

OAKWOOD ORAL HISTORY PROJECT TRANSCRIPT

Bernadette Turner (moved into Oakwood in 1976)

Interviewed by Liisa Ogburn on May 28, 2013 in Bernadette's home at 10 North Bloodworth Street, in Raleigh, NC.

Liisa: OK, if we can start by you introducing yourself, your name, your age, and how long you've lived here in Oakwood.

Bernadette: My name is Augusta Bernadette Turner. I am 60, I was born in 1952, and my mother and father bought this house where I currently live, here in Oakwood, in 1976. I believe the deed is dated 1976.

Liisa: Your family has a long history in Raleigh. Tell me a little bit about that.

Bernadette: Well, mom and dad, when they got married, they went north. Dad was actually born at 1312 Oberlin Road, in Cameron Village. But opportunities were better up north, at that time. This was back in, what, the 1920's, early 1930's. So, they got married, moved north. Then, in '60, '61, thereabouts, came back to Raleigh, which was my father's home place. Oberlin Road, Cameron Village.

They built a ranch-style home in '61 - '62 in what's called Battery Heights. It's at the very end of East Davie Street, but mom really loved old houses. When they lived in New York, they lived in New Rochelle in this beautiful, huge three-story house, in New Rochelle. I honestly believe, to this day, that mom saw this house and fell in love with it, because it reminded her of the home that we lived in in New Rochelle.

Liisa: Describe this home, because our viewers can't see it. Tell me about your home.

Bernadette: Well, it's a lovely home. It's, oh, 3500 square feet. It has a kitchen upstairs, as well as a kitchen downstairs. Which is, I don't know, maybe that's a little bit not customary. Though it's an old home, mom did not like hardwood floors, insofar as the heat. She always thought hardwood floors let in more...were not as well-insulated. This home, it does have wall-to-wall carpet, but that's the only thing that's sort of not "true" to here, homes in Historic Oakwood.

We have a small kitchen, but now it's being redone. They took out a wall, I think that's probably par for the course for older homes, I just, I don't know why they loved, or ended up with, smaller kitchens. But we've taken out a wall and it's currently under construction. My mother just liked homes that were spacious, that were roomy. She would have felt cramped up in anything less than this size, anything less. Now she didn't really...our fireplaces are not functional.

It would have been something good had they been, but we don't want to burn the house

down, so we just sort of, we have them, but we don't use them.

Liisa: And you have a 12-foot tall ceiling?

Bernadette: I think these are maybe 10-foot? I'm not so sure, I don't think they're 12.

Liisa: Pocket doors...?

Bernadette: Pocket doors in the living room. Going into the living room, as well as coming into the dining room. I mean huge, all of...as you see, floor almost to the ceiling. When you come in, I think that staircase is quite impressive. It's just a little flare, in terms of the fact that it goes...at first it goes one way, and then makes that 90-degree turn, but look at how wide those steps are at the...as you start to go up those steps. I think that's just sort of special.

Liisa: What year was this house built?

Bernadette: I thought this house was, by now, a hundred years old, I thought it was 1896. But somebody else told me...I'll be quite honest, I'm not exactly sure, and I should be. I cannot remember, but I thought it was at least a hundred years old.

Liisa: So, your parents, they were up in New York, and they had a very active social life and professional life up there. They came back to the south, to live, in the '60's, right?

Bernadette: Yes.

Liisa: And you were born...?

Bernadette: Actually I was born in New York.

Liisa: In New York.

Bernadette: Yes. I was 9 when we came back south, 9-years-old.

Liisa: Do you remember that time?

Bernadette: I remember...OK, the house in New Rochelle was 115 Sickles Avenue, and I remember it as clear as day. Well, why? Because I can see, you know, the similarities between that house and this house. It had, when you came in, these big, even bigger, staircases where, you know, you had wide steps at the bottom. But the whole way up, they were wide, wide. It was amazing, you know. But, to get back to your question...

Liisa: But you were coming at the age of 9 from New York, down to the south. At that time, here in Raleigh, what was it like, coming back here?

Bernadette: You know, I just know mom and dad spent a lot of time, when they weren't at work, overseeing the construction. They did build a house from scratch in Battery Heights, at the end of East Davie Street. Between work and supervising the house that they were building, they were very, very busy. But I tried in every way I could, to be of some assistance. I learned to do things in the house probably earlier than most females.

But I wanted to help, because they were so busy between the job and...you know, once you engage in the construction of a new home, you've got those payments, you've got to keep the income, the money-flow has to be there. I can remember just trying to help and they were just really busy. So I tried to minimize what they had to do when they came in at the house we were living in until the house was completed on East Davie Street.

I don't know, I was happy. I went to Catholic School for awhile, then public school and I finished in Eden-Broughton. Because at that time...the reason I went to Broughton, I graduated in 1970, from Eden-Broughton. But in '68, I think or thereabouts, it came out with freedom of choice, the freedom of choice plan, and my parents made a decision that they wanted the best. Eden-Broughton, in terms of high schools, and still is, one of the best.

I am grateful that they did make that call, and that I was able to go to Broughton. I went to UNC-Greensboro undergrad, and then I've done post-graduate work at North Carolina Central University. But I can't remember that it was so...well, Brighton was a little, you know, if you weren't popular, they kind of ignored you. That was OK.

You know, I understood, it was a new experience. It was predominantly white, so when black people started coming to that school, some of them were a little snobbish. But I'm fortunate. I don't really think that I've been, you know, unfairly treated. I'm very optimistic. I think the world of my parents, because I look back and I am amazed at what they were able to accomplish, to build a house from scratch.

Then to invest in the real estate that they did, here in Historic Oakwood. I tell everybody, "Look, I live in this big old house in Historic Oakwood. I had nothing to do with it, but I'm so glad I had a mother who was able to leave that to the family."

Liisa: Peter says that your family had a really interesting history. Tell me a little about that.

Bernadette: OK, well, he may be referring to the fact that daddy was on the city council. Two-year term, 1989 to 1991, but he wasn't from District C, he was an at-large candidate. There are two, I think, on the city council that serve at-large. In that respect, he made history because he was the first black at-large council member. Clarence Lightner was the first black mayor, but daddy had his claim-to-fame, with respect to being the first

black at-large councilman.

I don't know exactly if Peter was referring to also, my mother started the Raleigh chapter of the National Urban League. It was my mother who initiated that. She got it started and then passed it on to someone else. There's still a Raleigh chapter of the National Urban League. I've seen where they post announcements as to meetings. As a matter of fact, at one point before mom got really ill...as she aged, was beginning to have medical problems.

But before I retired from Shaw, I used to teach there in their Criminal Justice program, they would have meetings at Shaw University. But I'm very proud of the fact that my mother got that chapter of the National Urban League established here in Raleigh. Other things in terms of what they've done, mom just loved to help people.

While we were maybe in college, wherever we were, she never stayed her by herself. She would have people who really needed help to live here, usually upstairs, but there were always folk in this house who mom was saying, "OK, they need a helping hand. We're going to give it to them." So you know, you had to love that, you really did, about my mother. My dad, sometimes, he was not...he was for, "Well if your going to have people, you need to get some rent money."

But mom wasn't about the rent. She was about helping people. If they could pay something, fine, but if not, that was ok too. But not only did she invest in this one house here at 10, she ended up with, and we do own still, the house next door. The house behind this one, as well. Boy, did she really let folks stay. Sometimes weren't able to do, but she was trying to help them along.

That's a wonderful attribute, don't you think? But, you know I just, again, think so much of what they were able to accomplish. They never looked at...saw themselves as being not able to achieve. They always felt like, you put your effort in it, you do have to work hard, sometimes you have to work harder than you want to. But, that's just the nature of trying to accomplish the things that you think are worthy of being accomplished, the things that you want to see accomplished.

Mom was in this organization, the American Mothers, it's a nationwide organization but I don't think it's really that...in terms of membership, it doesn't have the popularity or the name-recognition of, for instance, Mothers Against Drunk Driving. But she did a lot of work for that organization. It was, again, American Mothers Association. Some of those pictures up on the wall related to her involvement in the American Mothers Association, but that's just another indication of who she was.

She thought Motherhood, and children, and trying to instill certain values were important.

And that organizations that were about that mission, trying to instill certain values in young people were very much something to be involved with, and she really was. I can remember having functions here with American Mothers and I can remember one other thing in terms of...well there are other things but in addition, that really stands out.

I remember when we were living at the ranch-style home they built from scratch on East Davie Street, she organized this group. The Young Democrats, Teenage Democrats, and it was all-black, but they didn't have anything in terms of political involvement for your people. I don't even know if they had something similar to that for a white audience. But she got this TeenDems, that's what it's called, Teen Democrats. Boy they were organized. They had lots of events, you would have cookouts.

Mom had a built-in-the-ground pool, so that would be another draw, cookouts, hot dogs, hamburgers. But the TeenDems were mom, she instituted it, she held that together, cause daddy really was into politics. He thought that was one way to accomplish change on a broader scale. He had the TeenDems. I don't know what became of them, but of course, at some point, they aged out because they were no longer teens, the members. But I can so remember the things that she did connected with that organization.

Liisa: How about living in...so you moved into Oakwood, though, in the early '70s...

Bernadette: Right, yes.

Liisa: What do you remember from that time when you moved here?

Bernadette: To be quite honest, the neighborhood was in decline, it truly was. You know, when you don't take pride in your property, that's going to be the result. The neighborhood is going to go into decline. As the original builders of these homes died off...you know, old homes, at some point, I guess in the '70s, were no longer attractive to people. I'm so glad that now there's a resurgence of interest in older homes, but I can remember in '76, it was bad, bad neighborhood.

There's a house, third house down from this intersection, across the street. That house was a vacant lot, nothing there. It's so wonderful to look over there now and see that beautiful home that's sitting there. And then the house right beside it on the corner, that was poorly maintained. They had a, what was it, a kitchen fire, and that was it. I think the landlord decided, "No, no, no. We're not going to just have renters who have fires in the kitchen." □

Although, that's a very human thing. He was just...I think it scared him to the point that they did a lot of repair work, and now I believe it's a single-family home. I can understand the concern that renters, sometimes, are not going to take the interest in your

property. So the landlord has to do that for the renters. So I am working very hard to get my property, the one next door, and the one on the other side, just in lovely condition.

It needs some work, it needs some paint, and that will get done. I do remember, going back to your question, that the houses were not as well-maintained. We didn't have that beautiful house across the street on East Edenton Street. I can remember the house right here on the corner of Bloodworth and New Bern, those are now owned by the city.

They face New Bern Avenue, oh those houses were just...the folk in them, just really no concern about the property whatsoever. The man who managed them really didn't do a good job, and they are so much better now. The city owns them and there are certain minimum requirements for getting that housing and it's made a world of difference. A world of difference in terms of the lack of disturbing the peace.

Back in '76, you know, just people were loud, loud, late at night. Maybe doing something harmless like playing cards, but they had no regard for their neighbors, none whatsoever. You know, they get loud and they may have been consuming alcoholic beverages. It was just awful, "It's not like everybody wants to stay up all night, just because you want to stay up all night." But there has been such a marked turnaround in just this area right here where I'm situated.

And I do understand, when they were proposing that highway that was going to go straight through Oakwood, that this house would not have been here had...that this house at 10 North Bloodworth would have been taken out. I was not actively involved back then with the local communities, Society for the Preservation of Historic Oakwood, but I'm so glad that Valley Henderson and the people who mounted a campaign against the highway, did so. I really am.

You know, this house was not always included in Historic Oakwood. But then I think in the late '90s, 1990's, it was annexed into Historic Oakwood. I do remember me, dad, and mom going to, because there was sort of like a public forum, or public hearing, to get input from the people who would be affected by the annexation. We went and we said we would love to be included and annexed into Historic Oakwood, we really would.

Really, if we let things go and just allow people who have no concern for the community to go unchallenged, it will deteriorate. And it was deteriorated in this particular block that I am in. So I try to be very careful about who I have as tenants. I do know how to make sure that they do not continue to cause the property to deteriorate.

Liisa: As a single woman, it would be daunting to stay in one of these homes and maintain it yourself. What has kept you here?

Bernadette: Well, I love the neighborhood. I love the people in the neighborhood. I love the fact that they love old homes. They want to preserve them. I like that preservation. There is something good about preservation that so gets to the heart of what I feel about these homes. They deserve it. You can't even get homes like...I mean, \$3 million to build something comparable to this. And besides, you can't build an old home, you just can't.

Because my parents loved them and invested in them and there's a lot of sweat in these homes that my parents spent trying to make them even better, and it's an ongoing process. You never finish it. But you have to make the effort, and I value the fact that they made the effort. They did the best that they could with what their financial resources were. I just feel like it's for me to carry that on.

When I die, and I do have that legal education, I am going to have a will and because I do not have any children, it will be going towards some wonderful non-profit organizations. I want to get them even nicer so that if nobody in the family wants to take them on, they will be sold, but for a goodly sum. Hopefully by then, the mortgages will be paid off, and money can be then put into, maybe some of it into, Oakwood's non-profit Society for the Preservation of Historic Oakwood, the American Cancer Society.

My mother did not have cancer but I know so many people who are being adversely affected by cancer. Real estate is an investment, and if you make that effort, when you go, you still have something of value. These homes, I don't know how long they're going to last, but as long as they're around, people will just be drawn to them. It's just the nature of the people who pass this way, people who have that value of preservation, who were either able, if they couldn't do the work, to afford to have people to come in.

Believe me, when you take a home and do the best you can with it, they're just lovely. There's just something about that plaster, the old style to these homes, the crown molding, the pocket doors, it just gets me, it just grabs me, you know? And look, I do know, I've been in a lot of homes here in Oakwood, and it never ceases to amaze me.

It's a lot of work, or a lot of money. If you can just get somebody else to do the work, it's still going to be a lot of money, but they are so worth it. They really are.

Liisa: You've been here for almost 40 years in Oakwood.

Bernadette: Right, with family.

Liisa: Yeah, with your family. Tell me about a moment, some moments over those 40 years that will just always be important to you, some memories.

Bernadette: Well, basically it's mom's social functions. Because, they were...she had plenty of them. It was the events with the American Mothers Association, she had so many different activities for them. Dad, his political events. Mom knew how to throw a party, I mean just beautiful. I have pictures of the table in terms of the presentation and the food. And that was just...

All the people events we had, we had so many people events. We had an event one time, I don't even think it was American Mothers, it was daddy's political event and it was on the weekend and they were parking everywhere. Folks just had to be dropped off and then somebody would go park.

I loved those things, it was just the communion with other people. And you need a home that you can communion with other people in and sometimes you need some space. Something maybe not as big, could not have accommodated those crowds we had. And then, things related to our own process, graduations, you know, and sometimes we'd just have a social party, a New Year's Eve party, something like that.

I think I remember one of the times where we had people in, food, and just good conversation and these homes lend themselves so well to that. I am going to have the Athletic Club, eventually, but I need to get that kitchen straightened out. Because when you have the Athletic Club, you want them to be able to utilize the kitchen.

Liisa: You said this wasn't an issue for you or your family, but I wonder if you have any memories about race relations in the '60s and '70s or...?

Bernadette: I do. Unfortunately, the thing that stands out the most was, before the city took over that house that's right there on the corner of Bloodworth and New Bern, the owner was really awful, he was awful. Truth be known, he was racist, there's no question about that. The confrontations we had with him were just ugly, just ugly. I remember that more than anything else.

When we were living at the ranch-style home at the end of East Davie Street, that was a predominately black neighborhood, and it was all black back then. Now it's in the process of integration. But here, even though this neighborhood was deteriorated, the owners were still white. Some of them were slum landlords or slum owners, so it became real apparent there was some racism going on.

We actually had a fight, not physical, but a verbal fight, concerning the property line for 6 North Bloodworth, the house next door, and his house, the one that faces New Bern Avenue, right there on that corner of New Bern and Bloodworth.

Sometimes I would have run-ins with him and it was always unpleasant, unpleasant. So

this stands out the most is just this one landlord and property owner...I'm not going to mention his name, I will not pronounce his name. But guess what? He no longer owns...he owned, I think of the four houses facing New Bern in that block between Bloodworth and East, three of those houses. Three of them. Not all of them, but three of them.

He no longer owns any of them, any of the three. Sometimes you know, you have to just sort of see if you can out-live or be around after this person is no longer around. He's still alive, I believe, but he no longer is involved in Historic Oakwood, nor should he be. Nor should he be, you know? Basically, he was white and all his tenants were black and he was just ugly. He was a slum landlord and just a bulldog. A real mean bulldog.

So that's probably the worst experience I've had. I don't let racism hold me back, I don't even dwell on it, because I've just said some people cannot get evolved. They're just not going to evolve. You can't worry about people who cannot evolve, there's nothing you can do, you know? So you just close your eyes and just walk around it and just say, "They've got to meet their maker, and that's between them and their maker."

But in terms of, you know, holding us back, I never felt my color held us back. I know my mom. She just knew she needed to have, basically, good credit. You have good credit, it didn't matter if you were black or white. People have to understand. The economics sometimes trump whatever race you may be.

It is the economics. And I'm sure if my mother and father were alive today...yeah, they had some unpleasant, maybe, dealings with the other race. But they knew that that wasn't going to stop them, that just gave them more fuel for their trying to accomplish what they wanted to accomplish. I can't speak for others.

Liisa: They planted many seeds in you. Many positive seeds in you.

Bernadette: Yes, yes.

Liisa: Tell me about their legacy through you.

Bernadette: Well I remember my mother, when she died...she was dying but I didn't realize it...but after she had died, I came in and said, "I need some time with my mother before she is removed...", she was in a nursing home. She was only going to be there for 10 days. The eighth day, she died because they changed her medication, put her on stuff that was generic, that would not work for her, and did not work. But by the time we realized what they had done, the damage was done.

But I remember when she did pass, I asked them, "Please leave us alone for me to say goodbye to my mother." I just sort of grabbed her leg, layed on top of her. She was on the bed, you know, in a horizontal position. And, I asked God, [Bernadette crying] "Please

give me my mother's spirit, please give me my mother's spirit," because she had such wonderful values, in terms of the hard work...man, she was...you know, she believed in hard work.

She didn't look at people and expect anything from them other than courtesy, common courtesy. She was willing to do what it took to achieve what she wanted to accomplish in this life. She really had such a good design. She married a good man. My daddy was a good man, you know? Sometimes she was a little more bossy, sometimes she had kind to kind of drag him to do something. But he loved her. He loved her.

I remember when she changed churches, he really didn't want to change churches, but he said, his comment was, "How will that look for me to go to the church that we're going to, and my wife to go to some another church. That just wouldn't be right, that would not look right." So, he changed religions. I mean anytime your wife can make you change religions, that's a powerful woman. He did, he sure did change religions. See, that's rare, that's hard to find that combination. I was not successful in that respect, I am single.

I don't anticipate getting married, but that's OK. But I do anticipate that what my mother left me I will, while I am alive, do the best that I can to improve it. And that money, when it's sold if nobody in the family wants it, I will have a will directing, after any expenses that are owed are paid, that that money be turned over to the American Cancer Society, other organizations, and the Society for the Preservation of Historic Oakwood as well.

You know, I just want to say this, because it's sort of something that gets under my skin. People say, "Well, you can't take it with you." No, but that's why you have a will, that's why you have a will. But they say that as sort of like, "I don't need to do...I don't need a house, because I can't take the house with me." Well, you can convert it into very good use, you know? You really can. And leave behind somebody else to enjoy it, or somebody who can purchase it and want it to be applied to a worthwhile purpose.

I just think that people need to be a little bit more visionary. A lot of people, particularly young people, they're not visionary at all. And maybe when I was young, I wasn't either, but there's something about the loss of your parents, and my mother was the longest liver. So I talk about her more. She passed in 2007. Daddy passed in 2000. But mom was the heart of this family. She was a matriarch to the core, no question. And that type-A personality, real type-A.

But that's OK, that's OK, I understand. She would not have been able to accomplish what she did, I think, had she not been a type A-personality. So I'm very pleased with what they were able to accomplish.

Liisa: So Bernadette, this will be a record of you, you know? This tape, this archive, after you're gone. What would you want to say in this archive that you haven't said?

Bernadette: I think in this life, we all need to love one another, support one another, be there for one another. And whatever our situation is, keep a positive attitude. Don't let things get you down to the point that you get depressed, and then your unable to function.

In this life, I want everybody to remember, try to maintain a certain level, and spirit, of, “I can handle whatever life throws out at me, and I can handle it constructively, not destructively.”

Liisa: Any other questions that you want to answer about your life here? That’s a beautiful [laughs] way to end, but...

Bernadette: Well, I think that I’m so proud of the fact that we reach out and help people in the community. That’s a wonderful thing, you know, and I was so happy that 516 East Jones Street, although there was a lot of dissention, we saw the merit of doing what was done for 516 East Jones Street, in terms of the loan so that they could restore that home. It’s a lovely home.

And I think that’s something everybody should, you know, look at. That there will be other people who might need help and that we do need to reach out and help the people in this community. We just can’t let the money sit there. It has to be used, but wisely invested. Wisely invested. I’m pleased that so far...they’re gonna look more courageous because I think they were more reticent, just sitting on that money, sitting on that money.

But now I’m very pleased to see that they are putting that money to good use because there are homes in this neighborhood that need some help. I don’t know if they are, financially, going to be able to meet the qualifications. But I had no problem with them, the organization, setting criteria. You have to do that, because it is an investment and the best investments that you can make will allow you to make more investments.

So, again, you got to be visionary. You do have to be visionary. I’m just pleased that we are taking a more active involvement in houses that need help, that meet the criteria for such help, financial help.

Liisa: One last thing. So, I walked into your house, it’s beautiful. You have photographs and news articles and all kinds of things on your walls. I’m just struck by the importance of family and legacy here. Any other reflections on that, I mean...and the pride of legacy and holding up examples before you and continuing that legacy?

Bernadette: It just makes me feel fulfilled. Especially because I don’t have a husband or have children, I guess I feel it strong, so strongly, the need to honor my parents. That is a force that is very, very...it makes me more driven. It’s good to have, you know, something that just motivates you to try to accomplish or to try to achieve the task at hand.

And I feel like I’m anchored and there are a lot of people who aren’t anchored. And everybody needs to be anchored and my parents are my anchor. They really are. I’m not drifting anymore. I may have before they died. I may have been a little drift-y, but I don’t feel that way anymore. I really don’t. That’s a wonderful thing. To have this sense of knowing where you want to go and how to get there.

When I close my eyes for good, I want it said at my service [Bernadette crying] that I

honored my parents. That would mean so much.

Liisa: I believe people will say that. Thank you. Finally, you mentioned you were an attorney, I just wanted to have that in the paragraph below.

Bernadette: And just by way of a little bit more of my background, I did go to law school and I passed the bar and I was active as an attorney, but with state government. I worked as a hearing officer with employment security. They do employee attorneys. A lot of state agencies, I don't think people realize, employ attorneys. Because, I guess, it's probably less expensive than going and getting a private firm to handle legal matters.

And then, after employment security, I did work at the Attorney General's office as an entry-level attorney. I didn't progress because then I ended up teaching. Teaching was probably a little more academic, and I guess I decided I wanted to be an academic. So I taught, I taught at the community college level. What was it? Central Carolina Community College in Sanford.

Then, Shaw University until I retired because my mother really did have to have somebody with her beginning 2002, January 2002, because she had heart surgery in that year. I had no regrets about resigning and staying home with my mother for five years, basically. Staying with her until she passed in March of 2007.