

Bernice Simmons

Interviews by Jasmine Dozier, Joseph Ruiz & Rogenzo Cruickshank

“My name is Bernice Dolores Simmons. I was born in Charleston, South Carolina on August 25, 1935. It was beautiful there. We lived in the city. We had a small family; I lived with my parents and my sisters and brothers. My parents were Marie and Booker T. Johnson — the T didn’t stand for a name, it was just a T! I have a sister Sara, and I have a half-sister Shirley and two half-brothers, Simon and Booker T.

We lived in project housing in Charleston. It was like a small town inside of the city, and there were lots of kids around to play with, so it was nice. I went to the Buist Elementary School and then I went to Burke Industrial High School. It was a trade school, so they had all kinds of trades. Like the rest of the girls, I took mostly domestic arts, cooking, sewing, and things like that. Yes I liked school. I didn’t dislike anything about it. I went through 12th grade there.

I had to do chores like most kids when I was a young. I had to cook, and help my sisters and brothers. When I was around twelve my best friend was Josephine, but don’t ask me her last name! I didn’t need too many friends because I had sisters and cousins to play with. We used to play the usual games: Hopscotch, Jump Rope, Double Dutch, and things like that. Later on I played basketball.

Oh sure, I might have had a few bad days if I did something wrong. I was the class clown, and I still am that today! I remember I got in trouble a couple of times for fighting. My punishment for breaking curfew was that I couldn’t go out. My father was the boss back then, and he was definitely in charge.

I remember a little bit of WWII, but not much now. I was still a little girl when it happened, but I remember there were hard times. My parents didn’t make much money. We didn’t make good money because things were different back then. So it was hard

times for my parents.

I guess one of my biggest adventures was getting married. I got married when I was 17. My husband's name was Ernest Simmons. We met at work. I don't know if that was my dream, but I got married. I did have college in mind, but I didn't have a specific trade then. So I got married at a young age, and my husband supported me — he was in the Army. He was stationed in North Carolina at first, and I lived on the base for a while, but I didn't like that so I came back home to South Carolina. Then we moved up to New York, and then here to Massachusetts while he was in the service. We moved to Boston in 1953.

He was deployed during both the Korean War and the Vietnam War. So, I lived with my Aunts here in Boston while he was away. Then later, after we were divorced, I just stayed here. Ernest and I had three children. Ernestine, my daughter, was the oldest. Then we had two boys— Orrin and Bernard Simmons. We lived in different places here in Boston; we lived in Roxbury for a while, and in Mattapan. My kids went to the Boston public schools and my daughter also went to Cambridge Latin School. The boys went to Brighton High. My kids are all grown up now and have kids of their own. My daughter is 53, Orrin is 50, and Bernard is 45.

I worked at different hospitals when I first got out of school, then, when my kids were growing up I got a job at Polaroid, — they made cameras. I started there in the 1970s. That was the best job I ever had! I loved it working with cameras and film. I never tired from it, and I worked for there 25 years until I retired in 1995.

Yes, I used to drive a car. I learned to drive in the 1960's. I went to driving school, and I had to pay for it. But one of my first driving experiences was *bad*. I was on my way to work and my car flipped over. There was a big storm and they were plowing the highway, so the car skidded and flipped over. It wasn't my fault it was my car's fault! So that's what happened to my first car. Not long after that, I stopped driving. It was

just too scary.

Well, I think my biggest accomplishment in life is just living to reach 75! I was very, very sick about three years ago. I had a heart attack and a stroke, and then I had surgery. They put two metal stents in me. So my illness was very hard on me. I'd have to say that my happiest moment was living through all I've been through with my illness. I'm happy to be alive, and I'm happy to be here to see my grandkids, and my great grandkids.

I love gardening. I guess that's from growing up in the South, because a lot of people had gardens and grew their own food. They just put in these nice garden beds out back here, and I'm getting ready to plant my tomatoes and some other things. I'll probably plant some onions, peppers, and I'm going to try some squash this year, too. I'm really looking forward to that. They've planted a lot of flowers here around the building. It looks nice. In fact, last year some college kids came and planted flowers all around the back of the building. It was beautiful! I love that I can look out my window and watch my little garden grow.

The most important thing I learned from my family growing up was to treat people right and respect yourself. I tried to do that with my children, too, and I think that was a big accomplishment. I hope they will follow in my footsteps and be good mothers and good fathers themselves. That's what I want for my grandkids, and that makes me happy too. Do I have any advice for you? There are so many things, but I think love and happiness are the most important. So far it always works like that. I don't worry about too much. I hope I live to be over 100. I have friends who are 90 or 100 and they seem to be happy. So I wouldn't mind a bit living to be 100."