

Black Archives of Mid-America / Kansas City Public Library Oral History Collection (AC12)

Interview #35: Hughes, Mamie

Interviewer: Edward Scott

Date: 05/05/1976

Length: Part 1, 61:30; Part 2, 48:20

Summary:

00:00 – 05:28: Discussion of Ms. Hughes' family background. Ms. Hughes was born May 3, 1929, in Jacksonville, Florida. Ms. Hughes' parents were teachers in Jacksonville, Florida. Her father taught in rural schools where he had to assume many roles, e.g. teacher, social worker, medical worker. Ms. Hughes' maternal grandparents lived in Jacksonville, Florida. Her maternal grandfather was self-educated but eventually went back to school and became a teacher. Ms. Hughes' paternal grandparents lived in Clearwater, Florida. Her paternal grandparents were laborers, but they valued education and worked hard so their children would receive a good education.

05:28 – 12:40: Ms. Hughes discusses the pride her parents and teachers felt in the struggles and accomplishments of African Americans. Her parents showed her that while they did not have a lot of advantages, they made the most of what they did have. All four of her grandparents were children of slaves. They all had a sense of pride in being involved in the building of America. Ms. Hughes notes that in her segregated school, the black teachers taught black history and corrected the mistakes found in "official" histories written by whites.

12:40 – 16:17: Discussion of James Weldon Johnson and his brother, who lived in Jacksonville, Florida. Ms. Hughes' grandparents knew the Johnsons. Ms. Hughes also discusses meeting Mary McLeod Bethune as a child.

16:17 – 18:16: Ms. Hughes discusses her schooling. She attended segregated schools in Jacksonville, Florida. She attended Stanton High School in Jacksonville, Florida; she graduated in 1945. Ms. Hughes attended Fisk University and graduated in 1949. She moved to Kansas City, Missouri, in 1949 when she got married.

18:16 – 21:45: Discussion of Ms. Hughes' experience in Harlem. She lived in Spanish Harlem for a short time. There were a variety of people living in the area, e.g. Spanish speaking people. Schools were better than in the South. Ms. Hughes also discusses her family's socio-economic status.

21:45 – 25:58: Ms. Hughes discusses the influence of her grandmother and her grandmother's friend Eartha White. Ms. Hughes describes Ms. White's welfare

work. Ms. White gave her a sense of pride and opportunity in helping others. Helping others is more than a responsibility, it is a duty.

25:58 – 28:00: Discussion of Ms. Hughes' religious experience. She was baptized in the Baptist faith. Ms. Hughes had friends who were Catholic, and after about ten years she completed the training necessary to be baptized into the Catholic Church.

28:00 – 31:58: Ms. Hughes discusses her experience in Mississippi. Ms. Hughes came to Kansas City in 1949, and she remained there until 1954, when she moved to Mississippi. Ms. Hughes describes the blatant racism, poll taxes, and poverty in the state. She was impressed by the poor people who worked so hard to pay the poll tax because of their desire to vote.

31:58 – 37:04: Discussion of African American schools in Mississippi. Black schools in Mississippi were consolidated. There were multiple buildings in a compound that served the broader rural area. There were about one thousand children in the school, seventy-two in Ms. Hughes' classroom. The school year was planned around the cotton crop. Ms. Hughes describes the white schools and the unequal conditions at the black schools.

37:04 – 42:11: Ms. Hughes describes the commitment among members of the black community in Mississippi to get children educated. They felt a responsibility to help others advance. Ms. Hughes notes that right now, people are getting too comfortable and forget the struggle of others that allowed them to get to where they are now.

42:11 – 46:42: Discussion of Ms. Hughes' experience back in Kansas City. Ms. Hughes returned with her husband and children to Kansas City in 1955 and worked for the federal government's money order department. She went back to teaching but became a homemaker when she had more children. Ms. Hughes also did volunteer work. Ms. Hughes got involved in politics around the time of the city's referendum on public accommodations and the fair housing ordinance. She came to the recognition that elected officials are in a position to make decisions and that perhaps she could contribute to the wellbeing of the African American community in Kansas City.

46:42 – 51:44: Ms. Hughes discusses becoming a candidate for Jackson County legislator in 1972. Ms. Hughes had the backing of Freedom, Inc. The organization was really at its strength at this time, encouraging African Americans to vote. This was essential in getting the public accommodations ordinance passed.

51:44 – 53:48: Discussion of Freedom, Inc. Ms. Hughes notes that expectations for the organization continue to change, and that is a good thing. The founders of Freedom, Inc. recognized that the community needed people elected who would respond the community's needs.

53:48 – 54:36: Discussion about Richard Tolbert. Mr. Tolbert was a member of Freedom, Inc.

54:36 – 61:30: Continued discussion of political goals. Ms. Hughes says the main goal is still to serve the black community. African Americans are still at the bottom of the economic scale, so creating employment opportunities is important. Good education and public schools in the inner city must also be a priority. Individual candidates have special concerns, e.g. prison conditions. Ms. Hughes is particularly concerned about older people and public housing. She also describes efforts to fight high utility rates.

61:30: End of tape one.

00:00 – 02:45: Continued discussion of utility rates and the process of political action.

02:45 – 07:32: Ms. Hughes discusses her legislative district, which goes from 9th Street to 43rd Street and from Troost Avenue to Jackson Street. Ms. Hughes also discusses property tax issues and reassessment. She notes that the people do not trust government and therefore do not want to push for a reassessment of their property taxes.

07:32 – 16:52: Discussion of the value of the Model Cities Program for educating the community about their rights. Ms. Hughes describes the need to educate citizens about the reassessment process.

16:52 – 23:15: Ms. Hughes discusses social welfare programs. She would like to see more of the restrictions on welfare removed. Ms. Hughes notes that there will be some people who take advantage of the welfare system, but there are people who need welfare assistance. Ms. Hughes believes the welfare system needs to be rethought.

23:15 – 28:50: Discussion of gender equality. Ms. Hughes believes African Americans will benefit from passage of the Equal Rights Amendment. Black women, as women, have their own problems. Ms. Hughes discusses white women's approach to gender equality and notes that equality encompasses all races and all genders.

28:50 – 30:44: Ms. Hughes discusses some of the people she respects. Nikki Giovanni is a person she admires. Ms. Hughes respects those who are helping human beings.

30:44: End of side one.

30:44 – 31:57: Continued discussion of people Ms. Hughes respects. She respects those who put community first, like her father and mother who dedicated their lives to teaching.

31:57 – 35:26: Discussion of crime. Ms. Hughes is most troubled by black-on-black crime. She describes her experience of working with Planned Parenthood and those concerned that the organization is trying to keep the African American population from growing. Ms. Hughes notes it is easier for men to make those charges than women.

35:26 – 40:19: Discussion about engaging the entire Kansas City community in human rights. Ms. Hughes notes the importance of getting people interested in helping others and uniting under that cause. Projects are important for uniting people. When people unite, they can overcome hardships.

40:19 – 45:12: Ms. Hughes discusses the importance of trust when trying to unite people. She notes the need for those African Americans who have succeeded to stay in and help the community.

45:12 – 47:14: Discussion of the Nation of Islam in Kansas City. Ms. Hughes believes the Nation of Islam is an example of a “total community,” with people gathering their energies together to reach a common goal.

47:14 – 48:12: Conclusion of the interview.

48:12: End of tape two.

Index Terms:

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 Equal Rights Amendment
 Freedom, Inc.
 Giovanni, Nikki
 Hughes, Mamie
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 Jacksonville, Florida
 Johnson, James Weldon
 Kansas City, Missouri
 Mississippi
 Model Cities Program
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 Politicians
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Summary compiled by Tyler Janke, April 2014. Edited by Michael Sweeney, Collection Librarian, May 2014.