

### **Greensboro Massacre**

I grew up in Greensboro North Carolina. With two sisters and my mother was a domestic worker. We grew up in a housing project Morning Side Homes. Right out in front of our housing project in 1979 the Greensboro Massacre happened. There was a rally planned at another location to protest the KKK. And then at the last minute it was moved to in front of our housing project and the Klan showed up and shot and killed five people. Which my mother witnessed the entire thing and was subpoenaed to testify against the KKK. They were all acquitted be- in the name of self-defense because apparently there was another gun shot or some kind of pow which means according to the transcripts that the KKK heard the shot and were retaliating against that to protect themselves. My mother was scared like the rest of our neighbors to testify because she thought that the KKK would retaliate against our family and from that point on we weren't able to go outside or you know we just could go you know straight into the car or whatever and you know and leave so it just it was it was unsafe for us.

### **The Projects**

I wanted to not repeat that cycle of living in the projects. That was very very important to me I wanted to get out of the projects and I didn't want to be poor and even today sometimes when I pass by a housing project I just get chills. You know 'cause I think oh my God. You know I mean my biggest fear that I try to keep silent and at bay all the time is that I'll be returned to the projects. I'll have to go back to the projects because I failed in some way.

### **Back to the South**

When I left North Carolina to come to Penn State my first time out I was like you know if I never go back to the South it'll be too soon and never say never is the name of that game. I ended up in 2007 returning to North Carolina. One of the things that you know made it so difficult to go back to the south was that you know I was always reminded that I was black or a second-class citizen. Whether it was through service you know at a restaurant or you know being in a department store and being followed because they thought I was going to steal something. Whatever it was always something and you know it it's very interesting because even though you know I have three degrees and earn a living and middle class and all of that but in the south I was still being seen as you know an African American woman. A threat.

### **Time at Penn State**

My experiences at Penn State when I was a student here you know I had a really really difficult time. I was here first of all there were no black people here or very few and so I didn't have that sense of community that I was used to not to mention because there's no black people there's no black radio station there's no black food there's no there's nothing to support blackness. So I found it very challenging to be here as a student.

**Earning MFA**

After being here for two years which was what my it was a sixty credit degree my master's degree in painting after being here and writing my thesis paper and hanging my thesis show there was one final step to being graduated from Penn State and that was my oral examination. So I go in there and they start asking my questions about things that were not part of my thesis and were not part of my research or and you know so that goes on and then they have me leave the room and I'm out there for a very long period of time waiting for them to call me back in a process that should take you know no more than five minutes was over an hour of me just sitting there waiting. And then I go back in and these three white males say to me we're not gonna pass you. We think you're ill prepared and we think that you should stay here another year. There was no indication in terms of evaluations each semester which we had that I was not doing well this was just outta the blue. I was so depressed and so desperate. It was the first time that I experienced and one of the most profound times that I experienced depression at such a deep level was here I couldn't paint I mean it just stopped me. I couldn't paint I couldn't do anything. So I was doing nothing. I was just being mad about being here and I went over to this to Faith Ringgold's lecture and I said I need to talk to you and I told here what had happened to me and she said you know this happens a lot in at universities that are isolated you know where there's no real NAACP or you know any sort of support to help black people navigate their way through this she said they want you to leave without your degree. And she said you can't do that.

**Distinguished Alumni Award**

When I got the award from the college the Alumni Award from the school of Art they called me and they said we wanna give you this award but we wanna know that you're gonna come and get it. Because they knew about my experience here and I was like you know I don't know if I can come back up there. And my mother was begging me she was like don't say anything about your experience just get up there accept the award and sit down. And the whole time they were giving out these awards I was sitting there I was like thank you for this award I was just practicing thank you for this award I appreciate it a bunch thank you and sit down. Kept saying it over and over while I was sitting there. And they called me up to the stage and I got up there and I said thank you for this award. I really appreciate it and it was like I don't know I sort of felt like I turned into Sybil for just a half- I mean I just sort of went and I said when I was here as a graduate student I experienced both racism and sexism and I said it was a horrible time in my life. And I said I really hope that no other graduate students will have to go through what I went through to get my degree here.

**Changes on Campus**

You know it's funny because you realize that you know the University is set up with you know it's more than just that that's what I've learned is that you know there was just a few people that made my experience really really horrible and tarnished the whole Penn State relationship and experience for me. But that there are good people here that are doing good things and that are trying to make it better and make it more diverse. I mean I saw

more black faces today than I've ever seen on campus so it's interesting it's very very interesting and I think it's better. I think it's better.

### **Advice**

Today after my talk a PhD student asked for my advice. She was African American she said your talk is just so timely. She said have you ever felt like you know that you wanted to scream or you didn't people weren't hearing you or that your voice was getting lost of she kept going on and on and I was like yeah of course I've experienced that. She said that's the way I felt before I came here today and she said you know what do you say to someone like me who is you know trying to rush through the process and get you know get. I said you gotta take out time and just take a breath inhale the you know it's the journey it's not the end of the journey. So that was the advice that I gave her. And I you know I also recommend just having a support system around you which I didn't which made me even more and that doesn't have to be black people per se it just needs to be like-minded people. I didn't have that when I was here.

### ***Raising Renee***

My oldest sister Renee is mentally disabled. She- two years older than I am and she has the mindset of a third-grader and also has epilepsy. When I was a Radcliffe fellow Jean Jordan who is a filmmaker in Massachusetts and her husband Steve Asher. Jean would come in my studio and she would say you're paintings look like film stills. And we'd like to do a movie a film about your work. They started filming and when they started filming it was right before my mother died. And I had made this promise to my mother that I would care for my mentally disabled sister Renee. If my mother was no longer able to do that. So they start filming and then the focus of the film changed because this promise came into play and you know Renee came to live with me like three months after you know filming. And so the the film changed and becomes this story about how I juggle being an artist and moving from New York and taking care of Renee and Renee and I moving out to Arizona together where I had my full time teaching job.

### **Searching for Identity**

When I was in high school there was a clown club. Which because I was bused because of desegregation I was bused to predominantly white schools. Everybody in the club was white except for me and my sister Ronnie who joined the club with me. And but we had to dress up in white face. White face and be white so my Grandma loaned me her pajamas and I stuffed all these pillows around me and put on my grandma's pajamas and white grease paint and I had my mother's church gloves on that were white and a blonde wig and I became part of the clown club. And I enjoyed it. I loved it in fact because it was a way for me to disguise everything that I considered a problem about me you know being black being from the projects. Being poor could hide all of that. It had a huge influence on my work because I was going through this thing where I was you know trying to figure out who I was and part of my history in figuring that out was that I wanted to that I felt very comfortable being dressed up and being this white clown. So I painted about that. And then I saw a performance at Duke University where there were white people dressed as black clowns in black face and I was like what? I can I could

actually be a black clown? You know put on black face? I had no idea. So I went to a party store the next day and there was black face paint and an Afro wig and I was like get down. And I dressed up started dressing up in black face mimicking stereotypes that were associated with black people like eating watermelon and you know fried chicken and all those thi- you know and domestic workers mammy figures and things like that and I started making paintings about it. Which offended the black community. Right? I'm thinking I'm liberated I used to be white now I'm black I'm moving forward and they're like no honey two-steps back you're not moving forward. So I was like I love black people what are you talking about? But it was painful for them to see those paintings because it reminded them of a history that they were trying to forget.