

Sarasota County Water Atlas
Oral History Project
New College of Florida — Fall 2015

Interview with: Shelia Cassandra Hammond Atkins

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Interviewer: Kaylie Stokes

Shelia Cassandra Hammond Atkins was born in Manatee County in 1952. Although she was born in Manatee Co., she grew up in Newtown, Sarasota, where she attended high school during integration. Shelia has been a member of the Sarasota community for over six decades. She and her husband, former Newtown mayor Fredd Atkins, remain in Newtown. She currently works as a paraprofessional aide at Alta Vista Elementary.



Kaylie Stokes: Okay, can you start just by introducing yourself?

Shelia Atkins: Well, I'm Shelia Cassandra Hammond Atkins.

Stokes: And where were you born?

Atkins: I was born here in — well Manatee County, because when my mother and them came I think they lived in Manatee County, so I was born at Manatee Memorial Hospital in 1952.

Stokes: And why did your family move to Sarasota?

Atkins: The story goes [laughs]...My mother and father lived in Alabama, and the Caples — part of your school — was traveling North and they stopped in this restaurant my mother worked in. And my mother was a great cook, so Mrs. Caples asked my mother if she would like to come to Florida and be her cook. And so that's the reason my parents moved to Florida at some time later.

Stokes: I love that story. What kind of food did your mom cook?

Atkins: I tell you, my mother was the best cook. She was more like a gourmet cook because she's always been — when she moved to Florida she was a domestic cook, so she cooked great meals, like — when we were growing up we had leg of lamb served with mint jelly, cabbage rolls, stuffed peppers. You know, not your everyday ethnic food that we had in our neighborhoods. But we would have collard greens and black eyed peas on New Years. But mostly, you know, we would have those types of meals. Steak.

Stokes: So did you grow up wandering around the Caples' home? Did your family live on that property?

Atkins: Yes, we did. We lived in the carriage house matter of factly. And I wish I had a photo where my mother was holding me as a baby. Yes, I wandered around through the mansion as a little toddler. I remember the columns being so gigantic, the house really looked gigantic as a little girl and even on the grounds — matter of fact, I do have a picture with my mother sitting on the steps with me when I was a little girl there. Yes, I just had the run of the house, but my mother brought a babysitter down with them, so she kept me, but at times I would run around the house. Matter of fact, Mrs. Caples named me.

Stokes: Really?

Atkins: Yeah, my mother said she would have named me Deborah, and I was glad my name was Shelia instead.

Stokes: That's funny. So why did she end up naming you?

Atkins: Well, maybe she liked my mother and — I don't know the story, but my mother did tell me Mrs. Caples named me.

Stokes: And how long did your family live in the carriage house for?

Atkins: As I can remember, my sister, who was two years younger than myself, I know, probably until I was three, and then they moved out.

Stokes: That house is right on the water, did you ever go and play in the bay?

Atkins: Well, I was small.

Stokes: Yeah I guess if you were only three.

Atkins: Yeah I was small. There was pictures of my father walking with me near the water. Matter of fact, one time I fell in the water on the edge. I can remember that as a toddler. It wasn't deep, just right on the edge I fell in the water.

Stokes: And so then your family moved out of there and where did they move to?

Atkins: We moved in Newtown after they stopped — because my parents, every summer would leave too. When the Caples left, they left and went back to Alabama until they moved here when I was about maybe four. And we lived off of Church Street in a duplex. The person that owned the duplex was Dr. James' family, McElroy, and we lived next door until we moved. We stayed there maybe for a few years and then we moved into the public housing.

Stokes: Can you talk a little bit about what your family was like?

Atkins: We had a unique family. First I had a brother who was 18 years older than me, so he would come down and visit, you know, during the summer sometimes. But my family was a unique family. My dad, my mother — who were very stylish people — they didn't have a high school education, or even a middle school education. My dad, you know, back in the day, he didn't finish school, but my mother finished up to eighth grade. So, they both were domestic workers all their lives here in Sarasota. But they were a great family. We did family outings every Sunday. That was our outing — we would dress up after church and go visit most of their friends who lived in Bradenton. They had maybe a couple of — three families here in Sarasota. We would go to their homes every Sunday. Just rotate around. My sister and I, we'd play with the kids while my mother and father did the adult things. But as I remember, growing up we'd play games as a family, watch TV, you know. We had a good foundation.

Stokes: That's so important. What kind of games would you guys play?

Atkins: Cards, we'd play guessing games. You know, we would make up things. We still do that today, I do that with my children as well. You know, like charades and that kind of thing.

Stokes: So what was your mom like?

Atkins: When my mother was a — she liked to cook, so she would cook — like when we were going to school, elementary school, she would like to bring cakes and cookies to the classroom, you know, just being that type of mom. She always liked to give her — everything that she cooked, to the kids at school. Because everybody just raved over her cakes and her pastries that she used to make. And she was a great cook. She liked to dress, my mother was a sharp dresser. I think I can say I took after my mother. And my father. As far as dress is concerned. In those days she wore shoes and bags and hats. And she dressed my sister and I in matching. Although we were two years apart, we would have dresses with the kremlins back then — you don't know what a crinolines — you know what a crinolines slip is? Yeah that stands out? Yeah, so they would dress us that way whenever we would go places. You know, Easter, and Christmas. But she was a mother that — you know, we didn't have to cook but we could be in the kitchen with her. She liked being a mom. We had to learn how to iron, she was very neat, because back in the day we ironed sheets, we ironed my dad's hankies and his underwear [laughs] and pillowcases and stuff for ourselves, you know. I think she was bringing in how she was working in the homes of her employees, she brought it home to us. We had the best of everything, even though we were living in public housing, you know, but it was a great time back then.

Stokes: What was the public housing like? Like what was your neighborhood like?

Atkins: It was a fun neighborhood. We played in the summertimes, all kinds of games that the kids don't play now, like marbles, jackstones — you ever heard of springboard?

Stokes: No.

Atkins: Springboard is — we used to stack boards like this high, and then put a plank and then jump. You know how they do in the circus? Jump on one end and you go high in the sky. We did that. It was dangerous but it was fun. We rolled in big tires, made mud pies. In front of our house was, like, the woods, so we would go out in the woods and campout, build forts and stuff like that.

Stokes: That sounds like a lot of fun.

Atkins: Yeah, we did that. We climbed trees.

Stokes: So what was your dad like?

Atkins: My dad? I used to love my dad cause I would get up with him every morning. That's why I'm an early riser today. At five o'clock he would get up before he goes to work, make him some coffee and toast and we would sit there together and dip our toast into our coffee. That was the best times with my dad. I did that, I got up with my dad and that was our time together. He was sort of quiet. But strict. I remember, when we had boyfriends, at certain time they had to — let me see — my dad used to go to bed with the chickens, we'd call it, by dark he's ready for bed and so he would walk around with his flashlight in the house at night, you know, but we had to be in the house by when the lights came on under the — you know the pole light, we had to be in the house. But, you know, he was fun, and he used to tell us funny stories about his childhood. But not many stories, because there's only one story that I remember, that my sister and I we would laugh. He used to tell us about this lady with a peg leg. She had a wooden leg, and the lady was sitting on the bed and he never saw her leg but he said and I put my hand there and all of the sudden I said, 'What is this?!' and you know we as kids would just laugh about it. Those kinds of stories. He was a character. He liked cars. So every two years we were getting a new car. My mother, she'd say, 'Well why do you need another car, John? This one is fine.' But he loved his cars, that's what he liked. So every two years we were getting a new car. And so we were riding in style.

Stokes: Nice, dressed in style and riding in style.

Atkins: That's right.

Stokes: And what about your younger sister? What was she like?

Atkins: My baby sister, she was good. We were good as far as, you know, playmates. We'd play with our dolls, we were both big on dolls because we got dolls every Christmas and so we liked playing with dolls. We played house all of the time as well. Even with our friends around, around the neighborhood, they would come over. We played school and we just picked who was going to be the teacher for the day. My sister, she had her own friends as well. Especially in school, but at home we were together. We slept in the same room together and like I said, played with our dolls together.

Stokes: How would you describe yourself as a kid?

Atkins: I was a little scrawny kid. Tall and skinny. I was the tallest girl in my class, but I was a girl who really cared about people, even at an early age. I always never liked to see anyone hurting, so I would be the one, even going to school, you know, usually gravitate to my peers who were getting picked on, at some point and just being their friend. I was likeable. Some of my peers would come to me for advice, for some reason, I don't know why. I guess I always sounded like I had a sense of reference. Even at an early age, I can remember back in second grade, young girls were coming for me, asking for advice with boys. At that age, I said [laughs] they were so funny. But I was a good kid.

Stokes: How did you see that trait of caring for people, even at such a young age, translate throughout your life?

Atkins: Into who I am today and what I do. You know, when I was younger I said I only would like to be a nurse or a teacher. I wanted to be a nurse at first, and I did go to nursing — you know took some nursing classes, but I ended up teaching, because it gives me a sense of helping. I always knew I wanted to be a nurse or a teacher and so I am a teacher today.

Stokes: What was your school like?

Atkins: Oh, school was so much fun, in the early grades. We did a lot of, I guess, fun things, you know at that age I can remember, like assemblies there, we would do plays, we would do skits, games. We learned, I remember learning in third grade how to make, we made an apron with our hands, sewn with hands. Even in fifth grade, I learned how to crochet. We had very creative teachers, and back then the teachers were very good role models as far as introducing us to things. Like my fifth grade teacher, I can remember her introducing us to a lot of different cuisines, like we, like Chinese food one time and bringing chopsticks in and we were eating with chopsticks. Yeah it was good. Well, see, all the — well the Booker schools back then, we were looking forward to going, to like getting to junior high school because every year we would have the homecoming parade and that was big in our neighborhood, the homecoming parade. Because where I live now, the pond, where the pond is, that used to be the football field, so it was like right there, right there. So it was just a fun time in the whole neighborhood. Listening to the band, I mean really great bands. And then you know, we, during that time, we would assemble in the mornings for school, we would all go out in the little courtyard and do our pledge and prayer and all the announcements in the morning. It was fun. School was fun back then. And the teachers, they really cared about you, even though you got the paddle back then [laughs]. But it was worth it. You know kids stayed in school, for the most part. We had principles that really, went around to the homes, and you know, if they were missing school checked up on you and that sort of thing, so it was close knit. And teachers cared if you were learning. You know, made sure that you were getting a good education. Although we didn't have the best of books — because we got the leftovers, so to speak, you know. But it was good, we had a good time.

Stokes: So what kind of stuff would you do for fun when you were younger?

Atkins: Like I said, for fun in the neighborhood, we were outside, you know. In the summertime, even in the wintertime, we played together as groups of children. You know, we had as much of the run of the neighborhood but you know, you had your neighbors. We stayed kind of in our own little neighborhood, because there was a lot of kids there, but we did things as groups. You know, we'd play hopscotch, those were fun things. I tell you, I can go back to hopscotch, you know, going down to — we had a big canal — and going in there and catching crawfish, jumping the ditch, those are fun things, climbing the trees and eating tar that's falling off the roof of the house, eating that, eating starch [laughs]. We did some crazy things as kids, but you know, they were fun. And then as a teenager going to school, we had what they called the recreation center so we would, my parents would drive us down there, we couldn't walk, but they would drive us and we could go dance on Saturday night. And then they would come pick us up, and you know that was fun. And you know, in school we would have, like, talent shows. So I remember, this one group of girls, we were the Supremes, so we put on our clothes, matching clothes, and we would perform on stage. Those were fun times too.

Stokes: You guys would sing and dance?

Atkins: Yeah we would sing. I was even a cheerleader in junior high. Mhm, a junior high cheerleader. And that was fun, we had uniforms. I was even a major, well a drum major at one of the homecoming parades.

Stokes: Those parades sound really fun.

Atkins: They were really good. We made floats and just how they have homecoming kings and queens now, we, they had a process of the homecoming court and students would vote for you to see who would sit on the float. I ran once, but I lost, but it was ok, it was a neat experience. So, you know, it was good.

Stokes: Do you have any memories of the beaches or around water?

Atkins: Yes, um, well long ago, when my parents were living, we couldn't go to, like, Lido Beach, so we would have to travel all the way down to Venice to go to the beach when I was coming up as a youngster. But we did go on the water. Although, I can't remember exactly when we were allowed to go to Lido Beach or Siesta Key Beach but even though my mother worked on Siesta Key beach at one time, at some time, but we had to go to Venice. That was in, I guess in my younger days. And then, we would go to the skyway. And the skyway, you know, they had the black side and the white side. And so if you wanted to picnic, you had — our side was much smaller and not well kept. As most all things that...

Stokes: What do you remember thinking about that as a kid?

Atkins: Well, as a kid, I tell you the truth Kaylie, I didn't look at it that way, although it was that way. And my parents didn't talk about it as much, that was just the way of life and that's just what we did. Even traveling, when we would travel back to Alabama, now I realize, those were some trying, scary, times for my parents. But I didn't realize that as a child because they kept us, you know, sheltered, that was just the way of life. I remember us not even really stopping. We would try to travel, at the time we — we would pack our food in shoeboxes, whatever my mom cooked, so that we wouldn't have to stop into a restaurant. We did stop for gas. I remember, you know, going around to the back of the facility and it was just so terrible, just deep down. But used to just stop on the side of the road to use the bathroom sometimes. My parents just took toilet paper then, instead of stopping. And I can remember that. But as a youngster I didn't look at it like that. Until, you know when, you know — before desegregation — I looked at it a little more. Because, to me, I just didn't say, well why is this? But it was that way, it was really that way.

Stokes: Right, it was just the reality.

Atkins: It was just the reality. We had everything. Life was really good in our neighborhood as far as we was — I was concerned. We had everything, I never was hungry, not sad. It was good times to me. And my neighborhood was vibrant during those times. We had our stores, gas stations, and — it was just fun, it was fun. We had taxi cab service, and — you know, we couldn't go downtown area. Now, my husband lived Overtown. But we lived in Newtown area. But I just — I didn't view it as a hard time for me.

Stokes: Could you talk a little bit more about that strong sense of community that Newtown had?

Atkins: Oh yeah. It was just, you know, people were together, you know. You patronized the businesses. Like we had shoe cobblers, and we would take our shoes to the cobbler or to get them cleaned. People had a sense of community. Our community was cleaner, and people, you know, we had our churches, but people just seemed so much together then. It was just beautiful. You know, times got hard after — you know, at some point. But we didn't have some of the things that's going on now, you didn't see it as prevalent as it is now. I didn't see it. Although I wasn't — like my parents kept me at a certain distance, You know, like, as I got older I was able to walk up like what we call Martin Luther King now, it was 27th street at the time, and we could walk up there. And it was just fun, you would walk and you would go back home. But it was just — Newtown just seemed alive. It's still alive, don't get me wrong. You know, it's still alive, I still love the area.

Stokes: What do you think were some of the key things that made up the community?

Atkins: Well the schools, you had your schools. You know, we had great teachers, the churches, the churches like — at that time we had not as many churches as we have now, but you know you had Bethlehem, that's the church I grew up in. It was a big church which was over town. Then you had Payne Chapel which was another African American church in the neighborhood.

But, you know, people went to church — and people were going to college as well, out of the neighborhoods. There was — like I said, the teachers, they were giving us a great foundation. And the ones that went to college, they went to college, you know. Although the class sizes were smaller at some point — but I think my class, I think we were over two hundred and something students in our class when um — when desegregation came some went to Riverview and some went to Sarasota High. But that bond never, although they split us up, we still were together, you know, still.

Stokes: Yeah, so how did you see desegregation affecting the community? You know it was seen as this good thing but it was also divisive.

Atkins: Yeah, it was. Like, we thought it was going to be better but it really wasn't. I don't think it was really good for us. You know, after that, back in '67, that's when we went to Sarasota High or Riverview High, and so Booker High School — which was Booker Junior High School, because, you know, you were going there in sixth grade. They were doing away with all the black schools and they tried to do away with one — Amaryllis Park — which was the last one, and that's when we boycotted. I remember, we boycotted for maybe about a week, because they said, 'Ok, you got the high school, close that, now you want to close that and move it somewhere else.' And so the neighborhood stuck together and we went to church, you know, for school that week, and so they kept Amaryllis Park. And then Booker reopened as a magnet school back in the '70s, the year we graduated — the year I graduated from high school.

Stokes: So you were in high school during this time?

Atkins: Yes.

Stokes: What was that like?

Atkins: It was kind of rough, because it was something new. We didn't know what to expect. They didn't know what to expect from us. So it was kind of like butting heads, because you got some people that were not nice. But then on the other hand there were some trying to be nice, to reach out to us. It was all new for everybody. You know, here we'd been in black schools for all our lives and then, the mixture. What I saw was that — from the sports side of it, from the cheerleading side of it, from the band side of it, from all, everything. Because we were used to having our band, and now we have to mix, as far as the football players are concerned, now we have to mix and they may not have gotten a fair shot at their greatness at the time. And I remember like, the cheerleading, coming from an all black squad and now they got to try and find people of color to mix in with their cheerleader team, now. I think two of my classmates maybe got chosen, maybe, to be cheerleaders during that time. So it was a difference, you know, coming where you may not have gotten the ok pat on the back or the concern. Being at an all black school, the teachers, like I said, took you under their wing. So now, you kind of got to fend for yourself. You lost that cohesiveness.

Stokes: Yeah, I mean it sounds like you were being uprooted.

Atkins: Yes it was, yeah you were uprooted. It was a difference, it was a challenging time in our lives you know.

Stokes: What grade were you in during the first year?

Atkins: Tenth.

Stokes: Middle of high school too, that's hard.

Atkins: It was. It was challenging. And, you know, you didn't know all the stories that went on, but I'll tell you, I'm in the class of '70, and our class was a very strong class, strong willed class. Matter of fact we even started, within Sarasota High School, where I was, we started like a black — I forget what it was called — a union, in our group, for concerns that we were having at the school. Because everybody was not getting fair treatment. And so we did that. And as one of our reunions — I think it was our 40th reunion, because Paul Rubinfeld who was Pee-wee Herman was in my class. Now he was a neat guy. He was in theater and he was reaching out to us, and he still does today. I remember him calling my husband saying, 'Well, where's all the blacks when we have reunions?' So we made a concerted effort to come together — black and white — come together and talk about those times when we were in high school. Tell you the truth, we found out a lot of things that were going on that I didn't know what was going on. Like one of the smartest girls in our class, she was turned away from being in the National Honors Society, and she was one of the smartest girls at Sarasota High at the time. They said, 'You really don't need to be on this.' And we didn't even know she was then turned down, and she was capable, and, you know, she had higher honors than some of the others. So we found out a lot of things that we just shook our heads and said 'Wow, this was happening to me, and this was happening..' I didn't have a whole lot of problems, because, like I said — you know, people talking down to me or anything — because I just get along with anybody. I'm the type of person that just tries to make everything work. Wherever I am, whatever situation I'm in.

Stokes: That's a good skill to have.

Atkins: It is. Although you know, sometimes it's sad because it still happens today. It still happens today, that you're slapped in the face because you are the color of your skin. Even today... So those were times, but we made it through and graduated.

Stokes: Do you think that that was kind of — well, you were talking about how Newtown had this really vibrant community, and it still does, but it's different. What do you think is some of the cause for this change and what are the biggest changes?

Atkins: Well, you have to look at the communities when — I think when drugs really came in the community, I think people, more people are afraid now. And now our community is so meshed, we have a lot of different ethnic groups in our community now. So it's sort of meshed.

Then you have people, like some of the older people who were here, they're dead and gone now, so there's a changing of the guard so to speak. So when people move out, you know, usually the ones that go off to college they don't — some come back and work in the community and then some don't. And you know our community — like my husband was the first African American on the city commission, so we still, you know, we still have to fight our way to get good jobs or to, to make a stand or statement in our community at large. Matter of factly they had to — to get anyone elected on the city commissioner they had to go to court. Back in '79 they had to go to court and say, 'Hey, rename the districts so maybe somebody will have a chance of getting on the commission.' Which they did and my husband won in 1985. And so it has been someone of color on the commission since then, and also, this time we have someone out of our district, in a different district, that's African American as well. But as you can still see, Sarasota is a tough place. We don't have anybody on the school board still. So it's still segregated in a sort of way. It is, a whole lot. But, you know, our community is — I like the changes. You know, when my husband got on the commission, the aesthetics of Newtown changed a lot with him and the commission itself saying, 'Ok, let's put some money here so we can beautify it, that part of our community.' So, you know things like that, I see those changes.

Stokes: What's it been like being on the inside of this family that's been politically active within the community? He was the mayor?

Atkins: Yeah, he was the mayor, he's been mayor three times matter of fact. So, it was great. You know, being a part of a family like that, you know, we always tell our children, say, 'Hey, we're going to be watched from all sides.' So my husband will say, 'I don't want to make my mama cry.' So he's always lived that, and our children, you know, that's something being in the limelight because you walk that thin line. But we're all family, who, we stick together and we do what we have to do. We do right. We want to see our community a better place to live and to raise our children. You know, we've been here all our lives, and so I have seen changes. But you have to work at it as individuals. So that's what we've done as a family, to make sure that our kids had a great foundation to know that, hey this big world that you live in is not going to be easy. Even right here in your community.

Stokes: What are some of the things that you remember most vividly?

Atkins: Well, as far as — I'm loving seeing the transformation of my community. You know, coming and developing into something for this time in my life. Coming from, as a youngster up until now, although we still have a long way to go. But I love the beautification of it, that's one part I love. We have a long way to go still. I don't feel that we are where we should be. It's a lot that — and I'm not putting the blame on anybody, because we have to own it ourselves. And, my philosophy is 'Where I am, I have to try and make it the best that I can make it. For me and mine, and for the surrounding area.' But you know, what I remember is that day, you know the milestones. When my husband became the first elected official — that was a time, that was a milestone, that's one thing that we crossed.

Stokes: I mean, that's huge.

Atkins: Yeah that was huge. But like I said, we still have a long way to go. He's running now for the country commissioner and being a democrat that's going to be hard to get into the county commission as a democrat. He will not change his party, and that's fine. I say what's for you is going to be for you [laughs] and so we'll do that.

Stokes: He's run for that before hasn't he?

Atkins: Yeah, he ran back in '95, I think it was. '95 he ran for county commissioner before. He got pretty good votes but it wasn't enough.

Stokes: It's also just hard to get people to vote in local elections. Which is a shame because it really makes some of the most difference.

Atkins: It really is, it makes a big difference. And you know, what can you do except say keep on trying to get people to vote and then you know for felons, trying to get them reinstated as well. That doesn't help the process globally. Not at all. But Sarasota still is — I love Sarasota, Sarasota is one of those places that, you know, I still love, I still love Sarasota. Its beauty, its people. But, like I said, being a professional here, there's not a whole lot to keep, you know, young African Americans, especially when they go off to college and you know they usually don't come back here. They may visit, some may trickle in and trickle back out, you know in the community. But there's not enough good paying jobs here for, you know. And then you look at — you're either here or you're up here. There's not hardly any in between, and that in itself, you know, kind of just keeps you. But will I leave here? You know, I'm probably going to be here for the rest of my life. I don't know but I probably will be here. I like to visit, you know, but I like Sarasota.

Stokes: Well you're actively working to try and make it better, so it's clearly a very important place.

Atkins: Yes, trying to make it better. And that's all we can do, train and hope to train other individuals. Say, 'Hey, look, you've got to take stock in your community.' And a lot of people are trying to do that. You know, even a lot of the snow birds who came down and who live in Sarasota now, the greater Sarasota area, they're working without our community to help educate our students and to make our community a better place to live. Sarasota is beautiful spot to live, it really is.

Stokes: What are some of the things you like the most about it?

Atkins: Well I like the arts, I really love the arts, I love all of the arts, the music, the different — it's very diverse now. It's there. It's better. The beauty of it. And I have friends of all walks of life, you know, I do. I like that. I like the weather. I like what Sarasota has to offer, like New

College and the other colleges that are around now. And so you can live where you want to live, if you can afford it.

Stokes: So after you graduated high school did you go off to college?

Atkins: No, I didn't. I was an adult adult when I went off to college. Yeah, I had a child and I got married, and I started working in the school system and then I decided to go back to college. That's what I did.

Stokes: How did you and your husband meet?

Atkins: [Laughs] Well, first, in first grade. He said he liked me from first grade but I wouldn't give him the time of day. That's what he said, from first grade. And then in — when we were in high school we were in — matter of fact we marched together at graduation. He liked me then too, but I still didn't give him the day. [laughs]. But we were destined to be together, so we are together. But we met in grade school.

Stokes: Do you remember him as a little kid?

Atkins: I remember him as a little kid. I do remember him. And then he went and lived with his grandmother for a few years and then he came back in — I think 7th grade he came back to Sarasota. But he's always been a serious minded person, even as a little kid, I can remember him. He's always been serious minded. So for him to be a mayor and commissioner, it was destined to be [laughs]. But you know, we have fun. I told him today when I was coming to do this interview, I told him, 'You know, I'm not...!' and he said, 'Oh, you'll be fine.' Because, you know, he's a great, I love to hear him speak, he's a great speaker.

Stokes: Yeah, I heard him talk at the Robert L. Taylor Community Center.

Atkins: Oh, he's great. He can just rattle it off, he remembers everything. I say, 'How do you remember all that?' But he remembers everything.

Stokes: He was telling you, you'd be fine?

Atkins: Yeah, 'You can do it' I said 'Ok.'

Stokes: Well, you've been doing great.

Atkins: Thank you, well you're easy to talk to. Yeah, but Sarasota. I look at when I leave, when I'm going to visit, I always like to come back home. Now if it comes the time where I don't like where I am, then that's a different story, but I like it here, you know. For the most part I don't meet any strangers. And when I meet a person, you know I meet a person for who they are and I'm good. People usually gravitate to me and I gravitate to other as well so I don't have that problem. And I try to be fair. Although, I don't like the injustices, and I'm usually, I will speak about it, so when I feel that I've been wronged I will speak about it. And that's what I feel

everyone should do. You know, and I'd do it in a way that won't be offensive. Maybe, sometimes it may be.

Stokes: Well I think sometimes you have to be.

Atkins: Yeah, sometimes you have to be. I try to do it decent and in order though, that's just the way I live. That's the way I live.

Stokes: So you liked raising your family here?

Atkins: I do because, it's a great place, it's been a great place to raise our kids and my family. Because we've also been a family that travels and introduced them to other things, you know. They went to public schools and they went to private schools here as well. Our kids, they, some of them went to college. And, so you have to, as a family, you have to give them the broader picture of life and so that's what we've tried to do, even when they were young. You know, that one time, I remember, we cut off the television for a whole year, and the phone. And so what we did as a family then, we played more games, we had more conversations and they performed for us.

Stokes: That's great.

Atkins: Yeah, we did that, and it was so wonderful. You know, and they, you know, hey that was just a part of life at that time. And so our kids, they knew, they had a family that, you know, we stuck together. We did things as a family and we introduced them to the broader world. Even when they were kids, they traveled. They traveled to other parts of the country.

Stokes: Your family sounds so nice.

Atkins: And we still do today, you know, we get together every second Sunday for fun and eating. We, every day we all text together. We all text and talk, you know, wishing everybody a happy day, giving them an affirmation of some kind. And we look forward to being together again, because family is so important, and that's what we've tried to stress. Hey, family is important. Sometimes you get along, sometimes you don't. But we need to make the best of it, you know.

Stokes: I wanted to go back and ask you, you said you couldn't go to Lido or Siesta, do you remember when they were desegregated and the first time you were able to go?

Atkins: The first time, no. I don't think I visited the beach again until I was an adult. Not during my mom's — because my parents died, you know, like right after I was out of high school. My mother died very young. So I went to the beach after then. But when we were youngsters, like I said, we did things as a family then. That's why I guess family is so important for me, as being a parent, because of how my family raised me as doing things as a close knit. But we did go to the beach all of the time when I was young but we had to go to Venice.

Stokes: So what did you do after high school?

Atkins: Well, I worked as a nursing — the classes at Sarasota High, we was the first class that had nurses aid training at Votech which is now Polytech. So I worked in the hospital, in the nursing homes. I did that for a while until I started working for the school board. Which I've been there for 40 years now.

Stokes: And you like that?

Atkins: I like it, I do. It's almost near time for me to retire. I'll miss the children though, I will.

Stokes: Do you see your teachers from your childhood as role models for you as a teacher?

Atkins: Yes, I do. Matter of fact, right now, I try to — I want to big sister some children, some young ladies that need a little help. So I try to reach out to them that way to talk to them. Matter of fact one of my students I invited to church Sunday, and she said 'You want to go to the pumpkin festival' which would be next weekend and I said 'Well, that might be something that we can do.' So, now I see that, you know, children are not being raised, and so when they come to school, my type of school, which is a title one school, sometimes it's hard. You may be dealing with behaviors first and then academics secondly because, the kids are not being raised. And so, you be a mother sometimes.

Stokes: That pretty much covers my questions. Is there anything else you'd like to add or that I missed?

Atkins: I just want to thank you for interviewing me. And I just want to say that, our community is still alive, it's vibrant, it's different, and being an older adult now. You know, you have to change with the times and to know that, you know, all of the children that I see is not trying to bring down the community. I just have to embrace the differences. And that's just being like, you know, maybe some of the adults when I was a youngster were saying the same things. But it's a difference in the time. But, trying to help the community and our youth and that might need a little extra boost. Like working in our church, that's what we do as well. And I think, you know, churches around our community they still seem to be one of those avenues that helps youth as well and the community. And then we have a lot of community activists still that are trying to make the place a better place to live as well. It's all good. Like I said, the community is still alive. Does it need improving still? Still, yes it needs improving, as you know, most places. But it's a good place to be. And I tell people, come in and visit. Come in, we have beautiful centers. The Robert L. Taylor Complex. It is a really nice facility, and it's being used.

Stokes: I mean I see a sense of that community that you're talking about even just visiting for a few hours. Your husband out of the porch talking to those two guys for a an hour, being in your backyard and having that guy drive by and stop and talk to you for a second...

Atkins: Yes, and see, that's what community is. It's not just living in your neighborhood and not ever seeing your neighbor, but that's community, when you can wave at people and you may stop and roll your window down and say 'Hey, what's going on?' And that's what a community is. That's a neighborhood. Absolutely. Like if we're out in the yard people can stop by. And that's what community is, if you see people standing out, that doesn't mean they're selling drugs all of the time. They're just standing out. It's just talking. Someone asked me the other day, 'Do you feel safe in your neighborhood?' I said 'Yes, I feel safe in my neighborhood, I really do feel safe in my neighborhood.' You know sometimes some things happen, but that happens everywhere. But you can't just knock a community because, yes it happened, this happened, but you know, you just have to move on, you have to move on. But I love my community, I do. And see my husband and I, we always say, 'Oh here comes somebody.' And you know, we're the ones — like I say, I even have a food pantry from my house. I give food away if someone needs some. So I keep canned goods and stuff, so if my husband says, so-and-so needs a package, I pack them up a bag and take it to them. But you know, we just, we know somebody's going to be knocking. And you can't live a life that's fearful, you watch, you can be watchful and vigilant. But you have to live a life. Freedom and laughter, but you can't be living scared. You learn so much from other people. We have a great time, we do have a great time. We welcome you into our family, any time you want to come over, any time you want to chat just say 'Hey I want to come over.' And come right on over. And that's what we do, we like sitting on the porch. What else community does, is, you know like, because we live right across from Booker High School, there's always kids walking by and kids in the neighborhood, you seen them, they play basketball down the street. And you get a chance to train them. If a kid is walking by and not speaking and I'm out there I'll say 'Good evening' and I'll tell them 'You should speak.' And that's a part of training, because you know, they'll see you and then they'll speak the next time. You know, or you train them, if you see them throwing paper down, you know, please pick the paper up, put it on the porch right here or whatever. So it's all a part of learning and training and not being afraid to say it. I love sitting on my front porch. I wish I had a bigger porch [laughs]. But it's good. It's good. It's all fun.

[...]

Atkins: I tell people, 'Life has been good to me. I don't have all the money I need, but you know, when you have — you can smile and when you can feel good about what you do, that's so good to me.' I can feel good about that, and you got to feel good about yourself. And you know I tell — my poster in my room says 'Do all the good that you can for everyone that you can for as long as you can' that quote there. And you have to. Don't be a colluder. If you know better, you do better. And so that's what life is. There's too much out here.

[...]

Atkins: One thing I wanted to say about Mrs. Caples, she died at 98, she was 98 when she died in 1971. Matter of fact, I cut an article out — well my husband did, he said 'This Mrs. Caples that named you.' Because we didn't — I graduated in 1970 but she died in 1971 at 98. She was a singer. Matter of fact, their family was the reason the Ringling's moved here. Yeah, all that land back there, was their friends. It was a guy named Mr. Thompson as well, but persuaded John and them to move here and that's why the Caple's had that mansion. Because he was into railroads here and she started maybe the, I don't know if it was the garden club, but she sang at the first presbyterian church. She was a big song bird. I said, 'Ain't that something, I'm a big singer as well.' But it's so funny, I said, 'Wow.' I feel I'm a part of history. I remember going, when my parents, we loved to go down that long driveway and being a youngster it looked like it took forever to get to that little house, but you know, since I've been out there now, I said 'Oh gosh, this house didn't look, it's small now compared to what it was.' And then some of the things not back, cause they had this courtyard, I remember, the courtyard that surrounded this big concrete part. I remember running around there as a little youngster too. But I think my mother was on the back, I don't know if that Caples hall, cause you all have a Caples hall too. But the back of the house was, I think was different. They had some steps going down. I got a picture of me sitting on that thing. I wish I had that picture of me sitting on the carriage house, I'd say 'I was there, I lived in there.' But that was something. That's how we got here. That's how I got here to Sarasota. I'm glad I came to Sarasota and not Alabama. Alabama is still, oh lordy have mercy.