

ZEPHYRHILLS ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Frankie McKenzie

Recorded December 4, 2018

Frankie: Don't ask me a lot of questions, Steve.

Steve [Spina]: Tell us your name and where you were born.

Frankie: My name is Frankie May Willis McKenzie, and I was born in Dade City.

Steve: Frankie, tell me about your grandparents. They were the first African-American family to live in the city limits of Zephyrhills.

Frankie: That's correct.

Steve: And they came here for a job with the railroad?

Frankie: My grandfather did.

Steve: They moved here from North Carolina—

Frankie: —No, South Carolina.

Steve: South Carolina. And they came here to work on the Seaboard Air Line Railroad in Zephyrhills?

Frankie: My grandfather did.

Steve: Where did they live when they got here?

Steve: Well, I guess they had a place on the train for him to live at that point, and then my grandmother came, and it was houses that they lived in. It was off of Seventh Street.

Steve: Right by where the Village Inn is?

Frankie: No. A little north of that, over by AutoZone, maybe. Up in that area, where that holding pond is.

Steve: Interesting. So how many people lived there? Do you know?

Frankie: There were three homes. I can't remember exactly. I know my grandparents were in one, and I know that my uncle, at one point, was in one, but I don't remember who the other family was.

Steve: So you were born in Dade City? Did you ever live on Seventh Street?

Frankie: No. My family—my mom, my dad, my sisters—lived out in Smith Grove. That's off of Fort King [Road]. That's the Smith family. My parents used to work for the Smith family.

Steve: What did your dad do?

Frankie: He used to work in the orange grove, spraying the fruit, doing whatever they had him doing out there.

Steve: And what did your mom do?

Frankie: My mom did housework. She used to clean for the Smiths.

Steve: Okay. And then your dad died when you were young?

Frankie: Yes. My dad passed away at the age of 42. We moved the next year from out in Smith Grove over to Krusen Quarters.

Steve: Okay. And that's this specific area now, right by the railroad tracks—between South Avenue and Sixth Avenue or so.

Frankie: Yes.

Steve: What was housing like here?

Frankie: Well, at that point, we thought it was pretty good. We had one bedroom, living room, bathroom, and a kitchen.

Steve: And what did your mom do after that?

Frankie: She always did housework.

Steve: Where did you go to school when you were young?

Frankie: I went to Moore-Mickens.

Steve: Okay. So did you have Ms. Bessie [Barefield] as a teacher?

Frankie: No. No, no.

Steve: Okay. So you went to Moore Elementary?

Frankie: Right. And then Mickens High School.

Steve: Okay. And then what year did you transfer to Zephyrhills High School?

Frankie: I transferred my junior year. I went to school at Mickens up to my junior year. I transferred in 1966 and 1967 to Zephyrhills High School.

Steve: Okay. So you were one of the first classes to integrate Zephyrhills High School.

Frankie: No, no, no. Charles Davis and some more graduates were the first ones to graduate from Zephyrhills High School.

Steve: Okay. You were the second year. What was it like when you transferred there?

Frankie: It was *rough*.

Steve: Explain that.

Frankie: When I'm saying rough, I mean it was very racist.

Steve: Yeah. So you were there, but you weren't accepted?

Frankie: Not by a lot of them. But most of the young men...we got along pretty well.

Steve: You were a flirt?

Frankie: I was a flirt. I was a flirt.

Steve: And what did you do after you graduated high school?

Frankie: I went to school in Ocala to be a beautician, and I didn't like that, so I got married and moved to Tallahassee.

Steve: What did you do in Tallahassee?

Frankie: I was just nothing.

Steve: So a home-maker. Where was Anissa born?

Frankie: In Lakeland.

Steve: Oh, okay. She was born when you came back here?

Frankie: I got married in 1967. October of '67. Anissa was born in December of 1968 in Lakeland.

Steve: Okay. And then you moved to Tallahassee?

Frankie: I went back to Tallahassee.

Steve: Oh, okay. You came home to have Anissa.

Frankie: I came home to have Anissa.

Steve: When did you come home for good?

Frankie: I think Anissa was probably about two.

Steve: Okay. And then did you come home and live with your mother?

Frankie: Yes, with my mom.

Steve: And you lived right next door to where you live now?

Frankie: Yes.

Steve: How long did you live there?

Frankie: Oh, from 1956 until 1967. And then, after I was married, I got a divorce. Then I came back to live at my address over there.

Steve: That was called Giles Road at the time, right? After your family?

Frankie: I don't remember the name of the road. I do remember it being Kennedy.

Steve: Wasn't Airport Road called Giles Road?

Frankie: Yes.

Steve: After your family?

Frankie: After my grandparents.

Steve: What was it like living in Zephyrhills as you got older? We had talked with Ed. He said that it was very separate.

Frankie: It was separate, mostly. A lot of blacks applied for different jobs in Zephyrhills, and they just wouldn't give the blacks a chance at one point.

Steve: So where did you work then? You ended up going to Tampa to work?

Frankie: I ended up still here in Zephyrhills. Billy Coleman—I knew him from high school—tried several times to get Sharry Boldt, who was the manager over at customer service, to hire me, but it didn't pan out. It just...

Steve: It was still too early.

Frankie: It was still too early. It's *still* too early.

Steve: When did you get hired by the city?

Frankie: I think it was 1995, because my mom passed away in 1994.

Steve: And you were the first African-American woman—

Frankie: —to work at City Hall in Zephyrhills.

Steve: What was that like? How were you accepted then?

Frankie: Everybody seemed to be accepting, except a lot of customers gave me a hard time.

Steve: I remember where a customer wouldn't let you wait on them.

Frankie: Yeah. That happened a couple of times. Like they didn't want that black lady waiting on them.

Steve: So what was it like growing up here as a child? You said you lived in Krusen Quarters. Did you know that it was really separate at that time?

Frankie: I knew it was separate, but we did the best that we could to get along with one another around our area. Now, we did have a few white friends, because my mom used to work for some that had kids, like Lance Smith—I think he's on the city council still in Zephyrhills. I graduated high school with his aunt, and we always got along with the Smiths, because we were raised up with them and the Reutimanns. My mom used to work for the Reutimanns, and the Reutimanns and the Smiths were related.

Steve: Right. Tell me about going shopping or doing things like that in town. There's this chapter in the book *Zephyrhills A to Z*, where your grandmother talked about having to come in the back doors of stores, along with different things that were part of the Jim Crow era. Do you remember those days?

Frankie: Uh-uh.

Steve: That was before your time. Tell me about your aunt. You said you had an aunt that worked for a family, and she had to quit. What happened in that situation?

Frankie: She didn't have to quit. She quit on her own.

Steve: She felt obligated.

Frankie: Right. Because, when she was doing some cleaning at this particular house, she found a Ku Klux Klan outfit that the husband had. That's when she decided that was it. She quit in the middle of the day and didn't go back.

Steve: And you said that you remembered they had a burning cross at the railroad tracks at Sixth Avenue. What was that incident about? Do you remember why they did it?

Frankie: That was just part of the K.K.K., I guess.

Steve: It was just kind of a warning sign.

Frankie: Yeah.

Steve: How old were you when that happened?

Frankie: I don't remember, but I know I was extremely young and I was living over there at the corner of Kennedy.

Steve: What was it like raising a daughter here, then, in some of those situations? By the time Anissa got to school, were things different?

Frankie: Yes. Very much so.

Steve: What do you think about Zephyrhills now, overall? In your lifetime, what kind of change have you seen?

Frankie: There's been a very big change, but the change that we've seen is simply because of the city manager. He made a big difference to the black community, along with the white community—a big change. That would be Mr. Steve Spina. Well, it's the truth! It's the truth.

Steve: *[flustered]* How so? What did he do? Elaborate on that.

Frankie: Well, he tried to do a lot of things for the blacks, I think. Like with the streets being cleaned up—this whole area around here being cleaned up. It's because of Steve.

Steve: Where did you go to church?

Frankie: I go to church, and I've always gone to church, at Victorious Church of God in Christ—that's in Lumberton.

Steve: How big of a role has the church played in your life?

Frankie: [It's always played a role], simply because of the pastor preaching and saying that we have to stick together and put our faith in God.

Steve: And did you see the church playing a large role in the black community, as a focal point for social activity and religious activity?

Frankie: Somewhat, yes. The church played a big role in our life because they tried to do things as a community, for everybody to get together and do things together and come to church and pray together.

Steve: So the church was a religious center, but also a social center?

Frankie: Right.

Steve: There's a number of small black churches in the area.

Frankie: Yes, there are a number of a small black churches in our community.

Steve: So, tell me how the black church played a role in your life, in the community.

Frankie: I guess the church that prays together, stays together.

Steve: Okay. Your church—Victorious Church—has a lot of McKenzies in it. It's kind of a family church, but it's more than that.

Frankie: Yeah. It's more than just a family church. It's just that the McKenzies have always been there.

Steve: And a McKenzie is the preacher. Then, off of Sixth Avenue, the Mathises kind of have a family church.

Frankie: Exactly.

Steve: And Macedonia [Missionary Baptist Church] is kind of a neighborhood church. Can you talk about that a little bit? Why would there be three different churches?

Frankie: They are all different denominations.

Steve: Oh, okay.

Frankie: Victorious is more of a Pentecostal church. Reverend [Adrian] Gay [at Macedonia] has a Baptist church, and the Mathises's church is almost like a Pentecostal church.

Steve: Okay. You have a lot of cousins here. Your family settled here in the 1930s, and there were five children in your mother's family.

Frankie: Right.

Steve: So, how often do you see your cousins these days?

Frankie: I see them basically every day in passing.

Steve: Oh, so you're still a tight-knit family even now. Tell me about having so many cousins. Your family is a little more tight-knit than if you just had brothers and sisters. We were talking about Dolores earlier, and how she was like a sister to you, since you grew up together. Talk about that a little bit, how being in kind of a close-knit neighborhood and close-knit family brought you together. How did that work?

Frankie: Well, we used to do things together, and I was real close to the Giles [side of the family]—very close—but we kind of weaned away from one another. No reason; its just growing up, and, just like with Dolores, we were just right there all the time.

Steve: Were you a little closer to your mother's side of the family, do you think?

Frankie: No, I think it's even Steven.

Steve: Okay. So how many cousins do you have that live around here?

Frankie: Hooooo. Hmmm. It's a lot. There might be about 30.

Steve: Okay, so there's still a lot of family in the area.

Frankie: That's on both sides. The Willises and the Giles.

Steve: Okay. I remember when Ms. Irene [Dobson] suggested that we change Sixth Avenue to Martin Luther King. You worked at the city then, and it went pretty smoothly, initially. Then there was some backlash from the community. How did you feel when a lot of people started protesting against the Martin Luther King Street name?

Frankie: I felt bad about it, because I didn't see any reason why they didn't want it to be named Martin Luther King—but I guess they just didn't want a black person's name to be on a busy street like Sixth Avenue.

Steve: Did you think it was a step back?

Frankie: It was a step back plus a slap in the face.

Steve: Have you seen more changes to bring you back around, where we've made some more improvements as we've gone along since then, or do you think that kind of slowed things down for a little?

Frankie: I think it slowed things down, changing it back from Martin Luther King to Sixth Avenue. I think that's why a lot of the blacks on Sixth Avenue didn't want to get into the city limits.

Steve: So, it impacted the annexation efforts?

Frankie: Exactly.

Steve: Because right after [the street name issue], we did talk about annexing it.

Frankie: Right.

Steve: And people said, “No, we don't want a part of that.”

Frankie: That's right. And that was one of the main reasons why they didn't want to—because of that.

Steve: We were doing the talk, but not the walk.

Frankie: Well, it's not just you guys doing the walk: it's because a couple of people that were on city council evidently didn't want it done as well, because they voted against it.

Steve: Okay.

Production: So, you felt like the community had started to unite a little bit, and then all of a sudden there's this break. Could you talk a little bit about that idea?

Frankie: Well, it was a real slap in the face, though, because we thought we were gonna have a Martin Luther King [Street]. Then, once it was all set and ready and they had voted on it, city council had to vote and say no, they didn't want that. It was a slap in the face.

Steve: It caused a lot of dissension. Do you remember when they were picketing City Hall, protesting?

Frankie: Oh yeah. They had the signs up, and, after work, I went out there and I petitioned it as well.

Production: Do you have any memories of that? Could you describe those protests to us?

Frankie: Just that we were holding up signs and picketing. I don't remember exactly what the signs were saying, but I know that they were picketing [City Council].

Steve: I remember that one sign said “Quiet No More.” Do you remember when we had the council meeting? The chambers filled up, and there was a lot of a discussion and dissension. Did you go to those meetings?

Frankie: I went to one. When I was there, I had my eyes focused on one particular city council member, because I was really disappointed in her vote. She voted “yes” in the beginning and then she changed it and said “no.” My focus was just on looking her in her eyes, but she wouldn't look back at me.

Audrey: Do you feel like changes were made from their initial votes more to please the overwhelming crowd? To please the majority?

Frankie: Yes.

Steve: I think what you're saying is that you hadn't really asked for too much from the city government, and then [this happened]. Can you describe that?

Frankie: Well, it wasn't that we were asking for that. It was just that it was given to us and then taken away from us, and that hurt. That was like a slap in the face.

Steve: How would you describe life in Zephyrhills today?

Frankie: It's good.

Steve: Are you glad you stayed?

Frankie: I've been here all my life so...might as well.

Production: Do you have any sense of pride in being from Zephyrhills?

Frankie: I am proud of being from Zephyrhills.

Steve: You've raised your daughter and your grandson here.

Frankie: Yes.

Steve: And they both have been successful.

Frankie: Very successful. And I have a nephew, [Marcus McCants], who doesn't live in the city limits of Zephyrhills. He lives out in Wesley Chapel now. They graduated from Zephyrhills High School and were very successful. My nephew [Ryan Pickett] on my ex's side has been very successful. He used to play with the Green Bay Packers.

Steve: What kind of business does Marcus have?

Frankie: My nephew has two Wingstop restaurants in Tampa—well, one's in Wesley Chapel, over by Target, and the other one is in Tampa off of Fowler [Avenue]. And he's in the process of opening up another Wingstop.

Production: I've been to the one on Fowler.

Frankie: Really?

Steve: And he used to have a barbershop.

Frankie: Yes. He used to have a barber shop, and he's fixing to open up another Wingstop. I think he's looking out in Lutz, but he's been very successful. Very.

Production: What do you think about Martin Luther King as a leader? Could you describe your thoughts?

Frankie: I thought he was a great man. That just sums it up: a great man.

Production: Was there anything in particular about him that stood out to give you that impression?

Frankie: To me, he was trying to get everybody to come as one, as a whole, and not be separated, saying, "Blacks on this side and the whites here." He wanted everybody to be as one.

Production: There's an irony there with the street renaming, right?

Steve: Yeah. The purpose of the street was to bring us together, and it divided us.

Frankie: And we really took a step way back.

Production: Yes. I heard your soap opera is about to start, so we'd better get going, but I want to ask a question: I'm 26 years old, so the whole time of us really being separate, I have a hard time imagining it. I mean, obviously there's always turmoil, even today, but that level of just outright, bold-faced segregation...I can't even imagine what that's like.

Frankie: It was bad. It was bad.

Production: What's one story or piece of information that you would give to me, or to my whole generation, to help us understand what that time was like?

Frankie: Basically, it was like a nightmare. When I first started going to school here in Zephyrhills, it was like, do we have to? But as time passed by, it started getting better. I had a few of my classmates that were just racist all the way around, but ninety percent of them treated me and my ex-sister-in-law very well.

Steve: Was Mae [Pickett] at school with you?

Frankie: She was classes behind me. Gloria [Brown] was with me. Gloria and I graduated together in 1967. Just like I was saying, one of my old classmates and I graduated in '67. Today, we still communicate every year, and his family sends me a Christmas card every year. Every year.

Steve: So there were positives in the process.

Frankie: Yeah. Yeah. But it's still gonna take a lot of time. Yeah.

Steve: Now, have you talked to Tyesen about things like that? Growing up segregated and integrating the high school?

Frankie: Oh yeah.

Steve: What, what, what did he think about it?

Frankie: He just said, "Grandma, I just can't believe things were like that back then." So I say, sweetheart, you just don't know.

Steve: So he appreciates the struggles you made that made his life a lot better.

Frankie: I try to let Tyson know how things were growing up and how it is now: a big difference. Like these little boys and girls: they have different races and they're going with this one and going with that one. I say, back in the day, Tyson, you couldn't do that. I said, yeah, they'd lynch you! And they would. But it's a lot different. A lot. He has his little friends. Back then, you couldn't even go visit your white friends, or your white friends couldn't come visit black friends. You couldn't do it.

Steve: There was a social scene at school, and then it was over when school was out. Everybody went to their own neighborhoods.

Production: Who do you think have been the most influential figures in the black community of Zephyrhills to help things move forward? Is there anybody who sticks out to you?

Frankie: He's deceased now, but Reverend [Eddie] Nunn.

Production: What did he do that helped move things forward?

Frankie: I don't know exactly what he did just to name out stuff, but he was a leader and he would go and talk to the city manager and get things done—what he thought was best for the community. Daniel Hill, and now Reggie [Roberts]: we look up to that. To me, they were just like a Martin Luther King.

Steve: I wish we had started this when Reverend Nunn was alive.

Frankie: I know. He was a good man. A very good man. But you just don't know. When I first started working up at the city, it wasn't pretty. It wasn't pretty. And I only worked with one person in the department that I worked in that showed prejudice. Just one, but everybody else, I won them over. I had to give them some charm, show them what charm was like, then everybody started coming around. But Mr. Spina. He was always, *always* [good to me], and I thank God for Steve.

Steve: *[emotional]* I'm going to cry.

Frankie: Awww! When Mr. Spina retired the first time, I just thought that I was gonna die. I was begging him to come back. His wife told him he needed to come back, and there were several other people who wanted Steve to come back. But this time, I'm not gonna tell him to come back. He deserves his retirement when it comes up this time, but I didn't want him to leave while I was there, because that other city manager that we had when they replaced Steve...oh, my God, it was a nightmare.

Audrey: We don't want him to leave now.

Steve: You're in good hands...this time.

Frankie: Yeah. You've got a good man coming in there, but he's not a Steve. Trust me.

Audrey: You think he's better looking, don't you?

Frankie: I'll plead the Fifth on that one.

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