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## Dixon, Norma

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Interviewee: Norma Dixon  
Interviewer: Stephanie Bernholz  
Date: 25 April 2012

Stephanie Bernholz (SB): Okay, so I have a few questions to start out with, I guess I should have a pen, just in case I come up with more. But I'll also just be asking you things in general as they come up, obviously. Um, so, Norma, where did you grow up?

Norma Dixon (ND): I grew up in rural North Carolina, in a small town called Rockingham in south central North Carolina. It was basically a, um, textile manufacturing town, farming, some tobacco fields, farms, cotton, chicken farms.

SB: Okay, did your-- you said it was a textile... did your parents work in the um...

ND: My dad did.

SB: Okay, did your mother work or did she stay at home?

ND: She worked. She was a custodian at the school.

SB: Okay, um what else can you tell me about your family? Like, just siblings, anything like that...

ND: I had two sisters, one older and one younger. My parents did separate and divorce. I was raised principally by my mother and grandmother. Um, my mother finished high school. My grandmother had a fourth grade education. Um, my father had served in the military during World War II. He was a machine gunner in the south Pacific, and that uh, um, contributed to his dysfunction once he came back to, you know, live a life in a marriage. A lot of stress and, um, so... the marriage did not last.

SB: Yeah. Yeah, my grandfather was in the war as well and I know that... that was a problem at times when my dad was growing up. So, uh, was your-- were you close with your family? Like your mother, your grandmother...

ND: Yes, we were a close knit family. My grandmother cared for us, my sisters and myself, when my mother was away at work. In the summertime we, um... we played in the yard and made little playhouses and my grandmother would make lunch for us and call us in for a nap. And, uh, she would put on the radio. And one thing that I recall about her care of me was that the radio station played country music. So that influenced me as I grew up. I loved country music, and people would laugh and say, "Why you like country music?" But it had a strong appeal to me because when I was a child that was the music that I lay down to in the middle of the day and it would put me to sleep. So, that I remember... She was a great story teller. She shared oral history about my family. Her father was a slave. Her mother was born

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just after slavery ended. And they were married and they had nine children, um, and the family did sharecropping. They lived in South Carolina then they moved into North Carolina and they continued to work as, uh, sharecroppers-- I did say sharecroppers, right?--

SB: Uh-huh.

ND: Sharecroppers. Okay, sharecroppers, and um eventually, I don't know, they began to prosper. As the children grew up they left the farm and went to Pennsylvania, you know, the boys and the girls left to find work in the cities. Pennsylvania... And eventually they were able to give their mother a home so she could quit, you know, sharecropping. The father died in an accident. He fell off of a wagon and the... his chest was crushed. And he eventually died of pneumonia, so that left the mother and the sons and the daughters to, you know... carry on the farm.

SB: (overlapping) ...take care of the farm, yeah.

ND: Yeah, and, as I said, when the young men grew up they moved away, they saved their money, and then they purchased some land and built a home for their mother. My grandmother married, but her marriage didn't last. And she saved up some money, she told me, that she bought a piece of land. I think it was a half acre of land. And I think she said it was a dollar an acre or fifty cents an acre. She got that little piece of land for very little money and she built a house. And, uh, her marriage had fallen apart, so she was left with the daughter, and--

SB: Who was your mother?

ND: Yes.

SB: Okay.

ND: And she finished high school. And that's basically her story. Susie began to work as a washwoman.

SB: That's your grandmother?

ND: My grandmother, Susie. And she worked for the judge in the town where we lived. She worked for his family, mom and dad. And so they were able to be a strong support network for my grandmother, for my mother, and even for us, you know, as we were growing up. Their son was an agent in the savings and loan, so if my grandmother...

SB: If she needed anything... [laughter]

ND: Yes! She could always, it was always available.

SB: That's good.

ND: So those were the Lampleys.

SB: The Lampleys were the, um--

ND: The family, the judge's family.

SB: Oh, the judge's family, okay.

ND: And, um... basically that's my grandmother's story. She lived to be ninety-two years old and she died pe-- um, peace-- well, it wasn't so peaceful. She died at a ripe old age and-- I'm going back to my grandmother Lara. I told you that my great-grandfather had an accident, but great-grandmother Lara lived to be ninety-four years old and she made her living in addition to being a sharecropper as the midwife for all of the children who were born in that part of the country at that time. That was in South Carolina and North Carolina. Wolf Pit township it was known as. She worked with the doctors. One doctor in particular was named Dr. Quick. I think he-- not think, he WAS a black physician. And, uh...

SB: Do you know what time that was around?

ND: Um... well, in the 1900s.

SB: Wow.

ND: Nineteen... the 1900s, and she midwifed me.

SB: [overlapping] Under him? Oh, wow.

ND: Yes, she delivered me, she delivered all of my-- well, she delivered me and my sister. She delivered most of the children that were born and she was the midwife who assisted, and then she would give her report to the doctor and the record would be filed in the court, so many of the records in the Richmond County Courthouse have her listed, have her name listed. So, she's well known.

SB: She's in there!

ND: Yes, she's in there, in the historical record of our town.

SB: Wow.

ND: As I said, she was 94, she was--

SB: So you got to-- do you remember her?

ND: Yes, I was about ten years old when she passed away. And she was a very strict disciplinarian. She took no nonsense if we were playing around at her home and she said stop, you know, we usually listened.

SB: [overlapping] You stopped.

ND: She was not known to tolerate disobedient children. [laughter]

SB: Um... What role did the church play in your life as you were growing up? Just because I'm kind of, "How do you turn into a pastor's wife?"

ND: The church played a major role in my development. I think, first of all, because our initial educations started in the church.

SB: Like, with Sunday school?

ND: Yes. Even before we went to, you know, the public schools, we were taught oral-- orally with little picture cards and little Sunday School books and we had to learn the Scripture. We read Scripture and Bible verses at home. My grandmother and mother taught us to read the Bible and helped us to learn the letters and the ABCs and so forth. And as I grew up we had what was called the Buds and the Yams and different little organizations in church and that's where we learned Christian principles about who God was and Sunday school. And as we matured we began to do things like ushering and singing in the choir. And, um, I think I was about ten years old when I really first began to listen to what the preacher was saying in the sermon. And I remember the pastor, who at that time was preaching was Ocie Spencer, and he was preaching about Job's experience with suffering. And in his sermon, I think he convinced me that God was powerful and that no matter how bad life's situations became that he was available to me. If I prayed and reached out to him that he would hear my cry. And from that I remember being at home in the house one day and I wasn't feeling very well. And I began to pray a little prayer. And I said, "Wow." I felt, I felt so bad, and my grandmother and my sisters were outside and I looked out the window and I thought, "Hm,

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they're playing and they're not even paying any attention to me and I'm in the house and I don't feel well." And I said, "Nobody cares about me." I thought, "No one cares about me." And I seemed to hear a voice, maybe from the inside it came, but it said to me, "I know who you are. I care about you. I made you. And I know where you are. I care." And [unintelligible] I felt it was the voice of the Creator who was giving me the assurance that I needed as a child feeling alone that I wasn't really alone because I had him. And so, I think that that was a firm, um, cement-- firmly cemented my faith in God and, um, it just-- I just-- it never wavered, I never wavered once I had that experience. That there was a God and that I could depend upon him to carry me through life. And, um, he has.

SB: Yeah, I feel like-- I feel that's definitely... I actually had that conversation with one of my friends recently and-- because she was like "I just don't know how much I believe it." And I was like, "Well you kinda have to just wait for it to happen. You know? It's not-- you're not gonna force it."

ND: Yeah, I think, it was, because I was feeling pretty low that day.

SB: Yeah.

ND: And thinking...

SB: Do you remember why, or is it just, you know, a hazy memory?

ND: I had a, I just remember not feeling well. Either I had a stomach virus or I had... I was sick in some way, and I was in the bed and they were outside. And I guess I wanted someone to come and be with me but nobody, you know, they weren't able to. My grandmother was working in her flower garden and they were just frolicking in the yard, playing. And I sort of looked out and I thought, "Oh." I got out of the bed, and I looked, and I thought, I mean, when I reflected upon it, I think that was probably the initial thing that cemented me, cemented my faith and my understanding that there was a higher power that cared for me. And at that point when I heard those words, when I understood that, it did give me comfort and I relied upon that. "Oh, I'm cared for, and even though they're not in here I am-- someone knows, and the one who knows is the greatest one of all to know."

SB: Wow. That's... that's fantastic. So you said that your education started kind of in church and stuff. How... how else did it-- how did it progress?

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ND: Then I... I didn't go to headstart or anything like that. I started school. We first had a one room school house. It was called, um... they're historical schools. I can't recall the title of it now. It'll come to me eventually. But they're, if they're googled, they were schools that were established in the South. Rosenwald schools!

SB: Rosenwald? Do you know how that's spelled?

ND: R-o-s-e-n-w-a-l-d.

SB: Okay.

ND: Rosenwald schools... and they grew out of that person's understanding of, his perspective of what slavery, the impact that slavery and the Jim Crow system and, you know, segregation had played on the black community. And so schools were established throughout the South. And that's where I first started to go to school. My sister was in one class, well everything's in one room, the teacher taught first, second grade over here...

SB: And then they moved...

ND: Yes, that's the way it was. And I really wasn't at the proper age to attend school but because of the situation where parents, where my mother was working and my grandmother was working on the factory [heel? hill?], you know, as I said, um children were allowed to bring siblings along. So my great-grandmother cared for my little sister and I went to school with Carolyn. Which wasn't a great success because I was immature and I would cry and...

SB: Aww, how old were you?

ND: I must have been about five years old, four, five years old. I was probably five years old, and she was probably six or seven. If she was six... she was probably seven. I might have been four and she was six? However, she, they, the school allowed younger siblings to attend the class and so I was able to be in school and there was an older neighbor, we had an older neighbor who was also a student and she could pacify me when I started to cry.

SB: Not your sister?

ND: Not my sister.

SB: She *was* your sister.

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ND: So, I was... her name was Barbara, so she could calm me down, but on those occasions when Barbara could do it, I, my sister would have to take me to my grandmother's home, which was in walking distance. She could do that. And eventually a school building was constructed right in the neighborhood, in walking distance for everybody just across the way from my grandmother's home. It was in the center of the community-- the school was-- so we all transferred out of the one room school, the Rosenwaldschool, into the Ashley Chapel School.

SB: How is the-- Asley?-- spelled?

ND: Mmhm, A-S-H-L-E-Y--

SB: Ah, Ashley.

ND: --Chapel School.

SB: Okay. Alright, thank you.

ND: Okay. And that school was located in what was known, what is known still as the Ashley Chapel Community. It was... the church... the church in the community was the Ashley Chapel Church which was founded by Reverend Leak, who is well known as well.

SB: How is that spelled?

ND: Leak, yes, L-E-A-K.

SB: Okay, so, like a leak.

ND: Um, so that... we began to attend that school. Carolyn was probably in second grade by then and I was enrolled in first grade. And Miss Thomas was my teacher, Miss Adams was Carolyn's teacher. And I remember school not being what I wanted.

SB: You weren't a fan of school as a child?

ND: No, not a fan of school. [laughing] I spent most of the day daydreaming and Ms. Thomas was such a kind-hearted lady. She, sort of, just seemed to sort of just let me get away with it because at that point I was still not old enough to be, I wasn't old enough to be in school, but they allowed me to attend school. And the reason, I believe, that I was allowed to attend school is that my-- [SB checks the recorder] Am I taking too long?

SB: No! No, no, you're fine, I'm just double checking that it's working.

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ND: My paternal grandmother had sisters who had daughters who were teachers and principals, so they were the ones who made the calls about who could come to school.

SB: [overlapping] They made sure you could go to school.

ND: [laughing] So I think that's why I was tolerated. But eventually I did get a grip on school. That year wasn't such a great success, I would spend a lot of time going to the door to look out or asking the teacher if I could spit because I knew that that would be an excuse that I could get outside. And I think about that now and I laugh because she had to know that I was... that something was amiss there, but she tolerated that. And she might have felt sympathy for me because she knew what had happened with my family. I don't know, I can't really say why she tolerated me but I... as... when I became an adult I looked back on that experience and I realized that in some way she was tolerant of me because she recognized something that... I was troubled about. Maybe she thought...

SB: Yeah, a lot of times when there's divorce in the family--

ND: Yeah.

SB: -- teachers understand.

ND: Right, and I didn't want to go to school and I started out sometimes, and I would go back. It was really not a pleasant thing for my sister. I just, I don't really understand myself. But I just knew that I wasn't happy and I didn't really want to go to school. I just preferred, I wanted to stay home. Okay, so eventually I made it out of first grade, not knowing very much, and I wound up in second grade. And second grade was pretty uneventful. I just, I didn't like spelling, and I tried to avoid it. Each day, and-- I don't know how I got away with this-- whenever the teacher said, "Take out the spelling book." I would always say, "May I go to the bathroom?" And I'd wind up in the bathroom, and I'd stay in there until I thought spelling session was over, and then I would come out. Eventually that led to... my mother coming to the school. I was promoted to third grade, and she noticed that I didn't, hadn't mastered what she thought I should have mastered in second grade. I was sitting in the third grade classroom and in she walked with my-- the principal, he was a cousin-- she said, "Get your things." And I had to get up and she took me back to the second grade classroom. And, so then I caught up. And then I settled from then on. I don't know, I guess the embarrassment of having to be taken out of the classroom?

SB: I would guess!

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ND: I caught hold of myself. And so then I went through fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth grade at Ashley Chapel school.

SB: Okay, yeah.

ND: When I finished that course of study there we went on to Leak Street High School. And, uh, did I mention that my name is, my former name is Norma Jean Leak?

SB: Distant relation?

ND: I think... well, you know, I'm gonna say, what I think it was... probably ownership, probably from, you know, slavery. You know, the name, had...

SB: Been passed down, yeah.

ND: So... in high school, I was an honor roll student. I did well in English, I liked science, I sang in the choir, I was Miss Homecoming in my junior year. And when I finished high school in 1968 I went to college at Winston-Salem State University. And that was as a result of that same family, the daughters. My grandmother's-- for whatever reason-- all of her sisters married men who, you know, were stable and they educated their children beyond high school. And that was a cousin, one of her nieces, who had graduated from Winston-Salem, the three of them, who mentored me and suggested to my mother that that would be a good school for me to become a teacher. And so I went to Winston-Salem and I did well there, and I met Nathaniel and we... uh... weren't serious. I went back to Rockingham and he came to New York. But we stayed in touch with each other and eventually he said, "Well, you know, let's get married." Okay, we got married. He said, "We'll live in New York for two years." And I said, "Okay." And we came to New York, we had the first child... we were married in 1974, July. We had our first child in 1976 and he was teaching and I was teaching and then there was a, um, economic, uh...

SB: Recession?

ND: Recession. And he got... I was laid off, he was laid off, and then he went to teacher's college to get his Master's degree. Eventually he got back into the system and when Ianna I got back into the system. And was... remained employed, I was appointed to you know, take the examinations. I was appointed in 19... probably 1978 or so... and I taught for thirty-two years total, counting the second grade-- I taught two years in North Carolina, second grade-- when I came to New York I was certified to teach mentally disabled students. I got a master's

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degree from teacher's college at Columbia University in mental retardation, teaching children who had disabilities. That was the way I spent my career in New York City. I did teach some health conservation classes and the last job that I had in 2006 was a fifth grade class of, um, challenged students, but they were a delight. I always found the... mentally disabled, I will say... fascinating because they were very compassionate, kind people. They seemed to view life at a very humane level and they had respect and regard for each other and everybody around them, I just thought they were the best people to ever have to be associated with. They didn't have any of the hang ups or any of the superstitious ways or prejudices that you find. It didn't matter. Skin color... it didn't matter. And so I found that a joy. I was privileged. And I would often say to them that working and spending my days with them was one of the great joys of my life.

SB: Was that... was that a good environment to teach in? Because you said that they were very accepting, and everything like that, but other than the students did you-- were you comfortable with all the other teachers and everything like that?

ND: Oh yes, oh yes, yes yes. I was. It was always, I always had good relations with my colleagues, whether they were in special education or not. I made some really good friends. The first job that I had was at a high school, [Marta Valle High School?] on the Lower East Side. I met Sheila Blank, uh, Cathy Kilcullen, uh, Judith [Stool?] was the principal, and, um, one other lady who, I thought I'd never forget her name, but now it won't come to me, but they were basically, I-- Phyllis O'Hara! They were Irish, they were Italian, they were all sorts of people.

SB: So it was a very multicultural environment?

ND: Yes, yes. The student population was basically, in general the school was Hispanic, you know, Spanish and African American students. But that was a good experience. That was my, probably... well I started subbing in the Bronx... that was where I first started to teach once I got licensed. I think, elementary schools, those were regular... I taught, well, I guess I first started to sub, I had not been licensed, so I was teaching on my experience from regular education as a second grade teacher in North Carolina. So I was able to work as a substitute and fourth grade, fifth grade, high school, wherever a teacher was needed. And I didn't find that difficult at that time because I was young and I just fell in there and did what I had to do, took whatever the curriculum was and I got, you know, I did the job. So I feel that my introduction to teaching in New York state was positive and it was something that I got into

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the routine of very easily because most of the time the people with whom I worked were very supportive and, you know, I never felt as though I was left alone to try and figure things out. People were very supportive and, you know, gave me...

SB: Advice?

ND: Advice, yeah.

SB: Okay, um, so you had... did you stay in New York, the New York area?

ND: Yes...

SB: Ever since then?

ND: Yes, um...

SB: It was supposed be two years--

ND: Two years, 1974...

SB: --and it turned out to be forever?

ND: 1974 and we moved to the Bronx. Nathaniel got an apartment on Mosholu Parkway in what was the Tracy Towers. And he said that he chose that apartment because of the park. I guess there's the Mosholu park or Van Cortlandt park... it's wooded, that area there. You know, "I got this place, I didn't want it to be a shock to you, leaving North Carolina, so I got this apartment in an area that would remind you of it."

SB: There are trees here!

ND: Yes, trees. So we stayed there and I thought, eventually, the thought came to me, "Well, you know, since I'm going to be living in New York I would have preferred to really live in New York City, you know, in Manhattan." So eventually-- I guess we stayed there two or three years in Tracy Towers. That is where our daughter was born, she was born in Einstein Hospital, so that's where she came home to. I guess by the time she turned... when she had her first birthday was when I went back to teaching... and his mom was going to get a house and we moved into the apartment where we live now, because at that time it was a Mitchell-Lama building.

SB: A, uh, Mitchell what?

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ND: Mitchell Lama-- M-I-T-C-H-E-L-L L-A-M-A. That was housing that was built, I guess in the 60s, late 60s? '68, '67. For middle income professional people. People who were not, you know-- you couldn't live in projects, you know, well housing development, you couldn't live there because your income was too high and you couldn't really afford, you know, higher...

SB: A normal rent?

ND: Mm. It was really basic rooms. And so she-- his mom-- wanted us to have that apartment so we moved in there. She moved out, and we were able to get the lease in our name and that's where we've been ever since.

SB: So you said that when you first moved here, Reverend Dixon got, like, the place with the trees. How was the transition for you into the Bronx?

ND: Well, um, it was pretty smooth. It was hard... I was really homesick, but it was... I guess I took it as an adventure. I was going to work every day. I had a car so I would drive, uh, I can't even remember that... anyway, I would leave the Bronx, I would leave home and I would go down FDR Drive, that was the route. I learned the route to work and I learned the way back home and I knew how to go shopping up the street... from, away from the apartment. I guess the biggest thing... there was a high school right next to the apartment building, so I would see students coming and going. And the people who lived around us, who lived in the apartments around us, were friendly, and so that made life a little easier. And his mother would come to check on me and his dad would come to check on us, to make sure, you know, that I was going okay. His mother was from the South, so that was one thing that was helpful. She was very friendly and very caring. She helped me a lot. I think she was a good friend to me as well as a mother-in-law. So she would come to visit on a pretty regular basis and... um... living in the Bronx was different than living in North Carolina but I found that when I moved to Manhattan that it was even... I could see the bigger contrast between what life was like in the Bronx and what life was like in Manhattan. Manhattan was a lot noisier, a lot, I guess... the dust that settled inside the apartment was a lot dirtier.  
[laughing]

SB: I know the Manhattan grit well.

ND: Yeah, so, but living in the city wasn't easy. And the thing that, I guess, calmed me down-- because at one point I was really torn about going back and sort of insisting on

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leaving the city. But my father said to me once-- I was complaining to him on the phone-- and he said, "Norma, do you have a shelter? Are you in a nice apartment? Do you have shelter?" I said, "Yes." "Is it adequate?" "Yes it's adequate." "Do you have a job?" "Yeah." "Do you make money to take care of your needs?" I said, "Yes, sir." And he said, "Well, you know what you need to do? You need to try to make yourself content." He said, "If you're living in a place that you're able to make a good living and you're safe and, you know, you're not hungry--" He said, "Learn to be content." And so I took that to heart and I tried to change my attitude, so to make up for the fact that I had to give up my home and my family and friends, Nathaniel agreed that I could go back to North Carolina every summer. So that's what I did. And even after we had children he would drive us. We would stop in Richmond, that was where his mom was from, we would visit with the family there and he would come with us and he would probably stay a week and then he would go back to New York and he would come back to get us and drive back, we would drive home again. And so that was basically the way we lived and... you know, until the kids got grown, older. WE would go there to visit at Christmas time. And when the children wanted to stay in the city for Christmas we stopped doing that. But he tried to give me a connection back to home. He tried to be considerate of that.

SB: When did Reverend Dixon become... a Reverend?

ND: Reverend Dixon became... ah... I guess that path started in... probably in 199????... I'll say in the 90s. Nathaniel had been a jazz musician, even when I met him in college, he was a young man who-- I would notice that he was sitting on a bench waiting on the Sundays. And eventually when we became friends I asked him, "Well why would I see you sitting on the bench?" He said, "Oh, that was-- I was waiting for someone to pick me up." There was a jazz club in Greensboro, North Carolina and this gentleman who was a musician would pick him up and take him to the club so he could, you know, get some experience. And when we came to New York he was a teacher, a music teacher, but he... I think he was always a musician. He played in clubs and he would tour with different groups. He played in different bands. I can't... hm... [Sam Wooding Big Band?], uh, different, different musical groups he played, but basically it was Jazz. And in nightclubs that played jazz, that you know sponsored or hosted jazz music. And then we became members of Salem United Methodist Church in Harlem, 129th St and 7th Ave. And Nathaniel began to become involved in the church. First as, probably, a member of a class and then he... probably became a lay-leader and a Sunday School teacher. I think he was asked to be a restoration, a chairperson of a restoration that was taking place, probably, back in the 90s. But he began to attend and get involved in the

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ministries of the church and listening to the preacher, I suppose, and reading the Bible and studying and preparing for church and the different things that he was involved in. He started to think about, um... you know, what if... what, you know, what could this lead to? And I had-- I have a cousin, his name is Bernard Leak, he is a pastor and he had been a pastor since he was in his late 20s and he was a mentor to me and he became very acquainted with Nat. They would have conversations and one day Nathaniel was talking to him on the phone and he was, you know, they were talking about the different things that Nathaniel was involved with. Bernard said to Nathaniel, "You know, Nathaniel, what God really wants is to be the center of your life." And I noticed that he had a very strong reaction to those words. I saw tears down running down and when he got off the phone he said, "You know, I think I have some things I have to... change in my life." And he just became even more intense on his path of working in the church and being a mentor to the young men and women, the young boys and girls in the church school. And some of the pastors, one of the pastors who was a former bishop spoke to him one day and told him that he believed that he would be a good candidate for ministry but Nathaniel would always say, you know, he would pray about things. So eventually one day he said to me, "What would you think if I said I was... that I feel called to do ministry?" And I said, "Well..." It sort of alarmed me. I said, "Well you better make sure. You need to really make sure." And so he... the first step that he took was to do what was called exploratory ministry. There was a manual that was available from the United Methodist Church and I guess he went through whatever that process was-- that's vague in my mind now. But he went through some process. And then a different pastor recommended him... I guess to the church council, you know, the people around, "What have you discerned? What would you propose this individual has said that he feels the call to ministry." So the church then had to vote, they had a discussion and they voted and they nominated him to become a candidate in ministry and then, you know, some steps, some things. He talked to me about it and I really thought... if... well... I think back to when I first met Nathaniel I thought that he was a very... I had made an assumption of him as being a good person. That he was a thoughtful young man. I thought that he had a certain quality about him that I admired and that I would... you know, would want in a husband. So that was about it. You know, he's a good person, he's decent, you know, basically. So when he said that he wanted to explore ministry I was a little surprised, but I wasn't completely in shock. But I wasn't really happy about it because I knew what that meant. But as time went on and I saw that he... you know, that the Spirit was at work, I could see the Spirit was at work in his life because there were times when it seemed like doors were closed and they would open. Money was given to him to do some of the work that he needed to do to go

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through theological seminary, he got some scholarship money. And every step of the way doors would open and maybe some obstacles would present themselves, but invariably somehow they would be overcome and so eventually I sort of fell into a comfort zone about it. "Okay, he's going to do this, and what, Lord, can I do to be supportive?" And that's what I have endeavored to do: to be supportive, to be prayerful, to offer my opinion if I thought that he was going about something a little forcefully or too laid back, you know, just to sort of be around there to...

SB: Keep him in line?

ND: [laughing] That's a very nice way of putting it.

SB: [laughing] I come from a family of strong women. I know how it-- I know what happens.

ND: You know I noticed lately that in conversations with different and various men, in different stages of life, if they're involved with a female, I've heard them say this week, "Oh, she's just so... strong willed." "Oh, when she makes up her mind about something, that's it." You know, so, I guess that's the way it is. Men need the woman to try and help them stay in balance, because sometimes they'll get a little lopsided. So you just need, they need someone to help keep in balance.

SB: So that was kind of how you approached Reverend Dixon's... transformation into the actual Reverend.

ND: [overlapping] Yes, yes. I think he has transformed-- I think he has been able to take some of the skills that he had as a teacher and as a band leader that has been so much involved our journey through this life, that I haven't been able to speak to. But I know that, um, that his administrative abilities and his teaching abilities and his-- he has a, he has this visionary outlook on life. I tend to be more, I guess, more contained. I will look ahead some, but I don't envision as far and as wide as he seems to. And I think that has been helpful to him in his ministry and I have found that he has a lot of faith. Sometimes, and I thought that I was more spiritually developed than he was at one point, but I have come to believe that he probably has a greater depth of faith than I do. Because I at one point had felt a call on my life but for whatever reason, I didn't have the faith, I didn't have enough... I would say trust in God, because I think we as Christians... um... sometimes talk... um... about things, and we profess faith... but when we're really put to the test our faith really isn't as strong as it should be. And that's what I believe about myself. So I have determined that maybe the call that I

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felt on my life was not so much a call for me to go into ministry as it was a call for me to make myself available to Nathaniel and the ministry that he was embarking upon... in ministry.... I still sort of wrestle with that, trying to determine if... if... if I did ignore a calling that I probably... that maybe would have been... um... and maybe I haven't failed that calling. Maybe I have, maybe I haven't failed in receiving that call. But I, you know, I just feel a little torn, a little tension about it. I won't say that for certain that I missed it, but I won't say that I'm not doing ministry at some level.

SB: Well that was actually one of my biggest questions, just because I was curious about how... about your role within the church. Just because, like, in my head, I was like, "Ah, she's like the First Lady of the church." You know, the Reverend's wife, you're the First Lady, so I wanted to know, like, kind of... and you said that you try to support Rev. Dixon and things like that, so... have you also... also what you're saying about your own ministry and things like that, have you done things with that within the church? Like have you started your own programs or...?

ND: Well I haven't started any programs. I'll tell you what. I think that my gift, my ministry gift, in my opinion-- and someone recently gave me an inventory. I was in a layspeaker's workshop during the weekend-- three days-- and I guess an inventory would help me to discern my gifts. But the thing that I have done... the things that I did do, ah, undertake, were an outgrowth of some of the retreats that I attended with Nathaniel, we went to bishops retreats. Bishop Wilkes did one, Schnase did one, and Terry Teykl did one, and those were the three that I recall because all three of those bishops retreats, times of refreshing, times of learning we brought back to the church. And the prayer room up there is from the idea from Terry Teykl. And that idea embraced because I do spend a lot of time praying and prayer is one way that I find it easy to be in ministry Being an intercessor, you can pray for any... you can meet all sorts, you can get involved in all sorts of lives and situations just by praying. So in that sense, that's one thing that I did. We read the book "Five" or "Seven Traits of..."

SB: Highly Effective Adults?

ND: Churches.

SB: Oh! That would make more sense. I'm like spouting my mother's books that she has in her office.

ND: Is your mom in ministry? A doctor, physician?

SB: No, she's a psychiatrist-- no a psychologist. She's actually a school psychologist so what you were saying about the special ed kids... I've always been, like, exposed to special kids more than normal, so I definitely understood.

ND: I used to teach the... I used to teach the EH population.

SB: The, uh?

ND: The emotionally...

SB: Okay, yeah.

ND: Because at one point you could teach across the board. You did special education you could teach every special ed category. But, um, that I guess is the one thing that I did attempt. It has been a good thing, I think. A lot of the kids, even the little kids would go up and pray and write down prayers in the book. And, um, it seems that it's not used as much as it was and I don't know if that is a good thing. Because-- what I think-- when I go up there sometimes I look and I, "Hm." At one point it was like, every, every day people were coming and people were praying and people were writing down prayers, it seemed as though life was... they were in the grips of things and now... I don't know if they found some other outlet to... you know, for that prayer time. But there's not as many prayers... I don't think the room is used as much as it was at one time. That's the other thing, I don't know. You can't ever pray too much but I... that was one thing that I did and.... You know, we have a pastor's spouses organization, clergy spouse organization, and one thing that we're kind of mindful of is that... the pastor is the pastor and we, you know... you're sort of in a fish bowl and you want to do things so as not to... cause, uh, friction, so you have to tread sort of lightly and try to be, I guess, unassuming and a little-- don't try to-- I don't try to spread myself around. I just try to be-- meet people, I try to treat all of the people with the same kind of grace and care and I try to stay out of the politics of the church, and I try not to be too opinionated. Sometimes I guess I do talk too much, and [unintelligible] tells me to, tells me, "You know, you gotta be quiet so the other people..." And I find it, sometimes... sometimes I'll just sit quietly but.... Basically I try not to be an intrusion, you know, into what he's trying to do. If I notice something, I might say, "Well, Nathaniel, you know, you might want to think about blahblahblah." You know, or I might remind him, "You know, did you notice this one hasn't been to church or that one" and "Maybe we need to go and visit over there." You know, he

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needs a-- sometimes he just needs someone to remind him and help him stay abreast of things.

SB: He does have a lot of stuff to do.

ND: He has a LOT to do. And you know, sometimes I think, "Wow." ...But it's hard to decide what should you push aside, what should you stop doing. Yeah, he was, you know, you have to try to affiliate with the political arena, with the business arena, be involved with the clergy and all the clergy from other denominations, and workshops, and you have to give pastoral care to your own congregation. People get sick, people want to get married, people die, people need a listening ear. There's a lot he has to do. And then, you know, the grants and the... just...on and on it goes. So that's why I say I'm not certain that that feeling that I had or that understanding or that inner knowing that "Norma, you gotta do this." We are all called-- I don't know what religion... what is your practice?

SB: I was raised Catholic, but I'm not sure...

ND: [overlapping] Okay, okay, so you grew up in...

SB: [overlapping] But I also grew up in-- yeah, yeah. But I also grew up in a Methodist church a little bit as well, because my dad was Methodist. So I was excited to come to a Methodist church, I was like, "Getting back to my roots, Dad."

ND: That's delightful. Listen.... As Christians we are all called to make disciples. We are all called to share what we know of God's greatness, his gracious acts in our lives. And so I feel some people are called to ordained ministry, pastoral leadership, and, you know, when I meet God, I believe that one day I will meet Him. And he might say to me, "Norma, you know, back in the 80s when you were wrestling so, you said, 'Oh Lord if you just take away this, take away all this pressure.'"-- It was almost like I was being pursued by a spirit, by the spirit of God. I mean it was over... it was just so... uh... dramatic, you know? And I felt, "Okay, if I just, if I go to layspeaker's school, that'll do it." It's a form of ministry but it's not ordained ministry and it's not being a pastor. I can't, you know... I can't be a pastor, I can't... I can't... you know, I'm not made out of the stuff that puts me in the position that Nathaniel and other people that I see-- that's not Norma. So I feel comfortable with my decision that I can pray, I can be an evangelist... evangelism chairperson, I can do Christmas caroling, I can visit the sick, I can call the sick, I can send a card, I can say encouraging words. If I see someone who's fearful and doubting that they have the ability to do it I have the... I have

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great compassion. I have intuition-- it's something-- God, he gave me this thing where I can enter into someone's situation and I can help people, I can assist people out of that gloomy dark place where they are. So I have some-- I consider that, well, I'm doing what I can do as a minister helping those who I encounter who are in a grip, a struggle, a trouble, out of that. And I think that that's what God requires of us as Christians. Just to be able to offer some help, some assistance, some hope. All is not lost. What he did for me, so long ago as a child: hope. "You're not alone. I can tell you, you're not alone. I know, because when I was a child I thought I was alone but the great God assured me in his way that I was not alone. And I believed him, I trusted that I was not alone." So when I got to college and I found myself... sitting in church one morning, with a lump here [indicates inner left elbow]. I had said to myself, "I'm not going to bother my mother about this. She's put aside the money, she's going to pay for my college education, I'll just go." One Sunday morning I was sitting in church and the preacher began to pray and he said, "Right now, somebody is being healed. Stand to your feet!" And as certain as that light is up there-- it was almost like a camera flash-- "It's you, Norma!" I stood up. When I got back to my seat, it was still there. Sunday night, I kept looking, it was still there. But I knew for a certainty that I had been healed. I had a work study job at another dormitory and that Monday at one o'clock I sat at the table at the reception desk, I did like that [strokes inside of elbow] and it was gone! It didn't manifest until Monday at one o'clock but I knew that Sunday, during that service, that God had touched my body and that whatever that was was gone. And so that's the kind of faith that... that little ten or seven year old girl in that sick room came to understand. And I can share that with other people who are sick in whatever way it might be.

SB: Wow. Does... you were talking a little bit about the politics of the church. Does anyone ever try to use you to get to Rev. Dixon? Are they ever like, "Norma! Norma, could you just... you know..."

ND: No, no, nobody has ever been that blunt, but you know sometimes I will hear... I will hear comments that are... just kind of thrown out in the air and they know that these ears are listening. So sometimes I will take those-- "You know, Nat, maybe you might wanna blahblahblahblah. And you know, you're just..." That happens, but it's not overt.

SB: It's not--

ND: Blatant, it's not overt. You know, there... and it's not about big things. "Oh, do we have to... where we going to have the... where's the food going to be served? Do we have to do it

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out there? Looks like everything is being done out there now, can't we do it someplace else?"  
"You think maybe it would be okay to change the venue." [coughing] Excuse me. Things like that.

SB: Do you need any water or anything?

ND: No, it's okay. Um. I'm thinking, has anyone ever...? No. I can't recall. There have been times when... um... there have been times when people have... um... said, sort of been rude to Nat. I don't know, sort of like, just, you know, they're rude, thoughtless, I would say. More thoughtless. Sometimes it just seems like overt rudeness. That doesn't make me feel good but... I don't... I don't... I try not to respond to that. I think as a clergy spouse I have learned from the other ladies, other spouses, that the best thing to do is just keep your mouth closed and be gracious.

SB: Have you-- do you have a good... do you have, like, a network of... You said there was like an association of clergy spouses, so do you have like a friendship network, a network of friends with them?

ND: I don't have a network of friends, per se, with them. But I do have a network of friends. They are women from my former and I'm in a birthday club with them. And we text and email and talk and chitchat. One of them works at the conference center and the others are just ladies who are very spiritual, who are very... um, they have an ear, they'll listen to what I... you know, if I have something I need to share. I have a sister and I have friends back in North Carolina, we stay on the phone. I'm not certain if it's the clergy spouses organization... sometimes it's... and I trust them I guess. But I guess, as I say this I realize I probably, I don't. Probably I don't trust them in the way that I should. They have a meeting, I'm pretty sure at least once a year, a special meeting. It's usually in October, but I work at the music school and I have yet to not work at the music school to attend but one year I vow, I pledge that I will go to that meeting. But they have also a gathering when we go to annual conference and I do generally join them for lunch and they're very nice women. Very lovely women. And some of them have been clergy spouses a long time, some are young and hot headed. I get tickled when I hear the younger ones ranting about what they said and what the ladies did and what comment they made and then the older ones try to say, "Well now you know you can't do that, you have to just do it like this. You can't say that." We have lunch together and then we sing. We sing, um... a selection right before dinner-- yeah, right before... it as probably after dinner. Maybe it was right before we close for the evening

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session on that Friday, we generally do that. "Pass it On" we sang one year. We sang, other songs... [singing] He came from heaven to Earth, to show the way, from the Earth to the sky...

SB: Oh! I don't remember the title of it, but it's one of... I like it when we sing it!

ND: "We Lift Your Name High."

SB: Right! I was like, "I know it! I do!" So, that's a good, it's like a... advice....

ND: [overlapping] It's a network, yes, it's a network. You can network with them and they are genuinely Christian women and all-- everything they have ever said to me, any advice, any tip, anything they've said I've always tried to, you know, incorporate in my life and use it. They usually have at that annual gathering, in October, they always have a guest speaker who can speak to some of the situations that we as clergy spouses might encounter. And they are always open. I have their numbers and if I really really need them I... they're just a phone call away. It's a valuable, you know, it's a valuable relationship to have, although I don't take advantage of it as, probably, as much as I should.

SB: Well, you do have your other... you have another network.

ND: Yes, that other network, we go out to lunch. Birthdays are scattered throughout the year so we get together and go out to a restaurant and we gift each other. Sometimes it's a surprise. Somebody goes on a trip they'll bring gifts for every-- seven gifts for... and we draw names and we'll have, like, a secret friend. At the last gathering we'll exchange gifts, that'll be in August and we'll start over again in October.

SB: Okay, is there anything else you want to... if you want, if you are going to end up putting this in the BAAHP, is there anything you want to preserve for posterity?

ND: Okay. Yes. I have had a very... uh... blessed journey on this Earth. I believe that we were all placed here for a reason, and I sometimes reflect on how... God has worked to bring this little person to this time and place, 2012. When I think about how far my people came from Africa, somebody-- I always tell my children and grandchildren, I'm sorry, my children and my sister-- somebody made it across the Atlantic. It was probably a very horrible journey and... but someone made it. My great-grandparents, their parents I know of Nero and Sara... that was my great-mother's, those were my great-grandmother's parents. And somebody made that journey. Then when we got here they were slaves in South Carolina and it was

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harsh, because Nero lost an eye. And we speculate that Nero's eye was probably lost... uh... during, uh, probably some harsh treatment that he received as a slave. I also know that I have some European stock in me. I know that from my hometown, my grandmother-- my paternal grandmother-- knew of her mother Rachel's... father. He was... I'm not certain if I should say the name.

SB: You don't have to say anything you don't want to.

ND: Okay. He was known and... um... I think that might be part of the reason why some of the family was able to prosper, you know?

SB: Do you think that's where the last name Leak came from?

ND: Um. Maybe. The name was a different name, though.

SB: Oh, okay. You're pretty sure that wasn't where that came from.

ND: That's not where it came from.... Through it all, I think that all those pieces that go into the puzzle of this little person sitting here, Norma Dixon-- Norma Leak Dixon! I just say, "God, thank you. I thank you for the people that you preserved through the terrible turmoil of slavery and I thank you for those people from the other race that I don't know who they are, but they all contributed something to my being here. And so I'm grateful." And I have learned in this journey of life that all people have a value, that all there's never that "Oh those are horrible people." There are good people in every race, there are people who are bad in every race. So I've learned to accept people for the fragile beings that I we are and I try my best not to be too hard on people. Because I experienced that myself. Not being hard upon. There were times when someone could have been hard on me but they weren't, so I try to give that back to other people, I try not to be too hard on people. And I try to be compassionate and I try to exhibit the traits that Christ would exhibit in this world to people. And whatever good I can do to whomever I can do it to, for, or with, I try to do that. I know that... um... time?

SB: No, no! You can talk as long as you want.

ND: [overlapping] Time is running and running.

SB: [overlapping] I'm just double checking what it is.

ND: [laughing] Okay, time is running short. I hope that I have been of some assistance in your project...

SB: Thank you, thank you for doing this as well.

ND: ...along this way. The church here and the church and God... the central thing of my life is I believe that... I am just an agent of God in this Earth and that he has brought me here to this place and that eventually this too will pass and I will move on to some other place in my time. And...that's about it.

SB: Okay, thank you, thank you so much.

ND: Did I answer the essential questions?

SB: Yes, yes. And I'm actually think now, about... my professor's gonna kill me because I didn't ask you like basic questions like when you were born.

ND: Oh I was born February 1, 1950.

SB: Okay, let's see what else. Um... and you were... maiden name was Leak. Let's see... is there anything else? I'm hoping she's not going to kill me. She's going to be like...

ND: I had two siblings as well.

SB: Right, right.

ND:I had two sisters, one was older, one was younger. My younger sibling died in a car wreck at the age of what, seventeen or eighteen?

SB: Oh wow.

ND: That was... so we two survived, my sister and I.

SB: Yeah.

ND: No brothers.

SB: No brothers?

ND: Mm-mm, never had a brother.

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SB: You're not missing out on much, let me tell you. As a little sister... you're not... Okay, um, I think that's pretty much it. Thank you again for letting me interview you. I'm going to stop the... I don't know how it works.