

# Rhodes College Digital Archives - DLynx

## Mary Blair, 2015

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*Layna Hayes:* Good morning. On behalf of The Corners of Highland Heights, Highland Heights United Methodist Church, and Crossroads to Freedom at Rhodes College, I would like to thank you for taking your time to share your story. Today's date is July 1st. My name is Layna Hayes and I attend the Collegiate School of Memphis.

*Keyont'e M. Loper:* And my name is Keyont'e Morris Loper, and I attend Kingsbury High School.

*Mary Blair:* I'm Mary Blair and I'm a neighbor who – what would I say – well, residents of this neighborhood for a very long time.

*Layna Hayes:* Let's start out with some basic questions about you and your life, and then we'll ask more specific questions about the neighborhood. If you don't mind me asking, what year were you born?

*Mary Blair:* 1955.

*Layna Hayes:* Where were you born and raised?

*Mary Blair:* I was born in Nesbit, Mississippi, but I was raised in Hernando, Mississippi.

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*Layna Hayes:* What is your occupation?

*Mary Blair:* Housewife.

*Layna Hayes:* Did you marry?

*Mary Blair:* Yes.

*Layna Hayes:* What is your spouse's name and occupation?

*Mary Blair:* My husband's name is Ira James Blair Senior, and his occupation is an aircraft fueller and he works at Federal Express.

*Layna Hayes:* Did you have children?

*Mary Blair:* Yes. *[Laughs]*

*Layna Hayes:* What were their names?

*Mary Blair:* I have seven children. My oldest is Sydney and my second oldest is Marshall. My third oldest is Audrey, and we have Ira Junior, Joshua, Iris, and Merriam, the baby.

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*Layna Hayes:* What schools did you attend?

*Mary Blair:* Did I attend?

*Layna Hayes:* That's right.

*Mary Blair:* I attended Hernando High School. I dropped out in the '70s, so I went to school under the youth program to – and I received my GED. And I moved to Memphis in the '70s, so – and I been here since, in Memphis. But I did go to school and I do have a diploma, so...

*Keyont'e M. Loper:* What grade did you drop out at?

*Mary Blair:* Ninth. Yeah.

*Layna Hayes:* What was school like for you?

*Mary Blair:* Very interesting. I wish I could go back to the elementary years, but – *[laughs]*

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But it was very interesting. I've went to school since I've been grown, you know? I've been – I went to Memphis OIC when I was, I guess, maybe about 21 or 22, and I just graduated from Tennessee Technology in, oh, let's see, in '12, and I – for – what – dental lab tech. So I graduated from there lately. So I started to going to Messick, and we – well, we wanted to – you know, well, I started in trying to get funds from the government to go because my husband is a veteran, but they wouldn't pay for me to go, so I had to drop out of there and – you know, 'cause we couldn't afford to pay or it, so...

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But I love to go to school, but the problem is, is getting funds to go with. So I've had a whole lot of school experience in my life, and all of my children – I have seven – all have diplomas. They

graduated from school, and I have three still in college, University of Memphis.

*Layna Hayes:* Did they go to school here in Memphis?

*Mary Blair:* Yes, all seven.

*Layna Hayes:* Where did they go?

*Mary Blair:* My oldest went – I know y'all know South Side, and he graduated from South Side. Marshall graduated from Treadwell. Audrey graduated from Treadwell. Ira Junior graduated from Treadwell. Joshua, Treadwell.

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Iris, Treadwell. Merriam went to Treadwell up until, I guess, the 11th grade, and she went to East, so she graduated from East. Yeah.

*Layna Hayes:* Did segregation impact your educational experience at all?

*Mary Blair:* Not as I know of. I mean, I can't see, you know, where it did. It was all in your ability to learn, I mean, you know, even though sometimes we might've felt like we was not treated equal or whatever, but you still had to put forth a effort to learn of your own, you know? You couldn't depend on someone else teaching you; you have to get out there and learn for yourself, so that's what I had to do, and I did it. And thank God – *[laughs]* – I made it.

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So where I am now, and I'm going on until he see fit that I come home, so I'm gonna do what I can as long as I can to make a difference in the world to – especially to younger people, let them know that you got to have a goal; you got to put forth a effort to get to wheresoever. You don't sit around and wait for someone else to give it to you. Go out and try to get it for yourself. Yeah, and you – when you put forth an effort to get it for yourself, when you receive it, you'll appreciate it more. But if someone's just always giving and giving and giving, you won't know how to – like I say, you can give a person a fish, but it's better that you teach them how to catch them themselves. *[Laughs]*

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So it's – I just feel like you put forth examples to show others what life is really all about. I mean, we wasn't put here to just sit around and wait for things to come our way; we have to go out and make things happen sometimes, you know? Some things comes pretty easy or constantly, but some things that you are really ambitious about, you have to go out just like you all doing now and find out some things, you know? When you learn it, it won't ever leave you, but – and that's what my grandma's always told me, said – I used to cry when I was younger with her, and I would tell her, my grades –

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If my grades wasn't what I – like, I tell her, you know, I put forth too much effort that my grades was low like they was, and she would tell me, "There's one thing that people can take from you is your grades," said, "But they can't take what you learn. So that's gonna go with you forever." And she was right. And I learned a lotta things that I was taught as a child, and it comes back to you. No matter how old you get and how young you was when that person told you these things, when you experience it, you remember. So life is mainly what you make it, and the – I guess the togetherness – we have to be together in anything we do.

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I mean, you can't be separate, you know? You got to always come together. No matter what creed or color, everyone have a heart, and if you can – if you have a real heart, you can love. And when love is in there, you have everything. But without love, you have nothing. So I'm hoping that, as young people, that I can help you all along the way to realize that life can be – it can be beautiful, but you have to put forth that effort to make it beautiful, and you can't listen to – maybe some people maybe haven't had much in life or haven't gotten to the goals that they would like to get to.

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Maybe they have slacked off along the way, but you can't slack off. You have to keep – as you said, keep trying, keep putting forth efforts. And when you put forth efforts, efforts will pay off, and I'm a living witness. *[Laughs]* So...

*Layna Hayes:*

What church do you attend?

*Mary Blair:* Well, right now, we are on – well, my husband is a minister, so – he's not a pastor, just he's in the ministry, but we attends our True Gospel – well, I don't know, it's in the Frayser area. So we attend that a lot, and then we attend the World Overcomers sometimes, too.

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Because my oldest son, his family attends that church there, and then Marshall, my second oldest, and his family attends True Gospel. We don't have a church home right now because we don't have a building, and my husband is, like I said, a minister, and we look to him, but he's looking for a building, and it will be called The Church House of Prayer. So hopefully, the Lord see fit, we'll get into a building soon, but we do a whole lotta home ministry. We pray together. We read together. We try to stay together, and they say a family that prays together stays together, and so far, thank God, we been praying together and staying together for over 30 years. So it's been a blessing, and don't – don't think it haven't been some ups and downs.

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Life is never without ups and downs, so – but you stay strong, you can get up, and – from being down, and sometimes, even though you up, it can carry you down, but you can still come back up. You always have a chance to come back up. So I been through the fire, they said, and I been through many floods, but thank God I made it. But it's one thing about it – this is why I'd say without love in your life, you don't have – you can't make it, because I've always been taught, and I've learned for myself, that God is love, and without God in your life, you don't have one. So we have to keep him in. We are not perfect, we was not born perfect, and I don't see us leaving the world perfect.

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But with – like I said, love carries you a long ways.

*Layna Hayes:* Thank you for the advice. Can you share some of the memories from your childhood that influenced you later in life?

*Mary Blair:* Well, I don't know where to start. *[Laughs]* Yeah, I could – I've experienced – well, I guess you know as – when we was growing up, it was like we really – we played and had fun, but we still had chores, like we had to do grown-up work, you know? Momma

was always working, Daddy always working, so we had chores at home we had to do – the dishes, the cooking, the cleaning, the washing.

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At that time, when I was growing up, we didn't have washers and dryers, you know? We only had – I don't know if y'all remember – y'all probably know about washboards – *[laughs]* – and the machines that, well, they had the dashes, you know, we just washed in it, and it had the thing – the where you had to – we would call 'em the rollers. You would have to put your clothes through 'em and roll 'em to squeeze 'em. I experienced all of that, so we had work to do. We had wood – we didn't have electric stoves or gas stoves. At that time, we had wood. We had to make a fire, you know, in our stove to cook our food. So we had to get this wood from the trees, cut – the cutting down of trees and making wood.

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Cutting the wood, we – I know you've seen on TV a lot. Y'all probably have never seen it in person where people put wood on blocks – the big blocks of wood – and split it, and split the wood into – yeah, we had to do all of that, and make fires to keep warm, so I've been through all of that. And the chopping of cotton – *[chuckles]* – we did that. Picking of cotton, I've done that, and growing gardens and – you know, to have vegetables and cows, and we always had swines – y'all call them "swines," but we call them "hogs" and "piggies," you know, I've experienced all of that as well. It's been a long journey, but thank God, I'm still going on.

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And a lotta people probably came here and think the way I talk, I am, like, 70 or 80 years old, but I'm not. I'm just 59 years old, but I've been through some things in life. It had been time – the hard times. I can't tell you there's been no easy times, but it's been hard times, but like I said, I made it through and I'm still going strong, and I have to give God all the glory. I hope there is no one – I hope I'm not stepping on no one toes by talking about God, but that's what I know, and I have to give him the glory and honor through all I do. And like I say, I'm not a perfect person – I would love to be. *[Laughs]* \_\_\_\_\_ a whole lot better on me if I could be a perfect person, but I can't, but I do believe that I have a perfect heart to love.

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And I'm like God; I don't have no disrespect a person because we never know what people are going through or where they been or what they have experienced in life. So sometimes, it's better to – instead of criticizing a person, it's better to sit down, talk to that person, find out what's really going on in that person's life so that you won't feel you have the right to criticize 'em, and then you can maybe understand 'em better to where you can say, "Oh, well, I can help out in that area," or, "I know someone can help you," or, "I know what you need to be helped." So we can put forth the effort to help one another instead of criticizing, because we never know.

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So I've been – had a whole lotta experienced in my life, and hopefully, I've touched bases on some of the things that you all wanted me to. And where I don't, just ask a question and I'll try to answer it, but I just like to give a understanding of what – maybe the question that you asked me of what I've been through or experienced in life, I like to kinda tell you and then try to explain a little of what I've been through.

*Keyont'e M. Loper:* Let's talk about how life in Highland Heights used to be. What does Highland Heights mean to you?

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*Mary Blair:* Home. *[Laughs]* For right now, it's home. Well, you know, I've been here since 1988, and it haven't been a bad neighborhood to me because I've never had any trouble in Highland Heights. I mean, we've – I haven't had none of my children to get into gangs and different things like that, so I just haven't had no very bad experiences in Highland Heights. And like I said, when I moved here, I had – I only had three – I had – well, I had five children when I moved here, and I had two after I moved in Highland Heights, so, I mean, you know, they was \_\_\_ children when I moved, but they was – I practically raised all of 'em here but the first –

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My oldest one was in high school and he graduated maybe a year after I moved here. So I don't – I've had good experiences in Highland Heights. I haven't had any bad experiences here.

*Keyont'e M. Loper:* What was your transition? A few minutes ago, we was explaining that you had moved, so where did you move from?

*Mary Blair:* South Memphis. Well, at that time, we lived in – they called it like apartment complex, what they call LeMoyne Garden. At that time, it was a whole lot different from what it look like now, so – but, you know, like I said, they said it was the worst place in the world to live. I never had any trouble there. Never. The only trouble that I can remember is my children was playing in the back –

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and it was a few people running through – you know, with big long guns, so all I did was ran out and got 'em, brought 'em in, but they didn't shoot 'em, you know? It wasn't no shooting, but I seen them coming through with these long guns and I knew it was time for me to get my children inside. So that's the only thing I ever had in trouble with, and they say it was a bad neighborhood and everything, but I trust in God enough to where I could sleep with my one little eye open. No one never come in. So it's all in trusting in God. I tell you, if you can live your life trusting in him, you'll have a better life. And I've learned that because I learned – when I first moved to Memphis, I didn't live in The Garden. I lived – McLemore – you know, I know you all have heard of McLemore, of what – Stax Records and all of that.

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And I lived there, and I used to – 'cause, see, I was being – in Mississippi, it was very quiet. When I moved here, the ambulances, the fire trucks and all that, you know, was disturbing to me 'cause we hardly ever heard that noise there. But when I moved here, I moved, and my friend and I started living together, so I would – I lived in fear, and I – you know, I wasn't as strong in the Bible as I am now, and even I learned to be stronger, and I learned that when you live in fear of something, you bring it on yourself. So I feared people breaking in on me, I feared people breaking in on my apartment when I'm gone 'cause I was – like I said, I was going to school, and all these things happened.

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I even had someone to break in and – when I realized they were standing over me. But God took care of me. I mean, he didn't hurt me in any kinda way. So when I moved to The Garden, I learned

that things happened to me before I moved there, it was because of fear, so I had to pray and ask God to deliver me from fear, and when I did that, I haven't had any trouble, anyone breaking in on me or sleepless nights. Because when I lived there, I would stay up all day and – I would sleep all day and stay up all night because that's how afraid I was. So I learned not to be afraid. Now, I can lay down and sleep through a storm – *[laughs]* – because I put my life and all of my surroundings in God's hand, and I go to sleep, and I rest.

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But when I was younger, I would fear – I was so afraid, I couldn't sleep at night because I was in a new place, and like I said, noise, I wasn't used to that. It was very quiet in Mississippi. The only thing – maybe you could hear the train going over the tracks through – at night or maybe a big truck, you could even hear – you can't – you know, you have so many big trucks and so many different noises, you can't tell if it was a big truck or a small truck now, but back then, it was so quiet in Mississippi, you knew when a big truck – like on the – we call it "the highway," but it wasn't the Interstate; it was like a two-way street, but we call it like the 51 Highway, and you could hear it. But here, you can't – I mean, it was so many noises I had to get used to, which down there, we could practically tell a train –

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And then if we heard a siren – it was very rare that we would hear that, so when I got here, I had to learn a whole lot of – learn to hear and not hear the noises, and it was kind of hard, but – it took a little while, but I got more used to it as I grew old here. So yeah, it's something. I've been there – as I said, I been through a whole lot, but I thank God that he have kept me and yet keeping me. So yeah, it was a whole lot different than where I lived when I moved here.

*Keyont'e M. Loper:* What is your experience from South Memphis to Highland Heights now?

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*Mary Blair:* Well, it's – to me, it's not any difference 'cause we – like I said, I had no trouble in South Memphis and I had none here, but I'm sure, in the time that – since then, it's changed a lot. So I don't know if I could go back to South Memphis and live peacefully or

not, but I know I'm living in – peacefully here, so I feel like I can – I believe that I can live peacefully in any part of Memphis if I decide to move to Collierville or North Memphis, South Memphis, wheresoever, I believe I can live in peace there, because for one thing, I'm gonna take peace with me, you know? *[Laughs]* And I'm gonna surround myself in peace. And I believe that I can live in peace.

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So I haven't – I thank God I haven't had any trouble – children will be children, and I had – so many until – I was always surrounded in children in Highland Heights, so it's a lot of 'em that I know that have growed up and got children and probably even grandchildren now, but I just feel like it's always in what you – you got to take peace with you wheresoever you go, and you can live in peace.

*Keyont'e M. Loper:* What was Highland Heights like in the '60s and '70s?

*Mary Blair:* I wasn't here in the '60s and '70s for Highland Height. I really couldn't –

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Now, I've talked to people like the lady that live next door to me, like she was here in the '60s, and I've learned from her a few things of what it was like here, but it was mainly – where she moved in her house, it was just scarcely built next door to me, but my home was built, like, in 1925, so it wasn't too many homes in that area where I am McGearns right now, because she said that when she was built, her yard was just on – it was like an orchard. You know, they have pears and apples and palms and peaches and all that. So they had to get rid of that, you know, knock a lotta those trees down to build her home, and the home next to me was built in the same year, and I believe she said it was built in '40.

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So when they moved in there, you know, they were brand new, and – but as far as for me, in the '60s, I was in Hernando, Mississippi.

*Keyont'e M. Loper:* What was going on in – around Highland Heights in the '60s and '70s, speaking of – but you didn't live here so we're gonna go to the next question. So what significance did Treadwell High School on this community some years ago?

*Mary Blair:* Well, it had a lot of significance because, like I said, I had, oh, all my children to go to Treadwell – all but one, and that's the oldest one. He was practically graduating when we moved here.

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So it's been a good school for my children, so it's been significant – *[laughs]* – from the '70 – well, the '80s up until now. So it show a whole lot – I really hated that they – what did they do? They closed down the – took away the high school, you know, the – and I didn't like that part, but I was thanking God that all my children was out and I didn't have to deal with it, so – but it was kinda confusing, the way they did it, but I said, "Maybe they did what they had to do because of the budget." So – but I've had a whole lot of experiences with Treadwell, and they all have – you know, I haven't had any real bad experiences with Treadwell, so – even elementary through high school.

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'Cause I had – you know, I had to deal with all three – high school, junior high, and elementary.

*Keyont'e M. Loper:* Did Treadwell have any impact on your children today?

*Mary Blair:* Yes, they learned a lot. They learned. I believe they have – you know, I believe it will forever have an impact on 'em because it helped them to learn, and they didn't – like I say, I don't have a one in a gang, or I haven't had to – well, I haven't had to really go to – maybe once or twice that I had to accuse of things, you know, and I went to –

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get them straightened out, like through juvenile court or whatever, but it wasn't nothing stuck, you know? It was something that they was accused of, so we fought it and got them cleared from it, but other than that, I mean, I haven't been having to run back and forth to court and getting 'em outta jail. I have four boys and three girls, so I feel like I've had a – they have been – it have been a good experience, so I would put it like that: a very good experience. And it would carry them a long ways because they did learn something, learned how to live, even though Treadwell. Because they don't know of any other schools other than – like I said, all five of 'em – all – the young five went to Treadwell from elementary up, so...

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Yeah, I feel like it have a big impact on 'em. *[Laughs]*

*Keyont'e M. Loper:* When you moved to this neighborhood in '80s, did Treadwell have any impact on this community?

*Mary Blair:* Did – excuse me –

*Keyont'e M. Loper:* Did Treadwell have any impact on this community, like for activities for the kids get together?

*Mary Blair:* Mainly at school, you know? They had different events at school that the children would participate in, but nothing like neighborhood – when they got older, they started – they used to call it – oh, let's see – the – now it's called Streets Ministries, but –

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*Male:* Bridge Builders.

*Mary Blair:* Excuse me?

*Male:* The Bridge Builders.

*Mary Blair:* Yeah, the Bridges – the City Builders, we were, yeah, City Builders. Now, they loved that. They stayed with Ms. Napoli, Ms. Napoli and that, so that is the only one I – other than school that I can remember is the City Builders.

*Keyont'e M. Loper:* Were the people in the Heights different than they are now?

*Mary Blair:* No, not to me. I mean, we've had a lotta people move into the Heights, so we got different people here and different – maybe different things going on, but like I say, in my – where I am, no. We're not having a whole lotta trouble outta people – maybe a little bit noisier than usual, but we're not having any trouble outta people.

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But a lot of times, like I say, it's in the way you carry yourself, and you can – I mean, you learn to get along with people. I would put it like that. You learn to get along with them and just go on with your life. So we haven't had any trouble. No major trouble, thank

God. So it's nothing different to me. I mean, when we first moved here, we was at peace and we went – we're – now, you know, you have that peace here in Highland Heights.

*Layna Hayes:* Would you say that you have any bonds with the people in your neighborhood?

*Mary Blair:* Yes, a few.

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Because like I said, the people in my neighborhood, most of them have kind of passed away or that was there when I first moved, and I learned to live a while. They left me alone, so either they passed away or they moved away. But I have maybe two – let's see – two people that have been – maybe three that's been in the neighborhood for a while with me, and all the rest \_\_\_\_\_ people, but a lot of 'em, I know; a lot of 'em, I don't know because they – they move in and move out so quickly, you know? But I still have a neighbor across the street that was there when I moved there, and a neighbor down the street moved in – two neighbors down the street moved in, like, a few years after I moved in.

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So we still have some acquaintance to where we was kinda learning the neighborhood together and lived in it together. We still have a few there, but most of the other ones, like I said, they are new, but we speak. We don't – I wouldn't be able to tell you all my neighbors' names.

*Keyont'e M. Loper:* What is the reputation of Highland Heights?

*Mary Blair:* I would say – I mean, I haven't heard of – other than it's – it's good. It's no bad reputation in Highland Heights as I know of. All I ever heard was good reputation of Highland Heights.

*Keyont'e M. Loper:* How has it changed?

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*Mary Blair:* How has it changed from – well, I would say it's been kind of updated. It's more – what I would say? More convenience, more people. It's more people in the neighborhood now, it's – so the only thing I can see how it have changed to where a lot of the people that lived in Highland Heights have passed on and a lot of

the houses is vacant now because of, you know, when older people pass. The younger people maybe have a life somewhere else or they don't have no one to really just move into the house and keep it up. So a lot of the houses go down like that.

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I'm not saying – and then they – a lotta people don't wanna rent 'em out because they don't wanna deal with tenants and sometimes they sit too long without it being life in 'em and they go to going down, so there's a lot of those in our neighborhood, but it's not because people don't wanna rent 'em or live in 'em; it's because the owners, after the people die off, the older people die off, you can't get in touch with the owners or the owners is out of town or, you know, and I feel like if you could get in touch with a lot of the owners and get them to where they would – a lot of 'em don't wanna sell because they was Momma's or Daddy's house or, you know, Momma and Daddy's house, and – but they got to realize that when there's no life in a house, it's gonna go down. And it's not gonna sit there without no one living in it; it's gonna decay.

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And anyplace where there is no life, it's gonna decay, so – but other than that, I mean, it's still a good neighborhood to me, you know? Like I said, we haven't had no major problems in Highland Height, so I feel like if it's a good neighborhood. Now, we – if we could just get it built up to where – get in touch with a lot of the owners of the homes, they're sitting empty and no one in 'em, get them filled, get people living in 'em, it would be a better neighborhood as far as living. Because right now, we got a lotta home boarded up, we got a lotta homes just going down that no one is in, and it's – I feel like it's a waste. So if we could get in touch with a lot of the owners and get a lotta homes rented out or whatever, then it would be more life – it'd be more life in the neighborhood.

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*Keyont'e M. Loper:* What are some places in Highland Heights that make it a better place?

*Mary Blair:* What are some of the –

*Keyont'e M. Loper:* Places in Highland Heights.

*Mary Blair:* Places? Mainly, I would say the churches, the organizations that give the children things to do, especially in the summertime, keep them busy to keep them from – children is – I don't know, they – they don't mean to tear up things or vandalize things, but they have to do something to keep them occupied and busy, so if you can keep them busy in other things, then you don't have that to be worried about. Children is just gonna be children; I don't care what. So if you can keep them busy doing things or just get a –

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like, you know, you call it the neighborhood – like, for instance, SOS. SOS have 'em out rebuilding homes, you know, doing work that they never learn – they don't know what they're doing, but you have a person over them teaching them how to do it, and you get them interested in doing things like that instead of just being out there, desolate, to where they don't have anything to do, they gonna find something to do, whether it's right or wrong. So it's better to get 'em into something more, I guess, more valuable than to get – let them just walk around and get into things that's not of value to them.

*Keyont'e M. Loper:* What does "SOS" stands for?

*Mary Blair:* As I can remember, "Someone Special." It's saying that people are special.

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So they're saying, "Someone Special," so as I can remember, that's what they quoted to me, "Someone Special."

*Keyont'e M. Loper:* So they help out the community, like get –

*Mary Blair:* Oh, yes, they are very good. They help out as well as – they have other organizations go out – people come in, like my children went out with the city builders. They went to New Orleans with the city builders and they did the same thing the SOS do, you know, go around and fixing homes and different things like that. Yeah, they – SOS very good, and it's good that they had people come in from Missouri, they're from other cities. Mainly, what it is, it's like the youth program from churches.

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They get 'em together and give 'em – they have a trip to come out and help other churches, they get together and help build up the neighborhood's homes. So that's what SOS is all about.

*Keyont'e M. Loper:* What is the best thing about Highland Heights?

*Mary Blair:* What is the best thing about Highland Height?

*Keyont'e M. Loper:* Yes, ma'am.

*Mary Blair:* Well, convenience of different – we have a whole lotta convenient places to go in Highland Heights. Just – I don't know, like I said, conveniences you have, the people, you know, we try to work together and keep the neighborhood up, so when people come in that don't wanna try to keep it up, we have to try to tell them, "We don't do that here.

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Here different and we would like for you to try to keep up the neighborhood as well. If you can't, then we got to try to get someone in here to get you out of it because we don't need nobody in it that's gonna destroy it. We've been in here too long and we don't wanna see it destroyed. Even if we move out, we still wanna be able to come back and see our old neighborhood nice and in order. We don't wanna see it destroyed."

So you have to work with people and let them know you don't live any kinda way. You live decently and then you will – you know, decent people will – you just bring in decency. If you live decency, you can bring in decent. But if you live any kinda way, you gonna bring in other people living any kinda way, so that's the way it – what I feel like Highland Height is really all about, is it's a really decent place to live.

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It's nothing – like I said, we have troubles – I don't care if you go to what part of the city, state, or whatever you go to; it's gonna always be troubles, but you got to – sometimes, you can help people with troubles. You got to put forth the effort to help others, and we was not put here to live alone; we got to – we can't live alone. We are human. We can't live alone. So it's togetherness, and the main thing of being – having – being togetherness is love. So without love, there's no togetherness.

*Keyont'e M. Loper:* What do you think would make the Highland Heights a better place?

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*Mary Blair:* Well, like I said, more togetherness, because like I said, if we could get the houses that's not – that's vacant filled, then we'll have more people and more togetherness. Right now, you might go down some streets and you might see three or four houses boarded up before you get to one where someone live. So we just need more – we need more life. *[Laughs]* We need more life in Highland Height. That's why I put it that way. 'Cause the more life you have in Highland Height, the more the people will get together and do things and build it up. And you always got to be concerned about where you live. You got to keep it clean and, you know, the – I love to do yard work and all that, so some things, now, I won't do that I did when I was younger.

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Like I tell 'em, "No, I'm not pushing a lawnmower. I'm not doing that anymore. I did it you know when I was had to." So I told my husband, he cuss – he do the lawn then, but I will weedeat now, but I just like to keep everything looking decent. And I had my sister – I think it was my sister tell me, it's that, "You know, they always said that you can look at the outside of a house and tell what it look like on the inside." She said, "But that wasn't true." *[Laughs]* She's like, "The outside can be looking good and you walk up on the inside and can't get in." *[Laughs]* So – but sometimes, it do really mean that if it look good outside, it's looking good inside or whatever. So that's all we really need, is more life in the Highland Height.

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*Keyont'e M. Loper:* Do you have any fond memories of your life in Highland Heights you could share?

*Mary Blair:* Have fond memories? Oh, I have a whole lot of fond memories in Highland Heights. Oh, where would I start? *[Laughs]* Oh, mainly, it's the raising of my children and others being around 'em, and I have – my daughters really have friends now that was raised up with them, and they still come to my home, and they still live in the neighborhood. So you have a whole lot of fond memories of having birthday parties for your children, other children coming, and I told 'em I had so many until I got tired though, and now, my

baby girl, she feel like I deprived her of doing birthday parties, but they don't know.

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After so many, you get tired, you know? *[Laughs]* And I had to deal with these children every day. It wasn't like they would come to my house just for birthday parties; they come to my house every day. I had a yard full every day, you know, and – but I enjoy children, and I tell 'em now, but I'm getting tired. I have one great-grandchild and then I have a grand – well, both of 'em – one of them's three and one is two – at home – at my house now, and I tell 'em, "Y'all gotta find some schools or something to put 'em in. I'm tired of children now – babies." *[Laughs]* But I got to go back home to them, too, and they runs through the house and – but, you know, like I said, there's fond memories of children, and now they're grown, you know, and they still come back and see me, you know?

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And they – I would say they love me because I still love them, and those are fond memories to remember back to a child being like this, you know, and then they done grewed up. So I still feel like those are fond memories to – and then being able to see them when they get grown, and I can tell 'em, "You know, I can remember you was little and you did this," or, "Y'all was playing in the water or whatever, and I told you to get out and you didn't get out, and I got the little switch and got they legs," or something, you know? Those are fond memories to me because if – I feel like maybe if I hadn'ta been in their lines or showed concern, they mighta not even made it to be a grown person. So those are memories that fond and we had other things to come –

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We used to have – they would have little things like – what they would say? – carnivals and things for the children, and we would go to them and enjoy that, so it's been a whole lot of fond memories in Highland Heights to me, because, like I said, I haven't had a whole lot of bad memories. So it's been fond memories to live in Highland Height. I haven't – I just thank God that – like I said, we've been through some ups and downs, but I've never had to be afraid of my neighbors or be into it with my neighbors to where we would fuss and fighting and all this stuff every day, pull

guns – [laughs] – throw bricks through windows and you – we never went through that.

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So there's a whole lot of those fond memories in Highland Heights for me. And mainly, we – I just thank God for it because I know that it's – some people probably can't say that, and it don't make me feel good that they can't; I would love that everyone could say that about their neighborhood, but I know it's a lotta people probably wouldn't be able to say that they had fond memories of their neighborhood. But even for a long your time and mine a lot of 'em, so we gonna just leave it like that. [Laughs] Those was the main ones, is raising my children in Highland Height. Had a lotta people to leave us, like I say, pass away.

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And I don't want to – I just wanna think of the fond times. So those are mainly fond times, is raising the children and everybody being nice, and we just – I can't remember no tragic times or anything, so it was a lot of fond times for Highland Height.

*Layna Hayes:*

Do you think that the children growing up in Highland Heights today have similar experiences as your children did?

*Mary Blair:*

I feel like the children growing up in Highland Height today have similar experiences, but I feel like they have more opportunities than when my children was coming up. And so I feel like Highland Height today is better than when my children was coming up, but like I say, it was good then, but it's even better now.

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Because they have so many opportunities, so many things – like I work with the Highland Heights Coalition, you know, I'm over the garden on homes and giving, and so they have more opportunities to get out and get into different – they have paintings – they do paintings, like the paintings on their vacant homes, you should maybe drive by to see they have boarded up – it's painted and it's pretty, you know? They have flowers, all that stuff on it. Children do that, you know? So it's a whole lotta opportunities – more opportunities now than it was when my children were growing up.

[0:56:00]

*Layna Hayes:* How would you compare race relations in Memphis, then and now?

*Mary Blair:* You mean race – you say what now?

*Layna Hayes:* Race relations.

*Mary Blair:* Race? They a whole lot better. I believe it's so much better. I guess we learned that humans is humans, you know? No matter what race, creed, or color, you're a human, and we are learning that more, and to me, I feel like the more together we become, it gets better. Because when we was separated, like if we separate races, those are less people to love one another. So when we come together, we have more love and we can conquer things better. So I believe it's a whole lot better.

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Once people learn that – I guess a lotta people was raised up wrong – I would put it like that – as far as being taught about other people. Maybe they taught that you ought to be afraid of these people because they are this color or that color, but we was taught wrong – a lot of us have been taught wrong, and I thank God I wasn't taught that way. I've never been taught racialness. I've always been taught that a person is a person and they human, you know? You don't have a heart, you can't live, so we knowing that if you have a heart, you got to have love because you come from God. So that's the way we was taught. Everybody was the same to us. We was never raised up that way. And, you know, even though we would get scorned by a lotta people, but we still was raised to treat a person the way we wanted to be treated.

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But it's a whole lot better now because we, like you said, when everybody just started coming together, no matter what color or whatever you was, it brought more love, and that helps out a whole lot. So, yeah, it's a whole lot different now than when I was raised up, so I thank God it's getting better and better that people is learning, that people is people, and you can't determine a person by his color, so – where they came from or all of that different stuff. You got to learn a person for himself. So, yes, it's a whole lot better.

*Layna Hayes:* I know that you've shared a lot of insightful advice for us throughout this interview, but is there anything –

*[0:59:00]*

any other advice you have for the youth?

*Mary Blair:* No, I feel like you always on the right road of learning and you're together. I mean, I don't see no division, and – what I would say? If you're divided, you can't stand, and if you not knowledgeable, you can't make it that way. So that's the only thing I can say, is try to stay together and focus together and learn together, and you'll be all right, you know?

*Layna Hayes:* Is there anything else that you'd like to add that we haven't covered?

*[1:00:00]*

*Mary Blair:* Not as I can remember. I can't recall anything right now.

*Layna Hayes:* Well, we really appreciate everything that you have shared today. It's very –

*Mary Blair:* Well, I hope I have made some points to which will help you out along the way, but I tell you: you have my phone number and my email and you have my address, and if I can ever be of help of any other way, just look me up. *[Laughs]* Now, I'll be around hopefully, and if not, if I'm not available then, there's – I'll get back with you and we'll try something else. And I always – as I said, ear open and a eye open and a heart, so we have plenty time, hopefully, and we will – like I said, if this is not enough time, give me another call and we can go from there, okay?

*Layna Hayes:* Thank you.

*Mary Blair:* All right.

*[End of Audio]*