

Oral History Project
New College of Florida — Fall 2016

Interview with: Victoria B. Brown
Date of Interview: November 22nd, 2016
Interviewer: Katelyn Grimmett

Ms. Vicky is the founder of nonprofit Dollar Dynasty, a community outreach organization that doubles as a thrift store and a food distribution site for All Faiths Food Bank. She works to empower the Newtown community every day of the week, embodying the mantra she remembers the elder women of Newtown had: Help others to help themselves. Ms. Vicky has lived in Newtown since the 60's, back when segregation confined the community to its own, and its own flourished into a self-empowered, self-employed community.



Brown: I'm Victoria B. Brown. I was born in Georgia, in 1939 to a Mamie Lee and Ulysses Brinson. I was the oldest girl of seventeen living siblings, and my dad was a migrant farmworker. We spent all our time working on the farm with cotton, peanuts, tobacco and raising turkeys and geese, ducks, attending the horses and mules that we worked on the farm with. That was many years, it was really hard work. After so many years, we ended up leaving Georgia because my father was very upset because he could not express himself and he could not do as he thought he should be able to do as head of a family with so many children. So he decided that we would leave. We had to do it secretly, so one night, in the summer, my dad loaded up whatever he could in the pickup truck. We proceeded to leave Waycross, Georgia. Four AM in the morning, I remember, because if we'd have been caught leaving we wouldn't be able to do so. We end up coming to Clearwater, Florida. To pick fruit. My dad's friend had a place that we could do celery, fruit and roofing. At that time I was 10 years old. We end up staying in Clearwater for many years, and after I was 16 years old I end up going away to find a job because I had to help my mom because we did not have enough financial support from working on the farm.

Grimmett: Where'd you move to from there?

Brown: I moved to...Sarasota.

Grimmett: What was the first thing you did here?

Brown: The first thing that I ended up doing in Sarasota was working in the restaurants. Housework and then going to the restaurants to work, washing glasses and cooking at the Morrison's Cafeteria, Driftwood and several small restaurants.

I worked with the Sarasota Cleaning Service at night and then after quite a few years, I end up getting a job at the Sarasota Memorial Hospital. Due to all my experience and everything, I end up getting a job as a cook's helper. That was really exciting because when you work in a restaurant you make 50 cents an hour, 75 cents an hour. But I end up making a dollar, 31 cents an hour, and I thought that was fantastic. At least I had money then to try to find a room to live in. I ended up moving into a rooming house, across the street from Humphrey's Drugstore. Mrs. Lottie Humphrey- who's still alive living here in Sarasota now- helped me a lot. She helped me out, helped me to understand that, being a young lady, you had have your room, keep everything clean and pay your whatever they charged to have that room.

We spent most of our time eating at Miss Mary Emma Jones' restaurant. It was on the corner of Osprey, and she was a very, very caring person. She was a taxi driver, a cook, she helped us out so much, and that was so good because we never had anybody to really show us exactly what was good to do and how to do it and where to go to it. If we had to go to do a day's work, she would take us and pick us up. And it was so funny because the car would be so full of people she picked up for 50 cents. or if you had any money it was okay, or if you didn't have any money it was okay. She still brought you home. It was 50 cents per person, and I thought that was really fantastic.

Grimmett: So she would drive all over Sarasota?

Brown: She would drive everywhere. Wherever they had to go, to the doctors or just go to the grocery store. Then, which made it easier, we had Jenkin's Grocery. A lot of people could walk from her restaurant. Then we still had the Humphreys, who had a sundry ice cream parlor, and they would make hamburgers and give 'em to you if you needed and people could not get their prescriptions, he'd end up giving it to them. All the time that I remember him, he was always helping someone with something they needed. It was very hard to live during that time.

Grimmett: You would go over to the ice cream parlor a lot?

Brown: Oh yes, it was wonderful, and Mrs. Humphrey would always, she had the little stainless steel stools that you see in the ice cream parlors back then, back in the '20's and '30's. It was so much fun because she really took care of everybody, and she invited them in to sit down. Even now I think about a lot of these things. We should be doing some of that now to help people along. We need to care more, show people that we really care.

Grimmett: Who were some of the other ladies that would help the girls living in the rooming houses?

Brown: My godmother, Ben and Beulah MacMillin, who lived on 28th Street, right down the road from Miss Emma Jones' restaurant. She would buy clothing, have rummage sales, and all the money that she would collect, she would get the girls who really wanted to go to school and she would buy books, would get them books that they needed for school.

She helped so much. Then she would cook and serve finger sandwiches on Sundays, and have all the churches come to have tea and a finger sandwich to raise money to buy these books. And I was the person who was instructed always to sit to the door, and no matter what, no matter if you knew them, no, they have to give a donation to get a finger sandwich and a cup of tea.

I learned so much from older people. How to take responsibility and stay with it even though it didn't seem like it was working. They would let you know, you got to keep doing this, and if you work at it hard and long enough, it will work.

Grimmett: Tell me more about your godmother.

Brown: My godparents, he was a chauffeur and she was a housekeeper. For the Applebees; the Applebees owned about half of Sarasota. She would collect dolls. She had a special talent to collect dolls, old jewelry and perfume bottles. It was my job, when I come to visit, to keep them all dusted. And all the dolls had on a dress, all the dolls had on different jewelry or necklace and each one of 'em had on a different outfit and there were over a thousand. That was my enjoyment in the afternoon... I was at either my godparents house or Mrs. Floyd's house, Heddy Floyd, who founded and built the H.J. Floyd Nursing Home that's here in Sarasota, in Newtown. My godmother and her were friends. She would pick me up to get my hair done. She'd pick us up and do our hair and bring us back.

Grimmett: Could you tell me how you met your godparents?

Brown: I met my godparents because when I moved here, the whole time in my young life it was always somebody showing us what was right and what was wrong. My grandmother taught us that you help people. You do for the older people. So when I moved to Sarasota I kept thinking, how am I going to survive without getting advice? So, just by chance, I was at the church. I decided to go to this church, Bethlehem Baptist Church which was on Central. These ladies was the 34th Friendship club members. They was helping others to help themselves. This lady was sitting there, this, this feisty, and all dressed up in her hat and her gloves, everything matched. If she had on blue, everything was blue, and it was a lot of fun. Ms. Floyd introduced me to her. She said, "I know of a lady who really needs your help." So I met this Ms. Beulah MacMillan, and we talked and everything, she hugged me and talked to me.

She had a house full of antiques. Antique furniture. She had a few dolls at that time. So she said to me, "I want you to make this and help me with this and help me hang the clothes out, and you sit out here." I would take the money, 25 cents. She said, "Now whatever you get, we'll add this up," and she would do this a couple times a week. It was really nice. And then I'd have something to eat. They would cook, everybody from the Humphreys to Miss Mary Emma Jones. My godmother, she would cook these casseroles like my grandmother used to cook. So, everyday, I would go by there and see if she wanted me to wash bottles or windows or whatever, cause I knew I was gonna get a healthy meal. From there on, we was like daughter and mother. We just sort of blended together, and everything was wonderful. She lived to be 100, he was 99. She passed away

in HJ Floyd Nursing Home. I took care of them when they got older. I would check on them in the morning and when I left in the afternoon I'd come by their house to make sure everything was ok.

It was just like, it made my life so much better. I learned from it, and right today I use a lot of the good things I've learned from older people. We were taught that, from my grandmother, when someone help you, you do not do anything to hurt them. You don't undermine them, you don't take things from them, you don't say anything bad about them, you don't do anything. You love them because they loved you in order to help you. Right now, I spend 99 percent of my time with older people. It was just such a blessing.

We end up making, as I said about the dolls, this is one of the things that I really loved doing is collecting art. Doing artwork. I love doing that even now, I don't have time to do it. I met other people too. Mrs. Bryant. I think her full name was Willie B. Bryant, and she was also a good friend of my godmothers' and I would end up at her house in the afternoon. Most of the other people that I met and helped take care of, they helped me so much.

On Saturdays if I was off from work, if I was off Saturday, Sunday and Monday, I would cook on Friday and get everything organized, and after church on Sunday I would deliver home cooked meals to almost all the elder people I know. Their children, some of them still live in Sarasota, and they can tell you. One of the daughters live in Newtown Estates, they can tell you that every time they come to the door late in the afternoon, they say mom would say "come on in Vickie, I know that's you." [laughs]. So the girls would get upset because they say "Mom, you think nobody comes to bring you anything but Vickie?" That's how close we end up getting. I enjoyed it so much.

But my godparents, they end up doing something for me that I never thought would happen. They end up helping me save enough money to get a place of my own. 'Cause I never had a place to live, living in rooms and rooming houses. And all of a sudden, on 1764 and 1762, on 24th street right here in Newtown, they had an apartment building. So they asked me, "Say, are you going to keep doing this all your life?" What I was doing, working and trying to make it, you know. So I said, "Yes." So my godfather said to her and Ms. Floyd, "So you see she's trying to have something, and we can see if we can try to help her." So what they end up doing... back then, this is a two bedroom apartment, kitchen, bath, where to park your car and this is right on 24th street. He said, "Well, why don't we let her stay over there and she could pay to own?" I'd never heard of such a thing- pay rent to own. So after so many years, three or four years, he said, "We will sell this to you, this building. We're gonna charge you the amount of money that you can afford. We're going to let you have this." And they said, "We're gonna let you have the building."

When I got paid every two weeks from Sarasota Memorial Hospital, it was my decision, they left it totally up to me: "You can pay us whatever you have." And so, here I'm bringing home 88 dollars every two weeks, so I'm thinking, "Am I gonna be able to do this?" As it turned out, it worked out. And every two weeks that we got paid, before I went anywhere or spent one dollar, I'd leave the hospital, come all the way down, go on

28th street and pay them. So I don't know how many years it took me to pay them, but I paid them. I have the property right now, still have it. I keep it up. And Richmond Construction Company built them, and I think nobody builds houses anymore that holds that long. This was built in the 50's. And I have it there now. Right now I'm doing some work on it, but I still have it. What happened, with my staying there for so long, if the cabinet knob was loose, I'd tighten it up, and if I wanted to paint, I paint, well, I painted it. Whatever I needed. So he said, "If she keeps it up, she can go ahead and pay us for it." And I did. And I think the total amount of money that time for a two two-bedroom apartments, utility room, carport and a little screened in patio, and two little front areas: 15, 000 dollars, and they let me have it for half that. It took me a while to make that money to pay them. From that day on, I never worried about anything because I knew it was gonna work out.

Grimmett: And before that you we're living in one of the rooming houses?

Brown: Mhmm. Cross the street from Humphrey's drugstore where they building the hospital program now. And Miss Mary Emma Jones' was just right there.

Grimmett: Can you tell me more of your memories you have of Mary Emma Jones or the Humphreys?

Brown: Right now, she's waiting for me to come see her, Mrs. Humphrey. Every Sunday, after church I would stop by her house. After church, I would come, and I would spend an hour. She'd have a little something in there that we can eat. That went on for years. Right now I feel really, really upset at myself because, after I opened up in 2003, my time became less and less. I didn't get to see her as often. But she would come by to see me, with somebody to drive her. And I would check with her daughter-in-law. I just got so tied into giving back and helping out, I didn't spend as much time with her.

Grimmett: What was Mary Emma Jones' restaurant like?

Brown: Oh. It had the counter, you sit to the counter and the kitchen areas' right behind the wall. You had the soda fountain and everything, right behind the wall. Whatever you needed. Candies, especially that penny candy- two for a penny- that was really fun. You go there and whatever she's doing, she would come and sit, talk to you. That was really nice because she would tell you things, ask you questions, it was just like having a good conversation with someone that knew everything you needed. She would do that with everybody. They come in and they have a problem and they could tell her, you know. With me, I had my godparents and everything, so I'd listen to what she had to say and I'd ask questions about driving and everything. I drove the tractor for my dad and everything, but I had no way of getting around in Sarasota. You'd sit there and she's cook it. She didn't have any ready cooked. You order it, she'd cook it.

Grimmett: What were some of the foods she cooked?

Brown: Breakfast foods, like sausage, homemade sausage. Almost all the foods came from Georgia, whether it was greens or cabbage or eggs and all that. Someone would go

to Georgia, I don't know who it was, that would bring back food and everything- beans, peas and all that.

Grimmett: What were some of the other restaurants around Newtown?

Brown: The vegetable market, was right up by 301. A big vegetable market, Eddy's Fruit Stand. Then the Pool Hall was across the street. Then we had the Towne Hall which is still there now. They serve breakfasts, you can get breakfast going by there now. They're still open. But the fruit stand is not there anymore, and the post office is not there anymore.

Grimmett: What were some of the things you would do all the time in Newtown?

Brown: Like a daily routine?

Grimmett: Sure, like that.

Brown: Well, I was home most all the time, never really out. I was either at the church or helping out at somebody's house or running errands for somebody.

Grimmett: What were some of the meals that everybody would make?

Brown: Oh my goodness. It's always ham, fried chicken, greens, macaroni and cheese. I don't care where you went. You had that. The roasted chicken, somebody would make that if they decided they wanted it but, fried chicken. Ham. Sweet potatoes- yams they'd call 'em- and macaroni and cheese and collard greens and cornbread. I still love the cornbread. The fried chicken I can't really get into anymore, but I still like it now and then. One day though, I would really love to find the time to write a book. That's my dream.

Interview #2

Interview with: Victoria B. Brown

Date of Interview: November 22nd, 2016

Interviewer: Katelyn Grimmett

Katelyn Grimmett: Could you introduce yourself?

Victoria Brown: I'm Victoria Brown. It's Victoria B. Brown. Should I say I live in Sarasota?

Grimmett: You don't have to do that. There's a memory exercise I'd like to try so I'm going to ask you, what is your earliest childhood memory?

Brown: My early memory, childhood, is walking with my mom. My mom was a wash lady they called back then. She ended up washing uniforms and everything for the soldiers, basic training. It was my job then, the oldest girl- the only oldest girl, I had to stay with her because she was a seizure person. She was a diabetic, which they didn't have very much medications for. So she would have seizures, high blood pressure. So my job was to stay with her. She used to hold my hand, and whenever there was something going on, I could feel whatever it is she wanted me to do- get help. So that's what I remember *most*. In the beginning. After that, it was like all of the children, my mom had lots of children, seventeen *living* siblings. I think she had about four or five miscarriages before that and, uh, my job was that I had to help her always, you know. Cooking and getting water from the well and taking water to the fields on the farm. We had a farm and we was raised up on the farm.

Grimmett: Where was the farm?

Brown: Georgia. A little place called Waycross, Georgia. Which was on the backside of the pine trees, and you had to go about five or six miles to get to someone else's house that you needed help. That was sort of a long ways, but it was a long ways after trying to get the mule, hook him up to the wagon, and have somebody drive you. Unless you knew how to drive, then you would drive to someone's house to get help or pick up something, food. Because we had so many people that helped my mom feed us. Support us with clothing and food and almost everything. Somebody to help her watch us. Most of all the children was born in the house. Midwife. So if there was a big problem and she had to go to someone's house or the hospital, which was in Augustus, Georgia, which was a long ways and that meant that we had to get help for that, someone to come and sit with us.

We had so many older friends of my mom's, ladies that cooked and would bring us all the leftovers almost every meal. We would get all the leftovers from their breakfast, lunch, dinner. And we cooked three meals a day- full, healthy meals. So that's one of the things that kept us going, was the neighbors. And when people said that they cared about you, that they love you, they want to help you, they *meant* what they said. And ended up doing it. And that was one of the very important things that I remember and today I still remember. I don't want to get emotional about it, but it still stays with me.

Grimmett: When did you move to Newtown?

Brown: Well, first we moved to Clearwater, Florida from Georgia. That was somewhere late forties, more like forty-four, forty-five. My dad was a farmworker, a migrant farmworker, so we'd come to Clearwater because someone had told him that he can pick fruit and do roofing. Which, my dad didn't know how to do that, so he ended up working on the farm and picking fruit.

We stayed in Clearwater the whole time, and in 19...I'm thinking which year. I moved from Clearwater to Sarasota. I had my first child in '53. When we moved to Clearwater I was about 10. After my daughter was born- in '53- so I moved to Sarasota after that. Which was more like '60, 1960.

Grimmett: What brought you here?

Brown: After my dad went to New Jersey to work on the farm, we began to have a lot of problems. My dad ended up being an alcoholic, and then he couldn't make enough money to support us. That upset him so. Then, it was like a lot of violence, I guess. We used to fight. My mom almost all the time, you know, whenever he would drink. When he didn't drink, he didn't do that, but it was like always something going on. So after they separated, we moved into the projects. When we first came, we lived in a farmhouse with a lot of other people that worked on the farm.

Grimmett: This was in Clearwater?

Brown: Yea. After my Dad left we moved into the projects in Clearwater. What happened is that I couldn't get a job being young and everything, so I moved here, in Sarasota, just to help. We had to pay \$10 a month in the projects in Clearwater. Now, I moved here, but the family stayed in Clearwater. So I worked washing windows, babysitting, housekeeping. So whenever I would get paid, I would go back on Friday evenings and stay the weekend and come back on Mondays. So, I was living here but I had to go there because I had to make certain that the 10 dollars that my mom needed was paid.

Grimmett: How long did that back and forth go on for?

Brown: That went on for years. I was very young.

Grimmett: When did you move to Newtown?

Brown: When I moved to Sarasota, I lived in Newtown. I moved in the rooming house.

Grimmett: Where was that?

Brown: The rooming house was right here on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Way now, which back then was called 27th street. The elder ladies had rooming houses, and you could stay in a room, share a room with another person or girl, and they would cook. They would watch out *for* you because, you know, you didn't know how to look after yourself- not really.

Grimmett: How old you were then?

Brown: I figure I must've been somewhere in my 20s, early 20s I believe.

Grimmett: Do you remember some of the ladies well?

Brown: Oh yes, Mrs. Humphrey and Mr. Neil Humphrey- was the first drugstore. Right on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Way, right walking distance where King's Meat Market is now. He had a drugstore there, and they had a home built right back behind the police station. What she would end up doing was making sure we ended up having something to eat.

The other lady was, that really spent almost 24 hours looking after the younger people, was Mary Emma Jones. She had a Taxi Cab service. She had the restaurant and wherever

you had to go, if you had 50 cents it was ok, if you didn't have it she would take you anyway. And she ended up doing that for almost everybody. She was there for years and years. I can't tell you how many years. She looked after most of the young ladies and the young people, and the older people because they didn't have any transportation. Kings Market- where Mr. Humphrey's Drugstore was at that time- right across the street where the Goodwill's building is, that was Miss [Jones], she owned all that area. She had rooming house there too. All the people who was like singers and trying to make it like Nancy Wilson and all those people, they ended up staying there because that was the only place, you know, totally segregated. You had to stay in the black area. Even when you played baseball, you had to stay in the black area. Rooming houses, you know.

So those ladies helped me out a lot. And then, later on, which became my godparents: Benjamin and Beulah MacMillin. They had a home over on Leon. Down off of Osprey. And so, they sort of adopted me more or less. It helped me because I had a place to go and just sit down and help clean up and cook and get to meet everybody. My job was to make sure every Saturday and Sunday, especially after church on Sundays, was to take dinner to the widows who did not have anybody to cook for them. So I ended up doing that for quite a while. They would cook all those healthy, southern dinners. So we'd put 'em in plates and cover them, and I would drop 'em off wherever it was. They would tell me how to get there, and I learned all of Sarasota pretty well.

I worked wiping tables for Driftwood and Morrison's cafeteria; that's where I made most of my money. It was something like 53 cents an hour. So at the end of the week you made 23 dollars, when they ended up taking out whatever that- taxes- 22 dollars you end up taking home. I had to take 10 of those dollars to my mom, and I had to get somebody to take me there. If I didn't have anybody to drive me, I would get on the bus. Now that was all day [laughs]. The bus would leave here to go to Clearwater, you had to stop in St. Petersburg, and wait to get on another bus to go to Clearwater. And this bus stopped everywhere. It picked up people all along the way. It was kind of strange, that's why I keep thinking: It's nothing like riding a Greyhound bus these days. It was so different back then.

Later on, I ended up spending a lot of time with older people. That's why I sort of kept it together, here in Sarasota. Because there was several older ladies that I could go to their house and stay all evening. Everybody else was out or going to Lerner's and spending the two dollars they had left. Lerner's had these outfits in the window. Lerner's department store. It was something maybe about 5.99, very inexpensive. So all the girls would get this outfit, shoes and everything, and put it on and go out. I didn't. I stayed with my godparents and the old ladies and everybody said, well "where is Victoria?" So they said, "well, she's probably somewhere with some older lady." So I says, "I loved it." I ended up doing that, and that kept me pretty well together.

Marthena O'Reilly was across the street from my godparents. I would help her to clean up and everything. And Heddy Floyd, Reverend Floyd and Heddy Floyd back then they built the HJ Floyd's Nursing Home. So, this lady would pick me up and take me to her house. Do my hair. Bring me back. My godparents would pay for that. So I thought that was so great, you know. Why do I want to go out with people who didn't love me, you

know? They loved me and I knew that. It just really touches my heart, today, because it's very hard to find someone that say they care but to actually feel that they really care about you. These people will help you get to wherever you need to go. You just have to keep it together and listen to what they have to say because they have a lot of wisdom. That's why I picked up a lot of the things I learned. Because they would say, you can't do that. And I want to know why. So they explain it to you and they show you. And this is what I learned from a lot of the people that I was in contact with.

Grimmett: Were there any other people in Newtown who you had that kind of relationship with?

Brown: There was lots of other people. The Bethlehem Baptist Church, where I ended up being a member. Quite a few of the people passed away now. Professor Rogers who was the Principal at Booker High. He was a member of that church. They would see to it that you end up getting food or something. We didn't know where they ended up getting it from but they knew the people who really needed something.

Grimmett: Could you tell me about how you first met your godparents?

Brown: Well, Heddy Floyd, as everybody called her, Reverend Floyd's wife- that was doing my hair- she had so many girls that she would take care of. So my godmother was doing housework- the Applebees. Big family, Applebees from Chicago. They owned part of Sarasota, but I think they sold out everything now. So, he was a chauffeur and she was a housekeeper. And I loved cooking. So Miss Floyd ended up telling me that, "Listen," she says, "I know a lady that really needs you." She says, "She works for these people, and she cooks for two or three different families." Because back then you lived on the premises. People brought the maid and chauffeurs and everybody down. But my godparents was lucky enough for that family buying them a lot right on over on Leon and built them a house. So I ended up with them and stayed with them up until they passed away. Even when I went to work at Sarasota Memorial in '64, I would make certain that when I left work I'd come by the house, see what they needed, and I took whatever errands they needed.

She ended up teaching me a lot about helping others to help themselves. That was her program. She was giving free books, a lot of the older kids now that ended up getting benefit from that, they passed away. This was way back. They wanted to go to college or go to school, but they had no money and no books. So her thing was to open up a charitable organization that we had little garage sales in the yard every Saturday morning. And fishing. We'd go fishing and fry fish. And all of that money- little pennies- she would put together and buy books for the kids who was able to go if they could only get books. The program was called helping others to help themselves.

Had it not been for the MacMillans, and these people, I have no idea where I would be. And especially godparents, they're like parents. Because my grandparents passed away early. My mom passed away early.

...

Grimmett: What were Sundays in Newtown like?

Brown: A lot of the peoples from the south and a lot of peoples from Georgia, they ended up cooking big dinners. Even if it's two people in the family. You could go by and get food all day on Sunday. That's why they had me deliver to the people- in Sarasota- who couldn't cook for themselves or get food. They didn't even have to worry about cooking because they let 'em know, we're bringing you dinner on Sunday. They let 'em all know, don't cook because we deliver food. And it was really fun, I enjoyed it. I met so many people, so many wonderful people.

Grimmett: Was that Bethlehem Baptist Church?

Brown: Yes, that's the one I was raised up in. Now I went to other churches sometimes, but Bethlehem Baptist Church was on Central. It's where I got married at. In the Bethlehem Baptist church. With the whole crew up front. It was wonderful. They had a basement and down in the basement was the eating area and the kitchen. We ended up cooking down there almost all the time, most everybody come and cook.

All in all, it was a lot of elderly people that kept things together. And quite a few families had both parents. A lot of 'em didn't, but back then it was more. Like now it's harder because there's so many single parents. Then we also had the garden. We had the garden right there on Leon. Marthena Reilly's house. She was a teacher at Booker. Right on the corner of Leon and Noble? She had a big yard in the back so she would grow all kinds of vegetables. She has fruit trees and everything there. That helped a lot because all the kids could come by. Just get fruit and whatever your mom needed. Miss Roundtree, Levinya Roundtree, she lived right on the same street as my godparents. She ended up helping the ladies who had children and didn't have money to buy them clothing. My godmother would go down to Salvation Army, which was a little place- it was very small, and they would get clothing for the kids. 'Course with the older people like me, their clothes would fit us, so they would always give all their clothing to us. Instead of selling them off or donating some of them, they end up giving them to us.

Grimmett: What was one of your first impressions upon coming here to Newtown?

Brown: I sort of thought that I was still in Georgia. [laughs]. Because, in Newtown, I'm thinking, we're in Florida. So it should be different. I come all the way from Georgia, with all the friction and all the segregation; you get treated so badly, you know. So you come to Sarasota. And here you can have this room, but you got this little square area. And the streets are mud. You know, mud. Really mud. You'd have to wait till the rain dries up and walk better. But, it was the same thing. You could not do anything. You couldn't even go in the 10 cents store.

So I was out on the trail. They had a store out there: Woolworth and McCorry's. Those were the five and dime stores then. Like now they have all the dollar stores. So you couldn't go in there, you couldn't eat in there, you could buy something but they would have you... the bus seat was between the buildings, so you could come and sit out there, and if you wanted something, you come in and you tell 'em what you want. Whatever it

is, if you had the money, they ended up giving it to you, but you had to go right out again. If you had to wait for somebody, you had to come out and sit on the bench.

My thinking is that a lot of places in Georgia was a lot better off, but Sarasota was very, very hard on...you had to ride this bus and the bus only ran every two hours. If you missed the bus, you had to walk all the way from Siesta Key all the way to Osprey. That's where Miss Mary Emma Jones was very important. They'd be looking for her in that car. Here she comes. And she'd have full of people sitting in their laps and everything. And, like I said, if you had 50 cents, it was okay; if you didn't have any money, it was ok. She would get you home. I don't say that it could have been better; I thought it should have been better.

And then we had Eddy's Fruit Stand. That was a big place. Just like the market we have now. It went right up on Dr. Martin Luther King and Pershing. Eddy- I can't even remember his last name, that's what everybody called him- he was a short, chubby guy and he had the fruit stand, covered from almost a corner of 24th street, all the way around. He had fish market, all kinds of vegetables, fruits and a little hair supply place. That's where everybody went. It was called Eddy's Fruit Stand. Right across from there, where I end up working as a waiter, by Atkins Park, the place was called the Pool Room. I worked there for a little while, on Sundays, because everybody from church would come by. Same thing about the southern cooking. After church people would come by and pick up the southern dinners. It was really nice.

We had everything, we had to have everything here. We had the TV repair, shoe repair, Bud's Barber Shop, the hair salon was Ms. Floyd- she would pick you up. So people was doing hair somewhere in the house. But right there, you had to have everything. You couldn't go downtown to get anything. They did not let you do it, no matter what. But the 10 cent stores, they would let you. And I remember Publix, when they had the food in the window. They were not open on Sundays. You couldn't go in Publix. You was not allowed to shop in Publix. You wouldn't believe that, but it's true. Publix is 100 percent a different company now. I mean, they been changed that. But I'm talking about the early years when I came to Sarasota. You'd go look. Sometimes you could get stuff but it was right in the window, pig feet, pig tail, chitlins, what was that other thing, neck bones, pig ears. All you could do though is just walk in and get that. You could not go in and walk around in the store and shop. You go right in that door and the counter was right there, and they'd say "what you want?" and you tell them. They put it in the bag, and you're out of there. You could not go inside and walk around the shop. I remember that. I couldn't afford to go in Cheney's but I did one year...

Grimmett: What was Cheney's?

Brown: Cheney's, Cheney's Supermarket, it was a special- like Morton's market now. I couldn't afford it, too expensive. I would say to myself, one of these days I'm gonna go in and get something. So I passed by there one day...they had this 101-pound watermelon, now. So I ended up buying it and carried it down to the Robert Taylor. That was my first time giving something to the kids. The mother and daughter, the mother now and her kids are totally grown. I have the clip somewhere here.

Grimmett: Who was it in the photo?

Brown: Sharon Ates. Sharon was a little girl who was three years old then. She's been grown forever and her kids are grown. I have a picture of her and her mom and Mr. John Rivers...we took a picture and it's almost faded out. I still have it though. I'll have to get it to you.

Grimmett: Yea, that'd be great.

Grimmett: Can you recall your first interaction you had with the community of Newtown?

Brown: Oh, the Charmettes'. It was a club called the Charmettes' Club, all women, down cross the railroad tracks. It was a beautiful club and all the ladies ran it. They cook, entertain- they get somebody to sing. They would invite you there, dancing and everything. They had bands. That was the Charmettes Club, ran by all the ladies in the community. That was the social club that you could go to. They [Newtown] had a lot of other little places, but it was too dangerous, the fighting and everything would go on. The other thing was, after a while we wanted to go to a better affair, you know, moving up a little bit. So we went downtown, the place was called Theresa Hotel. It was a hotel from up north. We had to keep on checking with them to find out if they could have a ball down there because they didn't have a large enough place in Sarasota where they could entertain.

Now, this is going back to something in Georgia. In the church... the name of the church was On the Rocks and the other little church was Brinson Rock, named after my dad. See my middle initial is Brinson, which is totally a rare name. It's not in the phonebook, maybe one person is in there. So, James Brown used to sing in our church. Oh yeah, that's where he'd have his affairs at because wherever he was from- Atlanta- he went around singing in places that he didn't have to pay so it was 10 cents, 20 cents.

Grimmett: So you've heard James Brown live?

Brown: Oh yea. We didn't have to stay inside and they didn't want us to stay inside anyway cause they'd be doing that dance, you know, the dirty dancing [laughs]. They didn't want the kids to see that, but good grief. The church had no air conditioning, so the wooden windows had to be open, so we could hear James Brown all down the road. The music would spread all over the neighborhood. Yea, he'd do that all the time. Go play in churches or juke joints. They'd call 'em juke joints 'cause...they couldn't afford to pay for beer and all that, so what they end up doing is making their own. By the time people finish drinking this stuff, they'd be so out of it [laughs]. So we couldn't really go to a lot of the little places where they had the entertainment. But the grown people could go there.

Grimmett: Were there any places like that in Newtown?

Brown: Yea, they had one across 301 there. Gene Carnegie used to run one. They had one behind the projects. The name back there would be “The Bottom.” All of that area was juke joint area. You couldn’t really go back in there because people got killed or something. That was one of the areas, all juke joint area. They moved everybody out from there, and they built the townhouses. Most people couldn’t go back anyway because they couldn’t afford it. There were projects and little stores...gardens.

Grimmett: Yea- I hear that there used to be a lot of home gardens in Newtown. Do you remember any?

Brown: Everybody that lived there had a garden. That’s what everybody ended up doing, is planting stuff. My godparents had one in the backyard because she liked onions and you’d have to fuss over that. And cabbage would grow anywhere.

Grimmett: What would you grow?

Brown: I could grow almost anything. I’ve got in my walkway at the house. I pinch off things and put it in and it grows. My dad used to say, “Honey, let her do that because it’ll grow,” my dad used to tell my mom. Right now, I have a little bucket out there, in the walkway out there, so as soon as I get a chance I’ll put a little soil and put a piece in there and it’ll grow. I can grow almost anything. It’s a gift because I don’t tend to it. I have about six orchids on my porch.

Grimmett: Did you garden somewhere when you first got here?

Brown: No, because at the rooming house you couldn’t do anything like that, other people’s property. But Mrs. Humphrey had her garden...between 24th and 23rd, which is right where Children’s First, her property is right back of the police station. She had a whole garden there. They did a lot for this town. They took care of a lot of the people that needed medication, didn’t have money and Mr. Humphrey used to give that to them. He had his own first drug store was in Newtown.

Grimmett: Would you go there a lot?

Brown: Oh yea! You had to go across the street to eat, too. Miss Mary Emma Jones cooked but Mrs Humphrey... they had the Roy 20 type, you know the little stools with the chrome on ‘em, the ice cream stand. That’s what she did, and she made hamburgers. In fact, I’m going to talk with her daughter. Mrs. Humphrey. I used to spend at least an hour almost every other Sunday with her after church. Then I got so tied into so many other things. I’m thinking of seeing her daughter and see how she’s doing and would she forgive me for not keeping up with her. I got to the place where I lost a lot of the elder people that I used to be with because I got so caught up in what I was doing, and you neglect some people, but you think, oh well they understand. I learned better. Whether they understand or not, you should always remember the people that carry you, that gives you a good hand up. You should never forget them because it takes you all the way through life. The things that they can teach you.

And, uh, she would make the best of those sundaes, ice cream sundaes. She gave away a lot of stuff too. There are other things that I need to try to remember, there's so much. I was trying to remember how hard it was to get them to let us have that affair downtown. I'm going to have to get you the name of that place.

Grimmett: Well, what was the affair like?

Brown: It was an evening affair, like long gowns and all that. Nobody would let you have it. We didn't have a place we could get all dressed up like that to go. You could dress anyway you want but most of the places was like, you know...

Grimmett: So, some of the ladies were trying to...

Brown: Put that together. And I do remember the hotel downtown finally letting us do it. Another person I could probably get information from is Eddie Rainey. Miss Rainey, his mother, was the person who had the Charmettes club. Eddie Rainey was the first black to get hired at the Sarasota post office. He lives on 24th street. She lives down where Mrs. Humphrey's place.

Grimmett: And who all tried to organize the affair downtown?

Brown: This is what I wanted to ask him because I know it had to be the leaders and he was one of the people who got hired at the post office so that took a lot of work. Who else is there...I wish I could think of this lady that was living next door to my godparents. They was there before anybody in Newtown. They maintained that little matchbox house. It was brick, but it was tiny, took one person to go through that door the way they built it for them. They was the ones that took everybody to see the wrestling in Tampa. You didn't have TVs, couldn't afford 'em really. So they would get the people who wanted to go. They lived right next to my godparents, and they was related somehow.

Grimmett: What was it that your godparents did, again?

Brown: She was a housekeeper and he was a chauffeur. They cooked so much.

Grimmett: Did you learn a lot of cooking from them?

Brown: Oh yea, but I learned how to cook mostly from my grandmother. That's why I was lucky enough to get the job at Sarasota Memorial. Nobody was making anything those days. Nothing came pre-done so you had to get somebody that knows how to put it together. Fresh vegetables came off the farm from Ruskin up there, and all the meat came in one piece so you had to cut it. Good thing I was on the farm so I learned all that, so I ended up getting a job in food and nutrition because I knew how. I knew how to bake, make all these beautiful blueberry pies, rhubarb pies. Whatever they needed they had to be made from scratch. They couldn't find anybody. Do you know how hard it was to find a white cook? Could you believe this? They'd tell me no, no. They didn't want to cook. I couldn't get anybody to mop the floors, wash the windows. This was a level that they did not want to be at. No washing windows, no babysitting, doing housework? No. And they

changed, see, this is what happened. All of a sudden- we had so much fun about this years later- I knew that things would change.

It's been a journey, I tell you. The job was to make sure that the food tasted as good as it looked. Now, that was a job. That's why I know I can taste almost anything, and if it tastes alright to me then it's gotta be good. I say, gosh, how many ways can you make it that taste bad?

Grimmett: I hope not too many! Where did you live after you moved from the rooming house?

Brown: When I left the room, I lived on 24th street in my apartment. When I met the MacMillans- he had a sister who was a psychiatrist who lived in Vermont- and they had lots of property in Archie, Florida and Ocala. All of this they developed because all these years they worked for all these rich people, chauffeuring. Some people just got houses. They got a check when they retired, so they ended up getting paid full time until they passed away. This is just how generous the people could be. As far as I'm concerned I've never been prejudice. About anything. All I know is people say you can't do it, and I'm saying okay, I can't do it I can't do it. I didn't know that I was not doing that because I'm so different. But then my mom would tell me, "You can't go in there because you're not allowed in there." So I'd ask her why. She said, "Well, they have rules, everybody has rules." So that's how I got to know that you're different because you're different colored skin. But then I seen a lot of people with different colored skin- light, medium, you know, [laughs], so I was confused all the time about that.

So, when I left the rooming house, the godparents had this duplex they'd built for his sister but, after they had it all built, the years went by, and they decided they didn't want to move in the apartment there. So they was leasing it out. We had a conversation, and he had said to her, "see, this Vickie's trying to have something, you see she's trying to do this." I was trying to find a room because I'd always lived in rooming houses, and I lived with a lady one time and I could only be there so long as she was there. So I'd have to get up and leave when she go to work, and I'd have to stay out the house until she come back. So I ended moving into that apartment. Oh but- this is funny- long before that I slept out in the yard under the fig tree- Magnolia tree- the Japanese Plum tree. That's why I like Japanese Plums cause I used to eat 'em all the time. So I slept outdoors. This was before Sarasota. But here, might as well have been outside because they don't trust you with anything. So I been there. So that's why I says I been there, done that and that's why I do what I do now. I been through all the things you're talking about and worse. I been through a lot. You just don't come from 1939 all the way here without a lot of stuff, a lot of things happens. So the godparents end up letting me stay after all, didn't have to pay but they explained to me clearly, they said this is a loan not a give-away. So when you're able, she said, you give us whatever it is- they didn't say how much and I kept getting little raises, so I said I can do this. So when I get paid every two weeks I come by and give them a little money, and I kept doing that and doing that and, guess what? Now I own the building. The same building that they let me stay in- right on 24th street. So I went all the way from there to that.

Grimmett: That is quite a difference... So I kinda want to jump back into social life in Newtown. I know you said you liked to hang out with a lot of the older people when you were young, and you made these strong relationships with people who cared about you. But do you remember ever hanging out with people your age, too?

Brown: Oh yea!

Grimmett: What would you all do?

Brown: I used to drive around Sarasota with people going 75 miles an hour probably. Oh, god. I'd end up hanging with some strange people, and they'd look at me and say "don't say it!" Cause I'd get on 'em. So Sunday afternoon in Sarasota, everything was closed. In the beginning. You had to go to Manatee or you'd go to Venice. That's where the real joints were, the hangouts.

Grimmett: You and a few other people would go?

Brown: Oh yea, we used to go down there, and they'd be doing these dances, everybody had these names for them. Everybody would be sitting around the wall and they'd be serving liquor and everything- I was never a drinker. These girls and guys dancing in the middle of the floor, they'd be doing all this hoochie-coochie stuff. Oh my goodness, I could not believe some of the girls. But that's where we went on Sunday in the afternoons. Every now and then on a Saturday they'd have something, but the main thing was on Sunday night. Now, most of the parties was in the houses.

Grimmett: Do you remember any particular one?

Brown: Verna Hall used to have some. Maddie Steddie, she lived right down the road here.

Grimmett: Was there somewhere you'd go in the daytime to hang out at?

Brown: Hung out at the beach. I used to go out at Performing Arts over there now. Where Gulfstream is, where the big hotel is built now right from the Hyatt House, right downtown. Palm Avenue runs into 41, used to be the big Ringling Hotel. There used to be a walkway by the Ringling hotel to the beach, to the front down there. We wanted to be secretly because everything went on when you go to the beach, so we didn't want to be where people could see us. So right between the Ringling Hotel and the waterfront down there. That's where we hung out a lot. We didn't mind walking from wherever, however far.

Grimmett: Could you describe what Newtown looked like back then?

Brown: It was like country, I mean *country* country. People had houses, wooden houses. Like nothing was really put together except the only thing that looks pretty good, there's a church not far from here. That's where Miss Emma Jones had her place and everything was wooden, old-fashioned. All along Dr. Martin Luther King Way now, which was 27th Street then, was just wooden houses. Either the doors was wide open or people sitting on

the porch in the rocking chairs drinking iced tea out of the jars. Then the church, they had one church on 24th street. You could hear the music. You didn't have to go to church, you could just sit right there and hear the music right there. So you sit there and listen.