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Santagati, Elizabeth

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Ishmael Lewis

Deborah Oden

Audra Kuby

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Ishmael Lewis, Deborah Oden, Audra Kuby
July 26, 2012
Lady's Island, SC

[Start clip 1]

IL [Note: off camera]: Okay.

AK [Note: off camera]: Okay, so we're recording now. Go ahead.

IL: We're here. Hello, my name is Ishmael Lewis—

DO [Note: off camera]: Deborah Oden.

AK: Audra Kuby[?].

ES: Liz Santigati.

IL: And we're here on… what island is this?

AK and OD: Lady's Island.

ES: This is Lady's Island.

IL: We're here on Lady's Island, and we're conducting an interview on July…

DO: Twenty-sixth.

IL: 2012. So could you please start off by telling us what year you were born and where you were raised?

ES: When I was born? Boy, that's a personal one (laughs).

IL: Where (DO laughs). When and where.

AK: We know you're thirty-nine. We won't do math (everyone laughs).

ES: Actually, I'm proud of my age. I was born in 1950, y'know, so I grew up during the 60s and stuff. And so I had to have a lot of involvement there. And the fortunate thing, I think at this point in my life, is that I grew up with my great-grandparents. So, having grown up with them, and y'know, their culture was pretty much still pretty much ingrained. As we've developed over the years, I think that this little bit changes in the culture as more people come into the island. However, many of us try to hold onto that culture, and some of us live on smaller islands, and those smaller islands have the closeness that we once had in the community. And I can talk about the island that my people live on. They… y'know, we own about 27 acres of property, and it's heirs' property, 'cuz that's one of the issues we have to deal with here, is heirs' property. It was bought by my great-great-great-grandfather, and… In 1874, he bought this property. And heirs' property that now is causing people to lose their lands, it was left an heirs' property because it had to, uh, you had to have everybody's signature in order to sign. So you couldn't sell a piece of your property, of heirs' property, unless you had everybody to do it, to sign off on you. The law changed, okay? So when they changed the state law, you can sell your piece in the property. Now, 27 acres, we might have 200 relatives (laughs), y'know? So how do you divide this property? This 27 acres into 200 people. It's almost impossible. So what you can do, because you sold your part, whomever you sold your portion to can demand that they get their property, okay, their share. So they can't get their share unless they sell the property, and their share would be money. So, that creates a lot of forced sale of heirs' property, and that's when the people lose it, because—

AK: When did that law change?

ES: This was back in the… maybe 70s (nods). And I think it, y'know, they knew exactly what they were doing. It's not a coincidence that that law changed. It's because they couldn't get the property that they wanted. And, I mean, you come to these islands… Most of the people lived on the water, which we took for granted (laughs), because it was a way of life. I mean, you go to the river, you eat out of the river. You greeon[?] vegetables, you greeon pork. Your pig… you knew your pig was healthy because your pig ate what you ate (laughs). You had your own chickens. The community was real close. So you could have one person kill the hog, and… What we did was we killed two hogs every year, and we would have one for ourselves and then you'd have one that you would kind of give to people in the community. So,

they give back to you when you do, and so you would have fresh meat. One of those hogs we would salt and cure, sometimes smoke, and that'll last you for the winter, because once you get it cured and smoked, it's good to go, it'll last you a long time. So that was one of the ways we survived growin' up, making sure we always had good food, always had great seafood. I mean, it was never a problem with food on this island. If you were starving, living on this island, you deserved to starve. Y'know, people would have no sympathy for you. Unless you didn't have any land. And everybody just about had a piece of land or access to a piece of land.

DO: Which… where's your heirs' property? Is it…

ES: It's on Warsaw Island. Warsaw Island is, like I said, where my family on my mother's side is from. My grandmother on my mother's side. And so, I have relatives… just about everybody on the island's related somehow (laughs). And the island stayed that way until 1954, when they drilled a causeway to the island. Other than that, people used their boats to get to the mainland to get wherever they needed to go. Most people on the islands didn't have cars, so you hitchhiked. And it was easy! Because if I was going to town—I lived on 21—if I was going to town, all I had to do was stand out on the side of the road, (laughs) y'know? Somebody was coming by, who would stop and give you a ride. If you're coming home, you stand at the foot of the bridge, and somebody comin' by would give you a ride. You knew the cars on the island (laughs). You knew who had the cars. It was a very, very closely-knit community, and it pretty much still is in a lot ways. But Warsaw is just… I mean, because it's a small island and because it's predominately black still. We, uh, my family, we have a family park that we built. So when we have activities, and we have community activities. Right now we're gettin' ready for children's day, and we do that just before they go back to school. We'll have some jumpin' jump-up things, water slides… We buy school supplies, y'know, so they have their little baggie when they go home. So we have a day where they come out and they eat and drink and have a great time. Father's Day, the women prepare meals for the father, and we treat them like kings, y'know. Bring 'em in, they sit down, we serve them. And I mean, we're out in a park, but we've got china and stuff (laughs). I mean. And on Father's Day, I mean, Mother's Day, the guys do the same thing. Y'know, so it's a lot. And then we do something for the seniors too, so it's a closely, closely-knit community. When we have activities if the seniors can't make, we make sure we send food to them. Y'know, so.

AK: What's your mother's family's name?

ES: Akin.

AK: Okay.

ES: Mm-hmm.

IL: Could you tell us about your great-grandmother, that raised you? Or, things about, her name? Tell us how she raised you?

ES: She was a wonderful, wonderful, strong, little, cussing little woman (laughs). She had a second grade education, but you would never know from talking to her. She, um, she was just, she was a hard worker. I mean, she'd be up in the fields 5:00 in the morning, soon as the sun came up, and then she'd come out and she'd fix breakfast, and maybe piddle around the—I call her piddlin'—around the house, until it got cooler in the evenin' and she'd be back out there until late. She, when she died, she was 94, okay? She came from a family of people who lived long. She had a brother who lived to be 95. She's got a nephew, Uncle Ben is now 96 and he's still alive. So, she grew up, and she actually had to help raise her siblings. There was a total of 15 of them. At that time, people had very large families, much larger than the ones they have today. So, she was just a great, great person. My kids knew her, and I tell you that was… so beneficial to them, to have gotten to know their mother. They didn't know their grandmother, but they knew their great-grandmother, and they knew their great-great-grandmother, who raised me. So not many kids are fortunate enough have those relationships with their grandparents and great-grandparents.

IL: What was her name?

ES: Rebecca Akin. Mm-hmm. There's a picture of her in there (nods). She's good people. My great-grandfather, William Akin, he was blind. He was blind since he was a younger guy, um, he got hit in his eye with a baseball. And actually traveled all over to try to get his sight back but wasn't able to. I guess if they had the modern conveniences that they have today that probably wouldn't have been an issue, but. He was a very… extremely intelligent; his mom was a teacher. And although he was blind, he had stuff that he did also. I mean, when we were in the fields, I mean, he was always doin' whatever he could. Like if we were plantin' sweet potatoes, he'd be cuttin' the slips, y'know, I say the slips. Once you plant the sweet potato and it grows, then you take the growin' vine and you can cut that and plant the vine. It's called a slip (nods). And so he would cut the vines. He made belts, and unfortunately I don't have one that he made. But he used to make leather belts for people in the community. He was feud[?] as someone who had… something. I mean, he didn't have any (laughs) real money.

IL: Right.

ES: But because my great-grandmother was a good money-manager, and he was one of the few people who was receiving a government check. So people were always coming, and y'know, borrowing money (laughs). So, and he was always so kind-hearted, to make sure that, y'know, he would help people as much as he could. So I came from a helping family too. My great-grandmother was also a helper. I mean, she'd cuss you out before she'd help you (IL laughs), but (laughs) she definitely—

IL: Helped you.

ES: Oh yeah, oh yeah. Great cook, oh my god.

IL: Can you tell us the things that she would make?

ES: Oh my goodness. One of my favorite things that she would make would be green pumpkin. And we would plant pumpkin and you'd get it when it's green, about yea big (gestures), and you cook it like a squash, like you do a squash. Oh my god, wonderful. She made the best peas and rice, great cabbage. I can't think of anything that she didn't do well when it came to the kitchen. She'd make wonderful breads from scratch. I ran into one of my cousins the other day, and she used to come over to the house a lot when she was growing up with her grandmother, who was my great-grandfather's cousin. So she was saying, "Oh, I remember when I used to come to your house, I used to like to come to your house, 'cuz you had that bread…

[End clip 1]

[Start clip 2]

ES: … y'know (laughs). Your grandma made that good bread!" But, uh, wonderful people, wonderful people. So I feel blessed to have had that guidance in my life.

DO: So do you do any of that same cooking today? Do you make—

ES: Girl, please (laughs, IL laughs). I used to, I used to when my children were here. But it's just me, so why cook? Y'know? I mean, like, sometimes when my boyfriend's coming home, I'll, y'know, cook up something.

IL: Right (laughs).

ES: And sometimes I'll do stuff that he never tasted before. You know, like, I'll do okra and rice (nods). And you can do okra and rice and you can have done okra and rice, and cabbage and rice, which is so good together, oh my god. So I usually, y'know, throw something on him like that. Sometimes I'll, y'know, tell 'im, "I'll use you and your family as guinea pigs." Y'know (laughs, DO laughs)?

AK: Where are your grandparents buried? Is there a family cemetery or what church?

ES: My great-grandfather's in the National Cemetery. He's a World War I veteran My great-grandmother is in Inlet Cemetery, which is on Lady's Island, right off of twenty-one. The reason she wanted to be buried there was because that was where her family and her children who had died were buried. And so people, y'know, that's the kind of thing that they do. They want to be buried, for the most part, and people who are attached to this place, they want to be buried her. You know, my girlfriend, who I lost last January, and she lived in Philly. She was between Philly and LA, 'cuz her son's a actor and a singer. So she died in Philly but she wanted to be buried here at home, so they brought her body home. And there's a lot times people just, they want to come home, and be buried with their family. And, um, I'm veteran, so I'll be buried in a national cemetery. I kinda like that idea, 'cuz people know exactly where you are. I go to my great-grandfather's grave once a year. I visit my uncle, who's deceased, once a year. Usually on Memorial Day, sometimes more often, but definitely on Memorial Day.

AK: Can you talk to us about the spiritual aspects? We've been talking to a lot of people on Eddings Point and Coffin Point, but we haven't talked to anyone that grew up on Warsaw yet. Was there a praise house out there?

ES: Every community had a praise house.

AK: Is there still a praise house?

ES: No. Mm-mm.

AK: Okay.

ES: Every community had a praise house. And that's because people didn't have cars, and so they came together at the praise houses. And we did that twice a week. It was Wednesdays and Sunday. Sunday after churches, go back to the praise house. And it was a great experience because it was a *training,* so much for the younger people comin' up. So certain times the younger people would take charge of the service, so that when, once they start, y'know, go back to church, then they're not in the dark. It's a shame that we don't have more praise houses, however, there's not much of a use for the praise houses now because people have vehicles. So there's nothing to drive to the car—I mean, to the church, to, y'know, for services and stuff.

AK: What church did you attend growing up?

ES: Ebenezer Baptist Church.

IL: Did you go through the seekin' process?

ES: Well, you know, when I got baptized, they just stopped doing that.

IL: Okay.

ES: Y'know, just stopped. And I was eleven years old when I got baptized. And the funny thing was, there's this thing about once you're twelve years old, you're responsible for your own sins. And I'm thinking, *Ay, I'm gonna be twelve next year.* (IL laughs) *I'm gonna do* something*, if I gotta be responsible.* So at eleven years old, I decided that, y'know, I would join the church. I joined the Ebenezer Baptist Church, and I'm still there.

DO: Who is in this picture here? Sylvia Simmons, could you tell us about her?

ES: Um (clears throat), we used to, they used to call her Myeve. Y'know, everybody had a basket name, so this'd be… Myeve lived in St. Helena, in Cedar Grove, is what we know about her, then she later moved to Warsaw Island. And for a while there

were only a few families on Warsaw, as we go back to do research. So some of these families came to Warsaw. Myeve had one daughter. That was Fanny. And Fanny died in 1956. She was… she had, I believe she had Indian blood in her. Because she was, you see how dark Myeve is? Well, Fanny was the same (touches cheeks) darkness, okay? Her skin was just as smooth as a baby's bottom (laughs). Loooong straight hair (laughs). So, and they say Myeve kept her hair tied up 'cuz most people did back then, kept it from gettin' dirty all the time. So when she moved to Warsaw, and… Fanny had one daughter. And that was my grandmother. And my grandmother had like seven children. My mother was the eldest of the seven children. My mother's now deceased. So out of those seven is five left. My uncle… died about five years ago (nods). Um. As you can see (laughs), I always get broken up when I talk about my uncle, because we were so close. Just a really close-knit family. Um. But, uh, y'know, we've got one uncle left, and he's a character (laughs), Y'know, everybody got their character. He's a character (laughs). He's a funny guy (sniffs, wipes eyes).

AK: Is he still down around here?

ES: Yeah, he lives on Warsaw. Mm-hmm.

IL: Could you tell us about your mother and your father?

ES: My father, I didn't know very well. Because they were not married. And he grew up in an area called Oaks, where his people were from. And, um, he was… not a *giving* person, but he was a loving person, if that makes sense. So he got along really well with everybody in the community, people liked him. I occasionally went to visit where he lived, 'cuz he was married to another lady. They were… y'know, he was, he was nice to me, but… I didn't have that father relationship with him, because I grew up with my great-grandparents, so they were my mom and dad. But, y'know, he was, from all accounts (IL laughs), he was a real nice guy. My mother… was quiet. She… I never ever heard her say a negative thing about anybody. Y'know, she was just that kinda person. She held a lot of stuff in, and didn't express herself. And I think that was part of what caused her to die at such an early age, because stress is a killer. And living under stress and not having a means to get it out, not taking the opportunity to get it out, I think, added to her dying at a very early age. Forty-one. Mm-hmm. My father was 76 when he died, and the funny thing is… It's funny how things work out. I had not seen my father in… couple of years, y'know, unless I run into him in the street or something; we didn't visit each other. And he came to visit me one day, and he says, "I need some help with my trailer." I'm thinking, *Okay, why you comin' to me? Y'know* (laughs)*, I mean, duh!* So, I mean, but you have to do what you have to do, so I helped him as much as I could. And we had this meetin' with these folks, and after the meeting, he gave me 10 bucks. And I was like, "Ten dollars? Are you gettin' ready to die or something (laughs)?" He did. He never moved into the

trailer. He died before he did. So that was, that was the last time… that was the most money I ever remember him giving me (laughs), and the fact that I asked him if he was gonna die, y'know. And sure enough, he did die! That was really strange, really strange. But (laughs) it's crazy.

IL: Could you tell us about your education, and how was growin' up here? 'Cuz earlier you said it was segregated. Could you talk about that please?

ES: We had some of the best teachers that you could find anywhere, at St. Helena. The teachers at St. Helena, they cared, they lived in the community, and you didn't act up, okay? 'Cuz they would paddle your hiney. And, you know, I (laughs), I can think of the times in school when I got spanked by the teacher, especially in first and second grade, y'know? But, I mean, that was, it wasn't a biggie, they weren't going to hurt you. And I know people talk about, y'know, corporal punishment and how it affects kids—'cuz I heard this other day—and how it had a negative impact on kids growing up, and I'm like, *I don't think so*.

IL: Mm-hmm.

ES: (Laughs) y'know? I mean, I feared them because I knew what they could do. But, I knew when they spanked me, it was for my own good 'cuz I actually had done something that I deserved bein' spanked. They didn't spank me just willy-nilly. But there were certain things you didn't do. You didn't talk about, y'know? And like some of these kids today, their parents say something to them and they go (makes puckered kissy noise). Oh my god. Do you like your teeth (laughs)? Do you want them? You did what you were told. They were very loving. My curriculum father was very loving. He was blind. And the way he would tell who you were (touches face) was with his hands. And somebody would come in visit, and he would feel their face, their bodies, and he could tell you who it was, okay? So, there's something about people being blind and using other sense. I remember one time, my uncle was trying to fool him. Okay, so he asked Papa for change, y'know. He says, "Papa, can I have change for ten dollars?" Y'know, he says, "Okay." So he gave Papa a five. "This… where's the $10?" He thought he could get over. Mm-mm, he knew that that wasn't right. He could tell by the touch. The coins he could tell by the size, y'know, whether it was a nickel, dime, or quarter. On the first of the month, I had all kinds of playmates (laughs). Because he would give out little nickels and dimes to the kids, and oh my god, that was best thing, because everybody wanted to go to the little store, 'cuz you could get, y'know, those cookies real cheap, ah, two for a penny, y'know, Mary Jane and Squirrel Nuts and (laughs) all that kind of stuff. Back for the two for penny kind of stuff, you run down to the store. And all the kids in the community were happy and he liked that. He liked to see people happy. School, uh, excellent, excellent teachers, but the school building itself was not up to par.

IL: Right.

ES: Because, y'know, when they built schools for black kids, they weren't really particular of how they did it. They just threw it up. So you didn't have any air conditioning (laughs). You could open the windows, but if you open the windows, the bugs come in.

IL: Mm-hmm.

ES: Y'know (laughs)? I mean, and the lunchroom—you had the lunchroom windows open, but you had no screens on the windows (laughs). It's, y'know, you deal with stuff like that when you're in elementary school. But my last year in high school, I was angry. That was '67-'68. I was very angry. The movement was going on, and I was involved, and marchin', y'know, after school and stuff. Because you didn't have a lot of teachers who were willing to stick their necks out. And we had William Young. He's a retired educator now. He was one of the teachers who we could count on. Wesley Felix, he was the band director. We could count on him. And another teacher from a different school, which was Robert Smalls across the water: James Jenkins. And he was really heavily involved in the movement. Part of his involvement came from his father, who lived on Johns Island, South Carolina. And his name was Esau Jenkins. Mr. Esau was instrumental in getting… hundreds of people in Johns Island and Charleston to be able to vote. And, y'know, you had to read something back then before they'd let you vote. And so what they did was, he had a bus, and he would take people back and forth to work, so on that bus, there would be a teacher, and they'd be working with those people to get them to memorize what they had to do (laughs), in order to be able to vote. So then I had that kind of influence on me also, because I would go to Johns Island, to the Progressive Club, where they would have meetings and stuff. I… lived kinda dangerously back then, but I didn't realize it. Because when you're involved in a movement and people figure out who you are, then you can be a target. And I can remember coming home in the nights, at nights, with my friend, and there'd be a cop behind us. And she'd, y'know, drop me off, and I'd tell her, "Be sure to call me when you get home so I know you're safe." But I didn't realize the danger (laughs). When you're young, you're foolish, you don't think about those kinds of things. We did stuff at school (laughs). We boycotted school on day. It's the funniest thing. And how we did that, the bus drivers went around their routes but they didn't pick up anybody, came back to the school, parked their bus, and left. And we were protesting Martin Luther King, and the fact that we had asked the superintendent to meet with us, and he refused. And so we did the boycott that day. The next day, a small contingency (laughs) of students went to his office. And it was so funny, because they were in this board building, and we go in and we tell the secretary that we wanted to meet with him. And she says,

"Well, he's on his way out." "It won't take long (laughs). It won't take long at all." So she called him up, y'know, "We have a group of students who want to meet with you." And he said, "Send 'em back." No, he didn't say send 'em back, he said, "Okay." So when she hung up, she yelled, "Do you want them to come back there, or are you gonna come out here?" And I'm like, *Wow, you're real professional here* (laughs). But anyway, we had that meeting with him, and there were some things that… we had a long list of things that we wanted at the school. And there were things that we should not have had to have been the ones asking for; it should have been the principal's responsibility, but I think he was concerned about his job. And so we wanted screens on the lunchroom, cafeteria windows, so that we didn't have flies in there when we were eating lunch. We wanted a ramp from the main school to the gym, because there was no ramp, so if you had to go to the gym and it was raining, you know, you got soaked (laughs). We wanted more black history, so that we could know more about our culture and where we came from. And it was a long list of stuff that we… And Robert Smalls and St. Helena came together, so they didn't have just the one black school. They had the two black schools. Because Robert Smalls had the same first through twelfth grade thing, so we had unity between the schools. Although we were rivalries on the football and basketball team, we came together for that. There were a lot of meetings held by SNCC, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, at Penn. And I somewhat became a member of SNCC, and so we would do newsletters and put them out in the community about what was going on, just not just here but all around, so people could have an idea of the struggle and what other people were going through in other places in the country. When I graduated from high school, I had no clue what I was gonna do. I knew I was getting the hell out of Beaufort (laughs), that was the one thing I knew. I could not wait. June 4th I graduated, June 5th I was out of here. And where did I go? New York (shakes head). I did not like New York. I had grown up feeling free to roam wherever I wanted to, whenever I wanted to. We never locked our doors. You know, though we lived on the highway, y'know, in summertime we didn't have air conditioning, so the doors were always open. I came home at night. I didn't have a key to the house; you just go walk in. And that's how we lived. And I got to New York and they had five locks on the door, and then they were afraid that somebody might break in? I'm like, *Oh no, I can't live like this* (laughs). So I joined the military. And here I am in the military, and I'm an activist (laughs).

IL: What branch?

ES: Army.

IL: Okay.

ES: And… how do you be an activist in the military (IL laughs)? If a war you don't believe in, y'know? But I joined because I lost a cousin in Vietnam, and I wanted to do my part, whatever I could, not so much for the military but for the soldiers coming back. And so, when I went into it, I went into the medical field, and I became a medic. And I thoroughly enjoyed my work. It was a wonderful experience, being the military. There were some very negative things that happened, but for the most part it was a good experience, because it taught you a lot of stuff that I probably wouldn't have learned on the outside. I look at the military as, in some instances, as someone going to college, because of the kinds of things that you learn. I was a squad leader in basic training, which meant I had a little more pull than, y'know, the other folks, because I had to lead that squad. And, I don't know how they choose people, what criteria they look for when they do that, but I was there. And then when I went to AIT—that's Advanced Individual Training—I went to Fort Sam Houston. And there, I was a squad leader again. And what we did was, they rotated the squad leader, and that means you have, like, twenty different people you were responsible for making sure that they get everything done the way it's supposed to be done. And then you had one training leader, who was in charge of everything. And what we did was, the squad leader and the training leader kinda rotated, so everybody got the chance to be the training leader. So that was a good experience. I was stationed at Fort Eustace Virginia, my entire time in the military. I could not get out of there no matter what (DO laughs). I mean (laughs). And you think now, there's a war going on at Vietnam, so most of the men are gone. Y'know, you don't have a lot of men. So we took on responsibilities that a man would have done. At E3, I was a ward master. Unheard of in the military. But you had to do what you had to do. That was a wonderful learning experience. I learned… my head nurse taught me, anything I wanted to learn, she taught me. How to give shots, how to take blood, y'know, all that stuff. How to do the notes. I got so proficient in making sure my ward was taken care of, that they moved me to a larger ward. Because I was on pediatrics. They moved me to OB/GYN. And I took over—and by then I had made specialist 4—I took over from a E6 (laughs), okay? I was a E4, so, and that was a growing experience, so. Like I say, I have no real complaints about the military, except for, there was some bad things, but for the most part. I learned a lot. I grew a lot. They sent me to a number of leadership courses, so they… I think they create leaders in a lotta senses. And I think they look for people with leadership potential, and having been involved in the movement and doing things in the community and being on the radio and all that kind of stuff, I had some of those qualities, I assume, that made them chose me.

IL: How many years were you in the military?

ES: I was in it a total of 4 years. As a matter of fact, they just did a magazine called *Pink*. And it's a Hilton Head/Beaufort magazine. They just did a little article, included me when they were doing women in the military. So that came out. I've only found two copies (laughs).

IL: Another question real quick.

ES: Mm-hmm.

IL: Were your parents supportive? Your grandparents, oh, you're great-grandparents, right? When you were in the movement.

ES: My grandmother wasn't.

IL: Mm-hmm.

ES: She could not… she was afraid. It was a lot of fear. My great-grandparents, y'know. I would always tell them, "If I call you and tell you I'm in jail, come and get me." (Everyone laughs) that was all I would say. So they never stopped me from doing those kinds of things. Because I think they knew the purpose and why it was important. And I think they felt I was better off doing that than being in the community and doing other things, um, that could get me in trouble (laughs), you know. So they were very supportive of my activities back then.

AK: Can you tell us about the baskets you've got here?

ES: Sweetgrass baskets.

AK: Do you know who made them?

ES: Yes. These were made by Jerry Taylor (camera zooms out). And Jerry usually sits up at the Gullah Grub Restaurant and does her crafts, so these are all authentic. People in the community have used these for years. And they'll last forever. I mean, it's not like this is something you could do away with. Strong, it's made to last.

AK: What about that one? What's its purpose?

ES: This one (picks up basket) was a gift from a friend. And he got this in Africa. I don't remember what part of Africa, but yeah, he brought this (drops basket) oops, from Africa. My daughter just got back from South Africa, and this is what she brought me back from South Africa. It's a egg.

IL: So after the military, you went—I guess you said you went to New York.

ES: Uh.

IL: After high school.

ES: I went to New York before the military.

IL: Right, okay.

ES: It was not for me. I didn't—y'know, I got a job. The thing about it I went with a girlfriend of mine. She went to a different school. (Sighs) and we left, and we went up to Yonkers, where her family lived. And she lived with her grandparents also. So we got a room together. And then the next day, her mother came and got her, and I was stuck (laughs). I didn't know anybody! I didn't see her after that. Didn't see her again. It was just mind-boggling. So I eventually moved to Brooklyn, 'cuz I had cousins in Brooklyn, and got a job. And I would work evenings in this job. I was a cashier in a store, Dean's Discount, on the boardwalk. And at night I'd have to come home, and I'd have to walk five or six blocks, and it was through a Hispanic community, and I didn't think anything of it, 'cuz, y'know, I'm used to walking, going wherever I want to go. Until someone says, "You're not afraid?" And I says, "Afraid of what?" "Walking through that, y'know, Hispanic community." And I'm thinkin', *Nobody ever said anything to me. Why would I be afraid?* And so, people built up fear in you, y'know, waiting for something to happen. And now I'm walking down the street and I'm like (looks both ways), y'know? I mean (laughs)…

IL: You got fear and fear wasn't there before.

ES: (Nods) fear wasn't there before. You know, and, y'know, everything in this world is based on fear. You know what I'm saying? We are afraid of everything. Sometimes we do things out of fear. You put fear in your children. The politicians put fear in people. I mean, it's just this huge thing where people are made to feel unsafe and afraid and fearful. And I don't think it's a good thing, you know. My kids—we grew

up in this house, and I didn't have a lock on the door until about five years ago. I had no keys (laughs). Never afraid of anybody taking, nobody ever took anything. When my kids were here, we were the neighborhood house. All the kids hung out here. Because I knew where my children were (laughs). Y'know so I figure, if my kids are here, then I'm good to go. So kids, I mean (laughs), this one guy, Brian Bearden. Every day, Brian would be here. And every day, I says, "Who you are?" You know (laughs)? "I'm Brian, remember me? I was here yesterday." "No, I don't remember you." Everyday I did that to him (laughs). And now he's an adult and I'll see him and says (raises hand), "I'm Brian." (Laughs) but, um, it is unfortunate. My kids, I have interracial kids, okay? And I guess people often wondered, *You got married to a white guy in the south in seventies?* "Yeah." At that point in my life, I was no longer afraid of almost anything, okay? Because during the movement, I had already decided that if it took me dying to make a point, I was willing to do that. And if I was willing to die for my country or willing to serve my country, I was more than willing to die for my people. And I still feel that way. And I will *always* feel that way. So I came home, and—

DO: This was after the military?

ES: Hmm?

DO: After the military?

ES: After the military, I came home. And all the things I had fought for before I left was coming into fruition. They had built the health center for the low-wealth community people, and I tried to get a job there (shakes head). They didn't hire me, and I'm thinking, *What the hell is this?* Y'know? All the marching I did on the streets, when people were laughing at me (laughs), 'cuz I was marching. Now those same people are working, and they won't give me a job. That's ludicrous. So I went to the Technical College of the Lowcountry, and I have an associate's degree in business administration. And from that, I decided that I was going to spend… No. I took a trip around the country, looong, three months' vacation. I went from here to Washington state, back through Oregon, California, all the way down to Mexico, came back, stopped in Houston because my aunts lived in Houston. And I just wanted to see if there was some place else in this country that I wanted to live. I didn't see anywhere else (everyone laughs), so here I am back here. I spent some time in Tacoma, Washington. And I started nursing school there, but my mom got sick so I came home. I loved it out there, but it was too far from home. And I'm a homebody, y'know, when I was in the military, I worked ten days, got four off, so every other weekend I was home (laughs). And so I came back home, and y'know took care of my mom. And next thing I knew, I met my… former husband. And I met him at a McGovern campaign headquarters, 'cuz I was for McGovern for president. I worked

very hard for him. And then I got, y'know, kinda disillusioned with politics. Y'know, it was like, y'know, I mean, come on (laughs). I mean, what is wrong with this country? And so I asked myself, in later years, I asked myself that many times. *Why would you choose Nixon? Why would you vote for Reagan?* I mean, this stuff's just not making sense. But now it's making sense. And got married, had three beautiful kids, who now are all grown and gone. My son's an artist. He did that (points) for me. That was, uh, the year my uncle died. As a matter of fact, these are his work too (points). Except for that one. That one's Jonathan Green. Are you familiar with Jonathan Green?

DO: Yes.

ES: Okay, he's from Yemasee… South Carolina. Yeah, and I have a daughter who's a banker (camera pans up to show artwork), and I have another daughter who is a mother. What do you call stay home moms?

DO: A stay-at-home (laughs)?

ES: A stay home mom (laughs). And she's out in California. She married a guy who's in Marine Corp.

IL: So, if I say, "What is Gullah?" or "Geechee?" or… What does that mean?

ES: It means a lotta things (camera pans back to her). It means, it means the foods. It means the spirituality. It's the way of thinking. It's the language. Um (laughs), I guess just like any other culture, it's a lot of things that make up that culture. And… Gullah was a… people maintained it because it was a way of life. And right now, [Note: unclear, presumably speaking the Gullah dialect], and you see? I could do that.

IL: Right.

ES: You know (laughs)? It'd be a lot faster, but… It was our way of communicating. Because when they brought us here from Africa, we didn't all come from the same area. Some of us came from Sierra Leone. I think the majority of us came from Sierra Leone, but we came from other places too. Here you come to this strange country, you try to communicate with… "the white man," and also communicate with each other. So you have to almost develop your own kind of language to do that. You're learning his language, and at the same time, you're developing a way of talking to

each other. It goes back to that "fear factor." People were always afraid of everything. And we still are pretty much afraid of… *most* things.

DO: Do you still consider yourself an activist?

ES: Oh yeah! I'll be an activist 'til I die. Yes. Yes.

DO: So what are some of the causes and things that you fight for?

ES: Uh, hmm.

DO: Or have fought for in the past?

ES: Yeah… I was one of the founding members of the South Carolina Association of Community Development Corporations. In South Carolina. This was back in '93, '94, and that organization is still alive. I spent 16 years on that board, having served in every capacity from secretary to board chair. I did a two year board chair stint. And we did was, we looked at communities and people in the communities helping themselves. Because government provide programs, but many times the government programs don't reach the people it's supposed to reach because they don't know who they are (laughs). And every government program that I've seen, okay, that people of color can benefit from, it starts out that way, but it doesn't end up that way. And there was a national congress of community development corporation which was a national organization, and the first seminar I went to by them, it was predominantly black. Because black people were the ones—the low rent communities were the ones interested in building up their communities and doing some community development, community economic development. And the next year I went, it was almost 50-50 (laughs), y'know.

IL: Right.

ES: And the next year, it was like, (looks around) *what happened to everybody?* This is a completely new… y'know, people. I mean, the movement has changed. And it goes from being a local movement to a movement where people are creating CDCs to get money. You know, just to get the money. And that's not what it was all about. It's supposed to be grassroots people coming together and deciding what their community needs and working towards that. And it became extremely difficult because the reality is, is this is South Carolina. Racism is alive. And it's doing very

well (laughs). It's doing very well. And so government, even the federal government, have an issue with doing what's right by people of color. As is evident by the farmers and the lawsuit brought by the farmers, and y'know, I've spent… Have you ever heard of the Federation of Southern Cooperatives?

IL: No.

ES: It's a group out of Alabama, and they cover all of the southern states, and they work with farmers. And I've been a member of that for a number of years. We're having a seminar coming up in August, where they bring farmers in from all over, y'know, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, South Carolina, kinda like the black belt. Bring farmers in, and they try to educate them. And also they'll have lawyers there, working on the farmers' issues. Usually they'll have someone from the USDA there. And usually they will honor somebody who's done great work in the community. This year it's gonna be Dick Gregory, who they're gonna honor. And then I served on a national committee. It's the National Rule Funders Cooperative … Collaborative. And you know, foundations tell you that you need to collaborate, but they're not very good at it (laughs). I mean, they have their issues too, because these issues of, *Okay, who has the most money?* And *who can do more?* And, y'know, all kinds of… stuff. And on that committee, what we did was, we went around and gave money. Not me, but the foundations that I work with gave money to certain groups to do certain things in certain communities. And what we do is, as a board, is we would do psych[?] visits. So that gave me the opportunity to go all over the country, doing psych visits, even as far as Alaska, which was a wonderful experience. So yes, I worked, um… In the CDC that I started, we have a commercial kitchen for the people in the community. And we, I guess our property is probably worth, mmm, probably a million and half, that belongs to the community.

AK: Is this one on St. Helena, behind Gully Road?

ES: Mm-hmm. I was… that was my baby, before I dropped it (laughs). Yeah. And through that I made contact with people all over the world. I had… the World Trade Center. When people came in through the World Trade Center, they would bring them down, to me. And we would talk about stuff, sometimes we would do a tour of the island. So we've had people all the way from Colombia, or China, I mean, Africa, I mean, everywhere you can think off, all of the countries. So. I think I've paid my dues, on a local, state, and national (laughs) level.

IL: Could you talk about the change from when you were living here before going to New York and after you came back? What kind of changes, from then to now, that you see on the island?

ES: Oh my god.

IL: Is it good? Tell me some of the pros, some of the cons… Because earlier you were talking about the bridge, that you all didn't necessarily want the bridge, but that they gave it to you anyways.

ES: Mm-mm. I mean, we got where we wanted to go (laughs). I mean, you take into consideration, you live on the water, okay? So, it's closer to go to Charleston, on the water, than it is to go by land. Same thing with Savannah. So what people did, is they sold stuff at markets like Savannah because it was easier to get there. I've never heard local folks, even folks back then, and my great-grandfather was born in 1888, so that goes waaaaaay back. I never heard any of them talk about being isolasted on the island. Never. Ever. I think it was a good thing, because like I say, we go back to the school, we knew who we were. We were not held as slaves, because they thought because we were on this island, you're not gonna get away. So we had freedom back and forth. And you meet people who come from other places and who were actually slaves, and I thought we were doing pretty damn good on this island. You know, we owned property (laughs), we were calling our shots. For a long time the cops didn't come over there. If there was a problem in the community, it was handled by the church. And if somebody acted up real bad and they had to send him to the white man justice, there was a place to hold him until that happened. But we believed in dealing with our own issues in the community. That no longer exists, y'know. You could walk out your door if you lived on the water—and everybody lived near the water—you go out and go fishing, catch as many fish as you want. You come back, you could drop off fish in the community, to the elderly. The access to the water has changed. Education has changed. Kids are not as well educated now as we were, when we got out of high school. When we got out of high school, we could stand next to anybody, I don't care what school you were from. Those teachers really teached. And they didn't just look at the books that we got, because the books were used books from the white school, and so they had to go beyond that. And the funny thing was, that a lot of the teachers when they came here, okay, they realized that *Oh my god, I must be in paradise*, because a lot of them had come from areas where there were sharecroppers. You know, the family was sharecroppers. And here we were, black folks who owned their own property. *I don't want to leave here.* And we got many teachers who came—I was talking to the guy I told you, Mr. Young, William Young, talking to him at one of my cousins had passed away the other day, and he said, "Yeah." He says, "I came here for two years. That was as long as I planned to stay. And I haven't left yet, and I don't think I'm gonna leave." And so we have a lot of teachers who were like that. The way the land has been—the heir's property has been stolen—we've lost a lot of land, in Beaufort County, in Hilton Head. I mean, in the south– Well, no. Not just the south. All over the south (gestures). Not just here. But all over. Black land, ownership has been continuously

going down, for a number of reasons. Because people die and leave their land to nobody. Heir's property accounts for a large portion of it. You can't really do anything with the land, because it's heir's property. There are ways around it, but families, a lot of times, don't trust each other, because "fear" again keep people apart. And they don't do what's necessary to be done to maintain that heir's property. And the way they do it, they should it, is create a corporation so then the heir's property is in the corporation. Everybody has shares in the corporation. However, you can do stuff with it. You can go to the bank, and get money. Corporation, y'know. So, I mean, there are lots of things that is changed. The education. Kids are… I mean, I already talked about the education. But. I mean, I'm just *amazed* at the lack of interest of children in schools today. And that the teachers who are *fearful* of the young black boys. I mean, so, if I'm afraid of you, there's not a whole lot I can teach you.

IL: Mm-hmm.

ES: And you can see it happening in school. Now, I was involved with my kids' education. President of the elementary PTO, y'know (laughs). The middle school PTO. School Improvement Council, in high school. Always involved. But I see other kids who fall, y'know, between the cracks, because there's not gonna be a parent who's gonna come and sit in the back of the classroom and see what they're teaching their child. And sometimes, it's nothing. To give you a prime example, my former husband used to be a teacher. And I went to the high school one day and one of his colleagues, he says, "Liz, c'mere (gestures)." I says, "Okay." He says, "You see that class?" I said, "Yeah, they look like they're studyin'." "Mm, hmm. They got their books open, they're lookin' in them. They're quiet. Ain't learning a damn thing (shakes head, laughs)." But that's what (air-quotes) "the principal wanted to see."

IL: Right.

ES: He wanted to see the chairs lined up, the book open. It didn't matter whether the kids were learning. Y'know, 'cuz sometimes, in that kind of environment, it's hard to learn. For me, I have to be, y'know, uh (gestures)…

IL: Doin' something.

ES: Doing something, y'know. I think my kids got a decent education, but I don't think it was totally left up to the school. I think it was because of… making sure that they had opportunities to expand and travel a little bit. You know, do stuff like send them to… I took them to Baltimore on the train, just for the experience. You know,

flying out somewhere just for the experience. Going to different places, just for the experience. Buying books for birthdays and Christmas, instead of a lot of toys, y'know. So as a result of that, I feel pretty comfortable with the education that my kids got. And as you can see (gestures), my son's a pretty decent artist (laughs). Graduated from Howard. And has a JD. And my youngest daughter has an MBA. So they…

IL: That's pretty good (laughs).

ES: Yeah.

IL: Real. Exactly. I know. Do you see the culture lasting for the next 50 years, or do you think it'll eventually…

ES: I think they'll be some things that'll be maintained. Like, for instance, on Warsaw, where we have these community things. I mean, people come from all over. We had, we used to do a luau every year, raise money. We had 400 people. Easy. Okay? Easy. If five of us gather in the park, you better believe somebody's gonna drive by and stop (laughs). "Whatcha all doing? You got something going on?" You know, so. The culture will be maintained by some of the younger kids. A lot of the kids today know the language but they don't speak it. So I think a lot of stuff will be maintained. And as the other people come in, it will cause certain things that used to happen to not be able to happen anymore. Like, my cousin lives on the water, okay? "House on the water." Dock. So he can't go out and fish without having a permit. I mean (laughs), come on. You know? So, the game warden or wildlife (IL laughs) came to his house. He was cleaning fish. Came to his house. Charged him, okay? He's in his house, in his garage. They walk up. And you've got people like right across the river from Warsaw is a community called Dataw. You probably saw the sign.

IL and AK: Right.

ES: Okay? That's river across the river. And so, people obviously are watching (mimes binoculars) what's going on. 'Cuz then they call the game warden (laughs). I mean. We were down, we were having a party one night. A huge community party. The cops came. Who would complain? Y'know, everybody from the community is there, y'know, except for this one lady. And, so we went to her and we asked her, "Did you call the cops?" She says (shakes head), "No, it wasn't me." "You know, well, I mean, there aren't that many white people around here, y'know? So it had to have been you, or…?" "Oh no, it must have been the Carsons." "No… I don't think it was the Carsons, 'cuz they were there (ES and IL laugh)." Y'know, so she finally admitted,

“Well, I couldn’t get any sleep.” So I says, “You know, the way we do it in this community is you go to the people,” Y’know, if I’ve got an odd against you, biblically, I should go to you.

DO: That’s right.

ES: You know, I don’t call the cops to have you locked up, for something that, y’know, if you had come and say, “Hey you guys, can you turn the music down a little bit?” Then you consider stuff like that, y’know? But, and so you, when people come to the community, you have to kind of let them know what this community is about. And this community is about looking out for each other. Now, we get might mad with each other, and don’t talk to each other, but you better not say anything (laughs).

IL: Right. About them, I got you.

ES: Mm-hmm. Absolutely. But, y’know, so many people—There was a time when I could go to… any restaurant in Beaufort, and I’d know half the people there. Now, I go and I don’t know a soul (shakes head). I mean, there are so many people in Beaufort, it’s like a different world altogether. It’s a different world. It’s sad, because it’s lost that small town atmosphere. Even downtown, where everybody used to go to shop. Local folks don’t go downtown anymore. There’s nothing there to go for.

IL: Right.

ES: You know, so, a lot of things have changed. What used to be African American section of Beaufort is no longer. There is now two black businesses in Beaufort. One is, uh, is it the Benson? It’s an art, y’know, store. He sells African art and local art and stuff. Lybenson. His is still open because I think he can afford to keep it open because he’s a minister, y’know (laughs), plus a state representative. Okay. Then we have Jimmy Johns. Jimmy Johns is new, okay?

IL: What, the sandwich place?

DO: Yeah.

ES: Yeah. In Beaufort, it’s black-owned.

IL: Okay.

ES: And so in Beaufort those are the two black-owned businesses—

IL: Right, right.

ES: —that's left in Beaufort, where we're used to going downtown and you did your shopping, I mean, you got your hair cut, you ate lunch. You could do everything down there. Now (shakes head), it's nothing. So, you know, shops that sell stuff that I'm not necessarily interested in buying, and I got enough junk (laughs) over the years.

DO: So where do you shop now?

ES: Um, Goodwill.

DO: Okay.

ES: (Laughs) I found that I can wear nice clothes, at a discount. And I go there for most stuff except underwear, y'know. Then you go to TJ Maxx or… They have a "shopping center" out in Beaufort, but no "malls," thank god. I think people are getting away from malls now anyways.

DO: So is there, on the island, a Goodwill? Or do you have to go into Hilton Head?

ES: There's one in Beaufort too.

DO: There's on in Beaufort too?

ES: Mm-hmm (nods).

IL: Is there anything else that we may have forgotten that you would like to talk about?

ES: Mmm. Y'know. There are things that can be done to maintain the land. But it's gonna require a whole lot of work. And it's gonna require a lot of people doin' work. And sometimes it's hard to find a lot of people who are willing to work. 'Cuz sometimes you have to work for nothing (laughs), you know? So, I hope that someday that will change. I hope that the culture maintains, and I want to see it maintain, but I don't want to see it maintain in a museum. I want to see it maintained by the people. And one of the reasons I had mixed emotions about the Gullah Geechee, uh, legislation is because I don't want to see people going to a museum to see Gullah people. Okay? And when they put Gullah people out there, hopefully it's true Gullah people, because I've seen a lot of advertisement with people who are not Gullah people. And I hate to see people… prostitute our culture for money, and lie about who we are and who we aren't. We're not dumb people. You know? 'Cuz some people come and they think, *Oh, those people been isolated on that island for so long, they don't know nothing* (laughs). That is not a good thought to have. Because usually, you know, and I talked a little bit about the spirituality, but usually you can tell, as soon as you meet somebody, where they're coming from. And a lot of times people don't realize that. But there's just something (sighs) that will put you on guard. Y'know, I don't know if a sixth sense or what you call it. But you're on guard because you know that that person's not here for the betterment of the people, but here for their gain. And that's unfortunate, but that's just the way it is, so. I want the story told, I want it to be our story, as opposed to somebody else coming in and getting information and saying, "You know, that don't sound right. Let me change that to this. Let me add to this." And then you come up with something that people of Gullah do not recognize.

IL: Right.

ES: 'Cuz I've seen that happen, in many instances. Y'know, or "I don't know what they're talkin' about (laughs)." They'll say something about, y'know, or somebody'll say something about the Gullah culture, that they do such and such thing. "Uh, I don't know about that." And I grew up—these are people who have young parents—and I grew up with my great-grandparents, so now I know that I got the whoooooole gab from the 1880s! Where Pop will be telling us about a 1893 storm, y'know, that took over 2,000 lives on the island. And water had washed across the island, and a lotta people drowned, and how they stayed in their little house, upstairs, and shut the hole in the floor, so the water would come in and weight the house down. Okay?

IL: Wow.

ES: So, I mean. How, after the flood, the water subsided, they would find dead bodies around. 1940 storm, where a number of people got killed. I mean, just. All kinds of stuff that's happened in this culture, and in this community, and I just want the truth told. That's my thing: have the truth told, of who we are, and what we're about.

IL: I want to thank you for allowing us in your home today, and to sit down and talk with us about your story.

ES: Okay.

IL: It's greatly appreciated.

ES: I enjoyed talking.

[End clip 2]