to school early and they knew that when they came there they could come into my room.

And then you had parental support, things were a lot different then. You had to make home visits and you just, the children loved you, and you loved the children.

[17:00]

That was my, the beginning of a real favorable teaching career, was the children in Leath School. They wanted to learn. They were eager to learn. And those who could not learn, especially in my class, they still felt some pride, some self-concept because that's what I tried to give them.

Francesca:

Again, I want to backtrack a little bit, in college or surely afterwards, did you see any of your friends or people that you knew, were they or were you yourself getting involved with the push for civil rights within the city?

Rita Kendrick:

When, I married when I was 17. When I was 20, I had my first job and my first child.

[17:54]

So, when Rosa Parks, you know sat on the bus and refused to get up my first child was like four and a half months old. I was a young parent. The marriage was not the best. And there were things. I grew up fast as far as being a parent. And I was not as actively involved but I was emotionally involved in what was going on but, actively involved, no. My conditions at home did not lend themselves for me to go outside the home.

Francesca:

When you say you were emotionally involved, what does that mean?

Rita Kendrick:

I could feel, you know you watch things on television and you can feel what the people are going through. And I think about Watts and how they tore up their city, and these were people who had no hope.

[18:59]

And they were just angry and it didn't matter where they took it out, they just took it out and they took it out on themselves. They tore up homes and burned and looted, and you know I find that at that time, that was a way of letting you know I don't like what's going on. I don't like what's going on. This is the way I'm going to show you I don't like it. And so we hurt ourselves a lot because

there was not a, there was a feeling of hopelessness and we just didn't feel like anyone cared about the plight.

And just like I said, I knew all of this was going on. I saw it on television. I watched the school being integrated with the little six in Birmingham.

[19:59]

I watched the marches, the men's march on Washington and you know all of this, I'm just thinking about myself. Like, I said I was an introvert and you know I held a lot of it in. When the sanitation workers in Memphis, when they decided to strike, I guess maybe and I may not be accurate with this for a couple of months, but the whole city felt that because our noses told us the sanitation workers are on strike. You know garbage was not being picked up and anywhere you went you could smell that they were on strike. And Henry Loeb didn't handle that in the best way.

Video Cut 20:56:02

[20:56]

And things, Martin Luther King came and I think he was scheduled to have another march in Washington, and at that time, and that one was going to focus on the poor people. So, put that on hold and came to Memphis to see what he could do. And of course, you know he was a non-violent advocate. The first march they had I worked at Leith school. In the middle of the march, they started rioting. I guess they were young, Black teenagers. We were close to Beale Street. They had trucks parked, our playground was in the back of the school and Southern Funeral Home which was on Vance, they had trucks parked over there. They were looting all up and down Beale Street, the clothing stores at that time.

[21:58]

The men were wearing pastel color suits, pink and yellow and you know light green and ruffles coming from up under the sleeves.

And we could look out our windows at Leath and see them just going across our back playground over to the trucks with just bolts of material flying in the wind, instruments from music instruments, saxophones, whatever they could, drums, whatever they could pick up. And we had received several threats there at Leath not to open the doors. Do not come to work. But we had to because we had so many children whose parents worked. And they had no place to send their children. We did relocate not in classrooms, but in the gym, but we functioned during the day from the gym.

[22:53]

And there were orders not for Blacks, after that happened, there was the orders for Blacks not to congregate in a group. And at that time, Leath was right across the street from the **Big M**. It was a little club. And Black men would congregate over there and they

did so, that day also. And so when it was time for us to dismiss our children we would walk them down to the corner of Linden and Wellington and the police were attacking the men who had congregated. And blood was just flying everywhere. And there were, with these little children trying to get them across the street. I remember that. And I remember what a toll it took on me, you know to have the children to have to experience something like that.

[24:00]

But, we managed to get through that.

Francesca:

What did you tell your students?

Rita Kendrick:

When, you know when I think back I remember then, I remember that incident, and I don't, well see they were being dismissed that day. And I don't remember specifically telling, making a class or a classroom discussion out of it. You know, when they came the next day we wanted things to be as normal for the children as possible, as normal as you can say that's it's normal when all of them are trying to have class in the cafeteria. But we continued. I don't remember specifically having lessons on that. I answered questions if children asked me.

[25:00]

Francesca:

That must have been so difficult.

Rita Kendrick:

It was difficult. That particular incident had a profound effect because I hated the children had to see that.

Francesca:

So, during the strike and after the assassination of Dr. King, what was going on in your life? You said you're really internal, what did you feel about --

Rita Kendrick:

When Dr. King was shot and died, there was a curfew. They had a curfew in Memphis. They brought in the military. There was a, I could just feel a calm over the whole city. You know you weren't even, that was not just a curfew for teenagers, it was a curfew for anybody who lived in Memphis. You had to get off the street.

[26:00]

And it was like a quiet. I was talking with my oldest daughter last night and I told her where I was coming today. And I asked her what did she remember, and she said momma, what I really remember was how you and dad told us just to be quiet. It was a time for meditating. She knew what was going on.

And I think it affected me so, I had never marched before. But the march that they had after Martin Luther King died, I marched in that march. My husband at that time did not go. The children did

[27:05] not want to go and I did not impose that on them. But I think for myself, I had to march because it was a way of cleansing, of being able to participate in something that showed you have my support. And I felt like I would have no peace if I did not march. So the march that I was involved in came after that. And then at the Claiborne Temple, I would go to the meetings that they had down there.

**Video Cut 27:20:28**

*Francesca:* It seems to me that you have an incredible amount of strength to be observing everything that was happening around you, but to keep--

*Rita Kendrick:* To hold it inside --

*Francesca:* What encouraged you to keep going, to go to school the next day to teach your students? What kept you motivated?

*Rita Kendrick:* I don't know. I tell my children, my daughters. I have one daughter who suffers from depression. And it's interesting how I tell her you know Black women are strong.

[28:00] And even though my skin is light, I'm still a Black woman. And that's the way I see myself. I know I'm not White. And that's, my mom was strong. I think she had to be to raise seven children and there were times when we had to negotiate what we were going to eat. Sundays were the meals. During the week, you had big pot foods. But, my mother was the kind who if she had \$2.00 and the man next door needed one, and he lived by himself. I'll never forget his name was **Mr. Bennett**. One of my, and she had seven children. One of those dollars went to Mr. Bennett. So, she was strong, but she was also giving.

[29:00] And I guess I get that from my mother. And also, the fact that I married when I was 17, and I was pushed out into a world that I was not prepared for. So, I had to learn how to be strong. My first marriage did not work. It ended in divorce. And I had a five-year old and three-year old. So, the world was not, the world was hard. So, you either had to get some strength because you had to survive and then you had, I had two children that were watching. And I remember when I was working. They paid teachers ten months. And you were supposed to save enough to cover the summer months, and it was hard to do that.

[30:07] I was not getting child support. And I remember once I went to get food stamps and they told me that I taught and so I was supposed to have enough money to carry me over the summer. And they

told me how. So, when you get a lot of “no’s” and you know you need help, then you learn to be strong.

*Francesca:* Did your participation in St. Augustine and did your religion and spirituality play a role in into --

*Rita Kendrick:* Absolutely. I know now that many churches lock their doors because of thefts.

[30:55] I can appreciate our pastor, **Father G** wanting to leave the church open even though I know that makes us a target for whoever wants to come in and do whatever. But, my faith and my religion saw me through those times because I could go to, I remember one time sitting in church like 11:30 at night. And I didn’t have to talk or put my feelings into words. All I had to do was just sit there and know that God was present and that he would make things right. So, I would sit there as long as I needed to sit there and then I’d get up and go on and face whatever came next.

*Francesca:* That very powerful that you say that. And you do have an amazing story to tell, Mrs. Rita. But I want to move ahead a little bit. You said you were also a guidance counselor during that time. What was it like being involved in the school system, and more so in the present, like the ‘70s and ‘80s –

[32:04]

*Rita Kendrick:* Well, by that time a lot had settled when I got to be a guidance counselor. And I felt like my goal, as a counselor was to prepare those children for life experiences. And there were crisis-kind of children who were referred to me. There were children I could put in small groups. But the total children I wanted to prepare for life and so, I went around to project, you know to classrooms and I a lot of classroom guidance preparing them for social skills or coping skills or study skills or motivating them to be the kind of citizen that would enhance their lives.

Video cut 32:58:24

[33:00]

*Francesca:* How long were you working for the city school system?

*Rita Kendrick:* Thirty-five years.

*Francesca:* And as an educator first being in the classroom and then as a counselor, have you seen the education system in Memphis change or be altered at all for good or bad?

- Rita Kendrick:* I can only speak from the situations that I've been involved in. I remember when they first integrated schools. And this is my personal, okay. I haven't run any statistics or anything. They sent to Leath, those children had Black teachers who cared about them. They sent the poorest class of White teachers to Leath. We dressed not extravagantly, but we always tried to look nice to give them something to want to achieve for. And I remember the teacher who took my place.
- [34:00] She came there with jeans on that dragged on the bottom and bragged about the fact she had stopped at the service station to get gas. And told them that she was a teacher and they told her she didn't look like a teacher because we always tried to look like a teacher. Still touching and hugging even though the children could not be cleaned up.
- But, they sent a class of teachers to Leath School, that's what I can talk about, that did not really sincerely care about the children nor did they care very much about their jobs. I was one that they pulled the better Black teachers to send to the White schools. And I'm not calling me a better Black teacher, but I was being sent to Sherwood Elementary.
- 34:58] In the meantime, before I arrived there a guidance position opened, so I never made it to Sherwood. But, the principal at Sherwood, we went to a citywide meeting. And she was determined to meet me because she wanted to know what did I look like? Who was this they were sending to her school even though I never got there.
- Integration, I worked at Richland Elementary School. The name itself can tell you what the neighborhood was. And they bused children from Binghamton to Richland. I had one day to Richland to try to give some self-concept to the children that they bused in from Binghamton. It was a total cultural mistake. It did not do anything to enhance the children.
- [35:57] The theory behind it was that if we put them in this environment, that will make them aspire to want what they see here. And that was a mistake. And I could go in more detail with that, but that was a total mistake.
- Francesca:* Wow. So, the integration or the attempts to integrate schools, what are your opinions about that you said --
- Rita Kendrick:* I think it hurt.
- Francesca:* Could you talk a little more --

*Rita Kendrick:* I think it hurt. I think it hurt our Black children educationally. I think it set many of them behind. And this is my personal opinion and then things, you know did get better, you know White teachers was teaching in Black schools. They did get better. They learned to, from my experiences of going to five different schools as an elementary counselor I could see the White teachers were beginning to feel or have a compassion for, and understanding of the cultural life of the children and to want to give them something.

[37:10] But I think initially it hurt. I don't know, I think the school system now is wild. I think a lot of theories and programs and new ideas that they're bringing in, they want to see them work on paper. But they're not really reaching the children.

*Francesca:* Do you think, well you mentioned how education is today here in Memphis. Do you think other things have changed in the city or just in the world generally from how they were then to how they are now?

**Video Cut 37:45:15**

*Rita Kendrick:* Well, I can go anywhere I want to go.  
[37:55] And I may feel some resentment from individual people, but maybe totally, I can't say things are totally better. I cannot say that. And I think that, but they're individual things we're all accepting, you know integration. And I think integration is good because that's what civil rights is, you know your right to not be discriminated again, your right to vote, your right to go anywhere. I grew up in a town when they had the colored restrooms. My mother had to wait while Whites were waited on. My youngest daughter gets up on the stool in the drugstore and then the lady with the, the White lady with the little girl moves her little girl because I wasn't moving mine.

[39:00] And so they didn't, I didn't bring them up knowing a lot of racial tension. They got Black history. They knew the contributions that Blacks made. But I didn't teach segregation.

*Francesca:* In wrapping up, what advice could you give people from say my generation or younger to keep Memphis moving in the right direction?

*Rita Kendrick:* To keep Memphis moving in the right direction is to, and these are general terms, know yourself. Know who you are, where you're going and what you want to do. But always know, I think this really hard now because Black history doesn't mean an awful lot to a lot of Blacks now.

[39:56] And I think in order to know who you are, you need to know your history and you need to know where you're going. So, the younger people now are standing on the shoulders of all who have gone before and I've even heard young people say, oh well that happened then. You know, and they need to know appreciate the contributions that were made so they'll know where they're going. And I think your question got lost in there somewhere.

*Francesca:* No, it's fine. You're just giving people from my generation advice to and that sort of --

*Rita Kendrick:* Know your history. Know your history. Know where you came from. Know the sacrifices that others made and don't let that hold you back, but know what it is so that you will have a firm footing of who you are. You will know who you are.

[40:57] You will have a better concept of the opportunities that are around you, recently I remember hearing, somebody said that Martin Luther King said "I have a dream" and there are a lot of people still dreaming. Well, see you can't just sit and dream and wait on somebody to give you something. You prepare yourself and then you go after it. And just keep your eye on the prize. Know where you're going. And take the necessary steps to get there.

*Francesca:* Well, Mrs. Kendrick, thank you so much. This has been an incredible interview. I've enjoyed hearing your perspective and hearing your story about just your life and how you've observed Memphis and just your surrounding areas. I, it's been a great honor and pleasure to be able to sit here and be a witness to that. So, thank you again --

*Rita Kendrick:* Well, and thank you for inviting me. When you first asked, I said oh, I don't have anything to offer. And then when I thought about it, I said everybody has a story.

[42:00] Everybody has a story. So, that's my story.

*Francesca:* Thank you, Mrs. Rita.

*Rita Kendrick:* All right.

*Francesca:* Thank you --

*Rita Kendrick:* You're very welcome.

[End of Audio]