OH 18 OMA Oral History Collection
Alcena Boozer

Date: May 30, 2012
Location: St. Philip the Deacon Episcopal Church, Portland, Oregon
Length: 01:03:27
Interviewee: Alcena Boozer
Interviewer: Chris Petersen
Note: words in (?) or the symbol by itself means that they were difficult to understand and may have been transcribed incorrectly or not transcribed at all

CP: Chris Petersen
AB: Alcena Boozer

[00:00:00]

AB: My name is Alcena Boozer and today's date is May the thirtieth 2012.

CP: I'm interested in knowing a little bit about your childhood. If you could describe maybe the neighborhood you grew up in and some memories from your early life.

AB: O.K. Well I grew up about a half mile south of here, down between the Rose Garden and Lloyd Center. It was a multiethnic neighborhood. There were many people from Yugoslavia, Filipinos, Japanese after the war was over and they came back from the relocation centers and a sprinkling of African Americans.

CP: Carl's memory was that in his neighborhood, people got along pretty well. Was that your memory as well?

AB: Yeah, they got along very well. It was just a question of neighborhood and all the kids, I mean, any adult was likely to correct you if you were misbehaving. The neighborhood store was a gathering place. Then we were about five—six blocks away from Williams Avenue which was sort of the main street that ran through what little Portland had of an African American community at that time.

CP: What were some of the pillars of that community? The places that people would gather?

AB: They would gather in the Churches. This Church was a center because in '46, this building was completed, so it was one of the newer facilities. They would also gather at Bethel AME which at that time as on North Larrabee Street down by the Willamette

river and at Mount Olivet which is still on first avenue and Weidler Streets. The adults would gather—there's a fraternal hall right off of William's avenue in William's court, a little place that (went off before?) And there were a couple of grocery stores. There were two in our immediate neighborhood and then there was a Japanese store and given the times, it was called "Mama Japs." It was up there on the corner of Weidler and Williams Avenue. And in the schools, there was Holladay Grade School there which is in between near the western edge of what is now Lloyd center.

CP: Did I hear correctly that your family used to host black entertainers that would come into town?

AB: Yes, yes, they did.

CP: Can you talk a little bit about that?

AB: Well, in those days, black entertainers could not stay in the hotels downtown and my Aunt, who lived in Oakland California, had a boarding house. So she used to have people stay at her boarding house and she'd tell them "when you get to Portland, you can stay at my sister's house." Some of the people I remember were Louis Jordan and Lionel Hampton and, oh gosh, those are the names that come immediately to memory, but there were a lot of them.

CP: It must have been pretty exciting.

AB: It was pretty exciting because many times, that's how I got to see a lot of those people. They always gave my family some tickets and so we were taken to see a lot of them.

CP: Wow. Did they ever put any impromptu performances in your house?

AB: Well, Lionel Hampton did.

CP: Yeah. On his vibraphones?

AB: No, with a piano. Yeah.

CP: Wow. So, talk a little bit about going to school.

AB: Well, I started at Holladay grade School and that was in the war. There were too many kids here because of all the people who moved in to work in the war industries. There was no kindergarten, so I started the first grade. I went there for the first two

grades. Then, they shut down Holladay as a grade school and had a girl's vocational school there called Jane Adams. So they sent us to Irvington for one year. Irvington was a remarkable experience because we were literally integrating that sort of and that was not a happy memory because of the way we were treated. It was kind of hard. Some kids would say "you can't drink out of that water fountain." Then they could just drink out of it or something like that. I don't remember the adults at that school doing a whole lot about it.

CP: Uh-huh. So it was sort of the kids mistreating one another and the adults turning a blind eye.

AB: Right, yes, yes. But they reopened Holladay the next year and I only spent the third grade year there. They reopened Holladay in the fourth grade. And then that was a good mixture of kids from the neighborhood and that was a very happy experience. We did a lot of things. We had one gentleman, Robert Ford, who was the first African American teacher hired in the Portland School District. He was sort of a legend in his own time, an eighth grade teacher and very demanding of people. All the teachers were fairly demanding. They hadn't heard yet that we weren't supposed to be able to do anything.

[00:05:08]

CP: So was he a mentor for you?

AB: He was sort of a mentor because I think the best thing he ever did for me, I think at one time I was the captain of Safe Patrol—the fire patrol and I worked in the office and I was the student body president. One day he said "Miss Caldwell, you are nothing from this point on. You are going to stay in this classroom and do your work." So he was great in that way. He always encouraged us. I used to see him over the years and I did bury him because that was one of the things he left, that he wanted me to do his funeral.

CP: So you were very active in school.

AB: Yes I was. I was active in elementary school. I was not that active in grade school, I mean high school.

CP: Why?

AB: Well high school was very different. That was Washington high school and there were probably like maybe twenty African American students in the school at that time.

People, I mean, still teachers were demanding and everything, but the social kind of avenues weren't going to be there. I think that was for some kids, was a matter of choice. My sister, who is three years older, she joined some of the clubs, but I didn't.

CP: Did you feel excluded?

AB: Yes I did feel excluded so I put my energy in to studying.

CP: Uh-huh. Was it sort of openly hostile, or was it more…?

AB: It was subtle. Every once in a while there would be a rather egregious kind of faux pas there, once the choir sang "Some folks say that the darky don't steal/but I caught one in my cornfield," all the black heads we walked out. And the principle chided us about why we should understand those things. And I thought it was interesting that he couldn't understand that.

CP: Yeah. Well, you went to school during World War II. Do you have memories about what the environment was like during that time?

AB: Well, for the first two grades, because the war ended in '45 at the end of my first grade year. But I do remember the first grade, that by bringing your money to school to buy the war stamps and that actually I guess it was safe enough because holiday was about six or seven blocks from where the old sears was. And about four of us kids walked down by ourselves to go down to sears to take everybody's money and go buy the war stamps and bring them back to school. Nowadays that would be… that would cause great problems.

CP: Uh-huh. In our last interview… well, I'll get back to that in a second. I think more chronologically speaking, we were more interested in knowing if you had memories of the Vanport Flood?

AB: Yes I do. We were playing outside. It was Memorial Day in 1948, and it was a very hot day. We used to always play softball in the street and all of a sudden we saw all of these people coming in on trucks, on the backs of trucks, and everything, then my mother came out and told us it was on the radio, that the Vanport had flooded, and then the school was shut down for about a week because they had to house people in the schools around and everything. I could remember after about 8-9 days somebody taking us out in the car out to Denver Ave. and we literally saw the flood. You could see… The road was up there and you could see those houses that which were poorly constructed, bouncing up against the dikes and everything.

CP: So they were housing people in the schools?

AB: Yes they did. It worked temporary until they found… Some people, I imagine, went back to wherever they had lived before they came here to work, as I think that many of them felt that it was a temporary thing to do, go and help the war effort, ear some money, then go back to where they came from. But an awful lot of people did wind up staying too.

CP: So what was the conversation like in the community about this?

AB: Well it was typically of thing like that they were rumors. One of the rumors was there were bodies stacked up like cordwood in some armory somewhere, which wasn't in fact true. And there are many stories of people… Cause one family that happened while they were worshipping here said they were eating Sunday dinner and they got a suitcase, put the Sunday dinner in the suitcase, and got in the car and left.

CP: So the last time that we talked to you, you said that when you were thinking about your career options that were essentially available to you were you could be a social worker or a school teacher.

AB: That's correct.

CP: Is this something that was discussed within the community or within the family?

AB: Within the family. I mean, for most people that was a given. You knew that if you majored in accounting you wouldn't get a job as an accountant downtown or something like that. A few people did go on to work for Bonneville Power Administration.

[00:10:08]

CP: Like Carl?

AB: Yeah. Like Carl. And some other people, but for the most part, yeah that's it. Most people decided to work in schools or as social workers who went on to secondary education. My oldest brother, who is five years older than I am, he became a pharmacist. I think I told you, he was the first person to go to the school of pharmacy who was a native Oregonian.

CP: And he came back to Portland to work?

AB: No, he worked in Eugene first, but he eventually made his way back to Portland to work.

CP: So he was able to find avenues of employment then? Cause it sounds like then-

AB: Yes, he was-

CP: -you were talking about how accountants couldn't find a job-

AB: Right. But he was. By this time it was a little lighter, you see. Yeah.

CP: So those few years made a big difference.

AB: Made a huge difference. By that time we were starting to have fair employment practices, you know, I think it was the Truman administration that put in the Fair Employment Act.

CP: How did you meet your husband?

AB: Well, I had always known my husband because they were another family here, and he was six years older than me, and he was an altar boy and everything, and he was a good friend of my older brother, the one who went to pharmacy school. They all went to service about the same time, and got home about the same time. And I was actually dating somebody else who was up at Fort Lewis, and it was getting ready to go to the sorority ball and my date's leave was canceled and my brother said, 'Get Jim to take you because he's just like a brother to you.' So, Jim did in fact take me and the first thing he said is, 'This will cost you another date.'

CP: What was your wedding like?

AB: The wedding was here and it was a standard kind of wedding with the bridesmaids and the groomsmen and everybody. It was really a family affair because I had two sisters and a niece who's a little bit younger than I am, and they were my bridesmaids. My brothers and Jim's brothers were the groomsmen and the reception was also in the parish hall here.

CP: You mentioned everybody sort of knowing each other. Did you know Carl and his brother?

AB: Yeah, I always can remember Carl and his brother because one of the things as a tiny child during the war you remembered, in the old church before this one structure

was built, was seeing them when they came home in those dress uniforms, you know. It was quite a sight.

CP: We talked a little bit with Carl about the Civil Rights movement. I'm interested in knowing what your involvement was in the '50s and '60s.

AB: Well, in the '50s I was still in school then and it was mostly reading about it, keeping track of what was going on through the news and everything. By the '60s, I got married in 1960, and by that time by walking in some of the public demonstrations here because there were many of them in sympathy with the freedom riders going downtown and things, and, so, I did that. But the Civil Rights movement in Oregon is an ongoing process, I'm not sure it will ever end. Because I am still involved in it in terms of what we have to do in town to see that things go fairly.

CP: What were those early marches like?

AB: Actually everybody from the community, almost, would get in, and the other thing about it was the early marches, you had a wide variety of the community because Portland, you know, was a fairly liberal town, it was then too so lots of folks would support that effort.

CP: So, it was pretty well received?

AB: It was well received and Mark had (real icon?) and hero in this area because he led the movement to finally get that, part of the state constitution had said remove it said that blacks couldn't own property in Portland and Oregon rather.

CP: What do you remember about some of the main figureheads of the Civil Rights movement of that time?

AB: Ok, I remember E. Shelton Hill, who worked for the Urban League, Bill Barry who was a gentleman who came here at the Urban League. I remember that Father Stone and Doctor Unthank, who was a parishioner here and a senior warden were very instrumental in organizing both the Urban League and NAACP chapters here in Portland. And many a folk who belonged to the parish also were active in the movement. Myrtle Carr, whose name might have come up, she was very active. Mercedes Deiz, Carl's wife, when she got here she was active. Some people weren't active in the parish but well known in the neighborhood.

[00:15:01]

Verdell and Otto Rutherford, they had been literally born and raised here and so they were very active.

CP: How about some of the national level figures, like Dr. King or Malcolm X.

AB: Dr. King, I don't remember Malcolm coming here, but Dr. King did come here, at least once. Jesse Jackson came here several times, and whenever they came, of course, you had a large turnout for those kinds of things, those events. And people would keep track of Dr. King following him, you know, in the newspapers and on television and everything. It was a remarkable thing to watch, and even via television, him speak.

CP: What did you think of the black Muslims and Malcolm X at the time?

AB: Well, you know, at first I wondered about the black Muslims because to me, when they started out before Malcolm really got active, it was Elijah Mohammed who was a little man, and I didn't see that as a legitimate Islamic religion, so I thought that was just somebody who had decided to have a way to gain a following. And then once Malcolm got active and the big split, Malcolm really did go to Mecca and become, he did enough research to say this really isn't Islam. Then I saw them primarily as people who really helped in the community because what you saw of the Muslims here, people that you had known as drug dealers or whatever were cleaned up suddenly being very positive in the community.

CP: There was a Black Panther chapter here too…

AB: Yeah, I know the panther, the gentleman who stills works over in the community center was one of the (heads?) for it here. I had talked to him since and he said the one mistake they probably made, in the Panther Organization, was the advocating of (?). They recognized that later. The positive things the Panther movement did here, they did start that breakfast program and they fed kids before they put those programs in the schools here, and they did put pressure on some of the grocery stores who were sort of ripping off the community and higher prices and inferior kind of products to change. Some of them wound up leaving the community, but the ones who stayed did better.

CP: How did the atmosphere change as Vietnam became more of a prevalent issues within, I guess the community of activists here in Portland?

AB: The community of activists here saw it as, number one, as providing cannon fodder. They said if you look at who's there on the frontlines, the people were getting shot, injured and killed are primarily folk of color. They'd say, it doesn't make sense to

go do that to attack another group of people of color when you don't even have the rights here in your own country.

CP: So did sort of the tactics change in terms of what people were doing? I mean did it go from marches to, were there, like you see footage of people burning their draft cards, was that happening here too?

AB: That was happening here and it sort of depended. You see there were different segments of the community here. Some of the more traditional, Civil Rights, didn't quite go for that radically kind of movement. Younger people, you frequently see that as the movements go over the years, younger people were willing to be more confrontational. You know, do what was…by whatever means necessary.

CP: And where were you fitting on that spectrum?

AB: Well, that time I was teaching history at Grant High School and senior social studies and so I would try to keep an open mind and let the kids investigate all avenues of it to try to teach critical thinking skills, which was a lot of fun with youngsters of that age. And when they were trying to, one of the things, the voting age was still twenty-one, but for model cities programs you could vote at eighteen. So, to teach them about civic engagement we found one of our eighteen year olds, a senior, and ran him for the model city's board. So, they had great fun and having a campaign and going out they didn't win, but they learned a lot through the campaign.

CP: It must have been difficult sort of being a mentor of kids that age as they are graduating from high school and possibly facing the prospect of going off to work.

AB: Yes, it was, and you know we did try to encourage kids to think critically about whether or not you wanted to do this, if you didn't want to do this what were your options. I mean, does it really make sense to just run off to Canada, or can you become a conscientious objector or something like that. During that time I also served on the last draft board.

[00:20:01]

CP: Oh, really?

AB: Yeah, and I thought that was good because I thought I saw myself as somebody who would listen if somebody was a legitimate, conscientious objector or just somebody who was wanting to get out of something.

CP: And do you feel like you were able to perform that duty pretty well?

AB: I think so, but we really weren't there for that long before they ended the active draft.

CP: Tell me a little about 'Project Return.'

AB: Project Return. When I, I have to sort of explain, I was there in the high school, I was a counselor when I left, and then I decided that I was going to pursue the active ministry. I had already been ordained a deacon by being locally trained, and then I needed to go down to see the (?) so I took a leave for a number, a couple years to go do that. And when I came back, I first worked for Oregon Episcopal School as a Dean of the upper school and the Chaplain to the upper school. Then I decided that, that wasn't really my calling because those kids were quite well off and that was a fabulous school, but I felt my calling was down here in the center city and, so, I decided to go back to the public schools. They didn't know what to do with me. One of the administrators pointed out, 'You've got a high profile as a priest, can we have a priest in the schools, an active priest?' And my response was, 'Well, it's not like I'm going to go down the halls sprinkling holy water.' So, they decided well, we don't if we can send her back in a building as a VP, that was my rank when I left, so, ah! We know what to do. We've got these kids that are not in school. We had 55,000 kids in Portland at that time. Ms. Boozer, you are now the attendance supervisor. Me, for 55,000 kids and whatever percentage of them who weren't going to school. And everybody just sort of, my colleagues said, you know they don't expect you to do anything, just sit there in the office for a while, then they'll send you back in a building. You know, my father had a work ethic, that just wasn't in my DNA to sort of just sit there. So I decided, let me go out and see how many of these kids I can find. Well, that got to be a challenge and I found lots of them. And after about three or four months, we were at a school board meeting and they had me report on it, and then one of the school board members said, 'This is your chance. Ask for what you want, you got them right here publically.' So, they allowed me, they gave me the funding to hire another attendance counselor. So, I hired, at that time I was in my early to mid-forties, so I hired a guy who was half my age and could run twice as fast. So, the two of us, we actually rounded up five hundred kids that year. So that caught the public's imagination and we got funding, and I went back to the school board and we got funding for, what we call, transitional classrooms because one of the things we discovered was that the kids were out for a reason. Most of them weren't just out cutting to have a good time, they were cutting because there was no food at home, there was no transportation, parents might be off doing

something else, they were responsible for young kids, no food in the house. So there were all these social issues going, only finding a whole bunch of social agencies in their lives and nobody's coordinating this. So, we set up a transitional classroom as a place for them to come get reacquainted with school, sort of, do the evaluation where they were academically and begin to do some prescriptive work there. And then we had people from the social agencies who could come into the Project Return classroom and work with us, and we sort of acted as the brokers for the various programs. So, it was very successful until funding ran out, and it was about probably in the third or fourth year of doing that when they sent me to Jefferson as the principal.

CP: Was food part of that? I mean was that part of what you were trying to do was to help feed these kids?

AB: Yeah, we tried, we did feed them. We found ways to feed them, we found other groups to feed them. People are remarkable in terms of if they know what the issue is, people will help you and they'll do anything much more with you than for you. So, some of the clergy from the Albina Ministerial Alliance, they came in and said, well what can we do? And I shared with them all of the issues and I said, most of these kids don't come from stable families. One of those churches, and I've always been impressed by them, they decided that they would become foster parents. And they went through whatever they had to do and they started become foster parents to stabilize an awful lot of kids, and that was Emmanuel Temple, a Pentecostal church, Bishop A. A. Wells. And that church also purchased, before they built their current building, they bought a lot of property and they had a bunch of houses.

[00:25:06]

They started half-way houses, they ran drug recovery programs, they ran employment programs. You know, so they just did…its remarkable what organizations can do if somebody is willing to be with them, and they had actual leaders who would rise out of all these institutions—the local neighborhood institutions—and see what can we do and we do it together.

CP: What got you started down the road to becoming an activist?

AB: You know I think, basically, it was growing up in a home where my mother was sort of the unofficial solver of all problems, arbitrator of all disputes, and if something happened, and sort of seeing that go on, and my dad was on the railroad, so my mother was the one who was home. He was gone two days and home one, or gone three and

home two or something like that, and that's what started me for a lot of it. Being influenced by Father Stone, who was here, because he was the parish priest of a very small parish, but he was awfully involved in all of the institutions. Because one of the things he always told me was, and he spent a lot of time at our house because my mother used to do the liturgical garments, launder them, and the alter cloth, and he would come by to pick them up. He'd always sit down at the kitchen table, have a cup of coffee and talk to everybody. He would say, "You know you always have to go down to city hall to see what's going on, you can't wait until the overpass is in your neighborhood to say 'don't put it up.' You've got to find out what the planning is." And so he always encouraged that. He also always showed up at the house around report card time, and he would look at everyone's report card. He'd show up at the house around forecasting time for high school, he was the one who convinced me to take Russian. So, he was…but his wife was a teacher. She was the second African American teacher who was hired here, and so they just spent a lot of time working with kids. He would keep the church open here, an awful lot of dances and things went on and young people's fellowship went on here.

CP: Was there an issue that really galvanized you early on?

AB: Probably, you know I think my earliest, I think the issue was the election. I was always interested in elective politics, even almost barely after I learned to read. I mean I heard conversations in the neighborhood. The first one I remember paying attention to was the '48 Harry Truman and Tom Dewey. I can remember being aware of that one. The first one I worked on, I was fourteen years old, was Adlai Stevenson, and Dwight Eisenhower. Then from that one on I had just sort of worked on every election, and yeah, just doing different things and I liked to do the brunt. I would go and do the 'knocking-on-the-doors,' delivering flyers, stuffing the envelopes. And this last election I also sat on the corner around there, by the coffee shop, registering voters.

CP: Was there a campaign you enjoyed more than any other?

AB: I think, and probably a lot of people do, I think the last one. Because it was just not something I thought I would ever see in my lifetime.

CP: At one point you mentioned last time that W.E.B Du Bois and Mary McLeod Bethune were two authors that had made an impact on you. When did you start reading them?

AB: I started reading Mrs. Bethune probably about seventh grade. I started reading Dubois because we had a little, I wish I could find that now too, because we had a little copy of *The Souls of Black Folk*, the original, the first printing and I don't know where I lost that over the years, but I can remember reading that. It was just really an eye opener.

CP: These were ideas that you were discussing in the family?

AB: Ideas discussing sometimes with the family, ideas discussing sometimes with the teachers, ideas discussing with Father Stone, you know. Because Dubois was an Episcopalian by the way, but, yet, when he founded the NAACP, you might have read that we had this long litany of complaints. He said, "This and (?) that professes to follow Jesus Christ. You know when I got to seminary one of the professors was having us read Dubois too.

CP: So, what did you take away from these authors?

AB: I took away that, number one you have to really work hard because if you are not academically qualified, you don't learn to think critically, you're not going to be accepted seriously for anything you have to say or anything you have to do. So, that was the thing that always gave me the motivation to study. And the other thing was the virtue of civic engagement. You know, Dubois was an excellent propagandist. You know, I went back and most of the older Crisis magazines that he published for the NAACP and when he was teaching down there at Morehouse University, Atlanta University and the complex, and he started many of the civil rights kind of movements in libraries. He was the intellectual father of the civil rights movement.

[00:30:29]

CP: I'm interested in knowing more about your time in seminary. One thing that you mentioned from the last interview is you thought you were liberal but you found you were conservative-

AB: No, that was living in Berkley. Because Berkley is a very, very liberal place, and you know when I, 'cause CDSP is adjacent to the University of California there. You know, this was in 1983-84 when I went down there. And some of those people looked like they had been standing in a closet since 1960. So people were still having the demonstrations and everything and we took our oldest son, whose autistic, we took him with us, and I worried about how he was going to get along in Berkley, but you

know, he got along fine in Berkley because they have a high tolerance for people who are different. So in Berkley there was always a demonstration going on down there. When we had an apartment assigned us, we couldn't move in because of Berkley's housing's a kind of thing, a very liberal thing, you couldn't just ask people to move out because the seminary had bought the building, so we had to live in another place for a long time.

CP: There was some resistance to your interest in attending seminary.

AB: Yes, this was locally here, because this was still the time when women were not encouraged to enter the ordained ministry. So even though the church had made that decision in '76, local diocese, you know, a diocesan bishop has a lot of power, and this was one of the ones at that time when the local bishop was a part of the Catholic Clerical Union and he said women had a right to go. He wasn't going to stand in the way, but he wasn't going to help anybody either. And to this day, the dear man has passed on, but I think if he would have had any inkling that we would really make a way to go if he didn't give us any money, I don't know that he would have signed off on me to go.

CP: Did any one advocate for you, or were you kind of on your own?

AB: Well, some of the people did advocate, some of the other clergy in the diocese advocated for me because the priest who was here wouldn't sign off for me, the local priest has to sign off, and another priest did. And he was taking a chance to do that. He did. And then a lot of people just encouraged me to go. They said "We think you have a call," and this bishop himself once said "I'm really not too sure about women having a call, but I think if women could have a call, I think Alcena does have a call." And while I was there, right before the end of my time there, I got called in, and there's somebody who sent you money, but it's an anonymous gift. I always wondered if it was him. And he signed my ordination certificate, although he didn't personally ordain me.

CP: What was your experience like in seminary?

AB: By the time got there, about a third or half of the students there were female, so that was a very positive experience. It was a very… that environment was fabulous to have a theological education in because there are seven or eight seminaries down there and they're all part of the Graduate Theological Union. Everybody from the Unitarians to the American Baptists. So when you went to a lecture, it was an expert in the field, then you went to your own seminary for the preceptorials. Then everybody had pooled the

library resources, so there were works there that you never thought that you'd see, let alone get your hands on. So I liked that, and then there were only two persons of color there, another young woman who was much younger than I was. We were there and we didn't experience anything related to color. Really, nothing related to being female there in the seminary itself, because in seminary you just get used to it, and after all, it was in Berkley.

[00:35:00]

CP: Did you feel prepared once you completed your training?

AB: I felt prepared. Where I felt unprepared was when I got there, because I was already a deacon I wasn't required to take three years there, but I was required to take the same exams as everyone else did, who had been there for three years. And I felt like I really had to work much harder to come up to speed, but then the other part I found out was the practical experience of having been in pastoral ministry for five years probably offset some of those advantages that I thought other people had.

CP: What was the transition like for you from the seminary to actually being a reverend?

AB: Well, it was… I was at the school that time, because that's where I was. And that time, the cathedral was there on an Episcopal school campus, so I was an associate priest at the cathedral then, and I was the chaplain of the upper school, and the dean of the upper school. So that was a very positive environment to be around the kids there. You know, it's kind of a rarified atmosphere, because those were kind of wealthy kids, with the exception of we had a significant number of kids whose parents were from Aramco, whose parents work for Aramco, over in Saudi, so Aramco decided it was more advantageous economically to pay for those kids to be in the private school here and pay for a couple of trips back and forth than to run their own school. So that was an interesting experience too, because when you wanted to speak to those parents you had to get up and call at two or three in the morning to get them. But I only stayed there for one year, and everyone was curious about that, but it was just this whole idea that I needed to be somewhere in the center of the city. I just really perceived as having an urban ministry. And so that's why I left. And the woman who replaced me died up on the mountain with those kids, when they lost those nine kids.

CP: Oh really?

AB: Yeah. And I did go back, the school district permitted me to go back, and I went back for a couple weeks to be with that community during the time they were getting through all of that.

CP: Is that when you came to St. Phillip after you left there?

AB: No, when I left there I went out to the coast range, I was the Vicar of Emmanuel Missions in Birkenfeld, which is between Jewell and Mist, those are the big towns around. This is right by the Nehalem River and then it's St. Catherine's in (Claxton?).

CP: What was that like?

AB: Well, that was really interesting because they had never seen a, most of them had never seen, a female priest, let alone a black priest and just have one together. But the people at Birkenfeld were really welcome and everything. I'd been there a while and one of the women, who was kind of the matriarch of the congregation came and said, "Mother Boozer, what are you?" I said, "What do you mean, 'What am I?'" She said, "Well, somebody asks and said they'd seen you around and they just thought you looked a little bit dark, but they weren't sure what you were. So we said we'd ask you." You know, it was a good ministry too because out there, I'd always been in a fairly good sized parish…, but out there my first Christmas Eve I celebrated the mass. You know, this was a place where you had to wait until the people brought the water, there was no running water, before you could do communion. They had an outhouse which they let me know they had put up there for the convenience of the clergy because they could all get home. And that first Christmas Eve that I was out there, about the time I was saying the Eucharistic Prayer, cattle started (lowing?). And all the sudden I said, "Yeah, this makes sense, Lord." You know I thought I learned a lot about being out there, and when I left there I came back into town and because I went back to the school district as my primary job because I always had to have a job so I could afford to be a priest. And I was at St. Stevens downtown and Grace Memorial which is over by Lloyd Center, I alternated Sundays between there as you know a (dollar a year person?). And I did that until 1993, and that's the time the priest who had been here retired and one of them (that series?) had been here after I left. The Bishop asked me, he came out to Jefferson High School, Bishop (Diablada Ladehoff?) who still lives here, he's retired now. He said, "I have no right to ask you this, but I need somebody to go to St. Phillip. You just have to be there on weekends and do the masses, because the lay people do the rest of it." And I thought, well of course, I can't say no.

[00:40:01]

Then once I got here, and these people all knew me, I was raised here, but my joke with them was I always wanted to come back somewhere where somebody in their late 40's early 50's could be called little Alcena. And so that's what I told them when I left too at age 72, it was nice to be little Alcena here, in my aging process. They were really willing to work because my first sort of little talk with them was, this is not my ministry it's our ministry because I've got a job just like the rest of you folks. And that was a very healthy thing because they owned that. And so they were very active in getting the ministries going. This was a parish that since Father Stone had left in the '70s, it hadn't really been focused outward. So one of the first things we did was to, I said, "Well lives around here now?" Nobody could really tell me because I had been away for ten years. So I said, "Well, why don't we go out and knock on some doors and figure out who lives here." The response was, "We don't do things like that, we're Episcopalians." You know, used to being a school person I said, "Well, we're going." And we went out and they came back and they were surprised because most people thought the church was closed.

CP: Oh, really?

AB: Yeah, because the priest who, they had a polish priest here who wasn't too comfortable being in the neighborhood, and he always had the blinds closed and the drapes drawn and everything. He was a good and faithful priest but he just had some concerns about the neighborhood. And so when they figured that out I said, "So what are we going to do if people think we're closed? How are we going to let them know if we're here, we're open, we're trying to preach and live the gospel. The people in that housing unit down around, down the next block, it was just open, but when we went there, there were actually some bullet holes through the door because this was the time the gang stuff was heating up. And they talked to people who wanted to visit about how frightening it was not to have anything for their kids to do, and it was in the fall. We decided to have an All Saints party in lieu of Halloween, but invite the neighborhood kids. And, you know, about 40/50 kids showed up. So, that was all people needed to say, yes, there is a ministry here that we need to do. We need to do some outreach and we also decided they had been doing a once a month feeding of the community. I just posed the question, "Do you think people might be hungry more than one day a month?" So, then we decided to try to do it every week. And that was, that was really a stretch because to get a crew in here to do it, most weeks I was here myself cooking, and I had no idea how you cooked for that many people. But I thought, I'm the

daughter of chef cook it must be there somewhere. So, I just did the math and we started doing things and some of the women who had been around and had a little better sense helped out. There was such a response to that, and we started getting more people to church because sometimes people just walk by and would walk in and maybe have a meal, maybe not and say, well, gee can I come help? And they would help and pretty soon you'd see them on Sunday morning.

CP: So how many people were you feeding?

AB: We started out feeding between about 70 to about 100/125. Now they're feeding 250-300 people.

CP: Where does the money come from?

AB: Well, the money, well God will provide if you start doing this stuff. I had no idea where was the money was coming from. So, one of the first things we do is joined a food bank because they get to buy ten cents on the dollar and there are some grants. Then as people figured out what we were doing, I'd get these anonymous checks 'for the food program only.' One young fan I had here, a young man died in his early 40s and his mother came up for the funeral, they were down the valley somewhere. And she was asking me about the food, and I just casually mentioned what we did. About two weeks later we get this check for $5000 daughters. And I called the daughter-in-law, the widow, and said, "Should I send this back? Is she ok? Does she have dementia or something?" She said, "Oh no, she's loaded. Keep it, cash it." So every year that mom would send that check on the anniversary of her son's death until the time that she died. Other people, somebody sold a house and said, we really want to help. So there's just all these sources that just sort of come up. People will designate for the food program only and the church is very good about designating it for the food program only.

CP: So, it sounds to me like you were providing similar direction for the agenda for this church, but it was kind of being developed collaboratively as well over time.

AB: Yes, and I think that's the way you do it is collaboratively because I think nobody will come in and just do your agenda because you say, I'm the priest and we're going to do this. No, that doesn't happen, but if you sort of gently point out to people,

[00:45:00]

'What does the Gospel say we should do again? You know, what did Jesus do out there?' And when they see that they put that together and I used to always tell them, I preach half the sermon on Sunday morning, you preach the other half. And I had a sign down here on the door when you go out, the whole time I was here, and it said 'Reentering the Mission Zone.' I always wanted to reinforce that notion that it's what we do more than what we say; it makes a difference in the lives of believers.

CP: So, aside from this intensified focus on sort of outreach, are there any other ways that the church changed over the time that you were here?

AB: I think they became more open to incorporating the African American history in terms of the liturgy and things because in terms of the (?) the original folk who were in Portland who founded this church and everything were West Indians. And the people of the West Indians tend to be very high church and very formal. Those people and their descendents weren't exactly overjoyed if you started doing some of the little up-beater things. I know one time somebody said, "If I wanted that kind of music, I would remained in the Baptist church." You know something like that. So gradually we started to introducing some of that, and so in terms of making the liturgy more open. And that was a way of trying to re-attract the people who left here because we have, for the most part, one generation that was missing, the people probably about ten years younger than me, that 10-20 year period. Because during the time the black power movements, they went off to join black churches. They saw this as going to white church.

CP: Carl mentioned the demographic of the church has changed a fair amount. Well, the racial demographic.

AB: Yes, because it's…I haven't been here for two years, but when I left it was about 50/50. But the white people who were here are very sensitive to the church's African American history and tend to want to lift that up.

CP: So you don't, you haven't encountered much in the way of tension as far as that's concerned?

AB: No. And I don't know what will happen, because I know a couple people have mentioned that they think it will probably change all the way over and there won't be anything unless people protect that history. It won't be, in many cities it's happened, you know. They have sort of, these smaller churches they have combined churches that happened in Oakland, California. And when you combine the churches, the one that usually loses the sense is the one that's the African American part.

CP: I have some names here of people who have been associated with the church, if you could share some recollections. We've already talked about Father Stone. Do you want to talk a little bit more about him?

AB: Well…he was, to me he was also sort of the paradigm of what a pastor is, because, as I said, he used to show up at the time report cards showed up. My mother also told me stories that when I was very ill as a toddler and had pneumonia they weren't sure I was going to make it, he was sitting there by the bedside, you know, helping with things. And I know that…because both my boys were born with things wrong, I mean I have the autistic son and the other one had congenital (glaucoma?) and we almost lost him to post-op stuff, and then Father Stone was there to sort of help me through that.

CP: How about Mercedes Deiz?

AB: Mercedes was an incredible role model, I think, for all the young women. It was Mercedes, she was pursuing law school by being a mom with three kids and everything, she would always take time for younger people. She always told me, you can be anything you want to be…I was still here afterwards. I used to go visit her all the time, during her final illness; I spent a lot of time. But Mercedes was a (?) of woman you know? She was sensitive and she was strong.

CP: So these are some names that Hannah…the past reverends of this church and maybe you know some of them better than others, but I'll just go through them: William Vernon Wetzel.

[00:50:10]

AB: William Vernon Wetzel was the second priest after Father Stone. He was an interesting man and he always preached with his eyes close. Everyone wondered why don't you open your eyes and preach? But what he did for this, this had been a mission from 1919 until 1979. Bill Wetzel is what he was called, Father Bill, he was the one who sort of rose this parish, encouraged it to rise up and claim its place rightfully as a parish in the church and got people to do all the things they needed to do. And he was the one who led us into the Diocesan Convention, saying we've come this far by faith when we were admitted as a parish. He was the one who was here. Now, he didn't believe women could be priests, but he was the one who was here and told me that he didn't have a deacon when I was chewing him out about not getting around, and so he was the one who encouraged me to be a deacon. He wasn't too thrilled, he had left here by the time I became priest, but when he heard about it he wasn't too thrilled about that.

CP: Ramsey Schadewitz?

AB: Ramsey Schadewitz was the polish priest I told you about. He was the one who would personally sign off for me to go to seminary, but he was a good and faithful pastor because he dutifully called on everybody that was sick and shut-in and everything. And he read the daily offices everyday he was here, if it was only by himself and everything.

CP: How about Karl Reich?

AB: Karl Reich was the, and he pronounced it "rich." He was the interim who was set here after Father Schadewitz retired and he was, again, a wonderful pastoral presence and really got along with people well. He was a fisherman and went fishing with some of the folks, and he was here, I came after Karl.

CP: Sally Lambert?

AB: Sally Lambert is a deacon here, and Sally, when I was here, she had been out at St. James in Tigard and she left there. It was either Christmas or Easter she showed up in the pews here and she was here another Sunday. And I said, "Deacon, do you have anywhere to be? Because I think every clergy person needs to be at an altar." And she said, "No." Well I said, "Well, why don't you come here?" And that's how she got here, so she's been here for a while.

CP: How about Richard Green?

AB: Richard Green was the last priest who was here. He was the one who followed me, and I had been here for seventeen years and that was…but he was a perfect person, you know, God is good to send somebody who had the sensitivity, who had the kind of preaching skills, the kind of sermons people were accustomed to hearing about and sort of encourage people to do what they needed to do. He had a good way.

CP: So the rule is that once you retire you have to leave the parish?

AB: Yes.

CP: That must have been pretty difficult.

AB: Well I knew that was coming, because see I set on the standing committee, the diesis. I had to be involved, you know, but some clergy needed to be reminded of other places that, 'Hey, you're 72 its time to go.' And I understand the rationale for that

because you won't have any place for younger clergy and the ones coming out if you don't do that. So, I knew that and I think it was harder on the people than it was on me because I had expected, and I had tried to prepare them because they thought I was out of my mind when I started telling them five years ahead of time, 'I'm going to be retiring.' They were kind of dragging their feet and one of my little moles told me, "You know what they think? They think that if they don't do anything you won't go." I said, "That's not even a question. I am going because that's what the church does."

CP: How about Kathryn Bogle?

AB: Kathryn Bogle was a historian, she was a journalist, she was an incredible woman in terms of how she used to organize, because there was some journals of hers around here, I found one in the in the kitchen one day up on a shelf, where she organizes YPF groups when Father Stone was here. So, she encouraged her son, Richard Bogle, he was well known around here he was both television newscaster and on the city council, we just buried him last year. Kathryn lived into her 90's and she was very clear right up until the day she left this earth. She always took pictures, sent notes, and you probably read one of her histories at the parish.

[00:55:10]

CP: Talk a little bit about the connection between the church and the Urban League of Portland.

AB: Ok, well the church in the Urban League when Dr. Unthank I believe was on that board at that time when they were organized, and then he was very active with Bill Barry who was the executive director for a while, and with E. Shelton Hill who was the executive director for a while. And they always, many of the Urban League meetings were hosted here, they wanted those pictures somewhere around somebody (because?) one of the meetings that was here, the year (?). And they sort of made sure that league had a place to go and to grow and then another person, I don't think whose name has come up yet but, Gertrude Ray. Gertrude Ray was the secretary of the Urban League here to Mr. Hill in places, and then she became the director of personnel for the league. And she was, and she had grown up in this parish and she was very active too, so those were connections. And Myrtle Carr, who's in her 90's now, and she was also in the office there. So, in between the staffing of the league the people here had a, maintained a very natural connection between the parish and the league. And so that kept the parish advised to what the initiatives were going on at any given time. Whether voter

registration or anything else because up until the time that I left, Ms. Carr was still standing up reminding people when every election came up to get those ballots in.

CP: So that's a big focus of the Urban League?

AB: Yes, and employment, that was another part. And when Father Stone was here, and the league and the employment, he sort of was an informal employment counselor for the league too, and Ms. Ray was very active in sending people out on job interviews and things.

CP: So they would prepare people…

AB: They did prepare people very well.

CP: I wonder if you could comment a little bit on race relations in Portland and how they've changed over time?

AB: Well, they've changed, for the most part, formally, you know it gets back to this question de facto and de jure. From the de jure standpoint they're very good. De facto, sometimes they leave a little bit to be desired. I think the most glaring example now is the relationship between the police and the black community. It's still a very stressful relationship, I mean you still, I've had the conversation with my grandson and my son (whose dad does too?) about how you must behave when you come in contact with the police if you want to live. When was the, when I was in the schools I know sometimes coming home from the game on Saturday night you'd see the kids out in the streets, and some of them were just doing what kids do, and the policeman would have them up there 'hands up' and everything. I'd stop my car and say, "Is there a problem officer? I'm the principal of the school." Then they would sort of stop, but that's still going on and probably will go on for a while until there's, you know, the police here don't even have an evaluation system. That astounded me. We were at a meeting, the ministerial alliance with the mayor, and I can remember posing that question saying, "Tell me how your evaluation system works." And he kind of hesitated for a minute and then he had to acknowledge, "We don't have one."

CP: How about the gentrification of, especially this part of town?

AB: That's a sore point because, you know, the people who used to live around here could no longer afford to live around here. If you drive around Portland much you'll see something you never used to see and that's a large number of people of color living out beyond east of 82nd avenue. But that happened with the gentrification and the way

people sort of first made sure there were no services down here so the area kind of deteriorated, and then when it was at its rock bottom price came in and purchased all the land and then started developing it.

CP: How is your activism changing?

AB: My activism is changing by, in some ways, moving, slowing down a bit, but not too much. Because every time I think I'm going to slow down I'm going to another meeting, there's another cause that comes along and you decided that as long as you've got strength you've got to do that. And the activism takes on not only against races but against ages, you know, because you find lots of things, terms of medical facilities, insurance and things for older persons.

[01:00:00]

My latest little thing is going to be with the providence system because the tool program they have, water aerobics program for older folk there, they're getting ready to close it. Because they can make more money by putting a surgical suite in there or something, but anyway, we organized a little letter writing campaign, and so yesterday the folks were very concerned about, 'Well, what if they don't read the letters and they don't do anything.' And I said, "That's the first move. You kick it up a notch, and if they don't respond to letters, then we call Channel 2. They don't respond to that, then we're out on street with our walkers and with our canes and in our wheelchairs."

CP: You mentioned satisfaction that you felt working in the Obama campaign, what was it like the day he was elected?

AB: You know, I could just remember crying a whole lot because I had been working in the local office up here on Killingsworth Street. There were a bunch of young kids there from all over the country there, working, because I could remember taking a pan of spaghetti there too and those kids were out there in the street partying. They put up a great big sign saying, 'Yes, we did.' But the question now is can we reignite all that enthusiasm this time around, because I think people are pretty comfortable thinking, 'Oh, well there's no way he's not going to win again.' But that's being very gullible I think.

CP: Have you reflected much on your own life as being a sort of a pioneer or mentor?

AB: You know, I keep saying I'm going to write something for my grandchildren, and I think I will do that, but you know it was just last month or so I got around to writing

my will. I thought, 'Well, I'm almost 75 years old, I'm not going to be here forever. I probably better do that.' But the reflection, the whole thing about it is, I was always greatly surprised by whatever I did because I was the meekest, mildest, scariest little kid in my family out of six kids. Older brothers and sisters always said, "Well, speak up for yourself," and everything. So, it was always a great big surprise to me when something changed, and it was always a recognition of, you know, you never know what God has in store for you. And the best thing is to try to open one's self to go along with whatever comes. And the other thing I learned was not to take myself too seriously, take my work very seriously, but not myself. Because I had to discover that, kids helped me discover that when I was a principal at school, you know, because the kids were tough over there. They weren't very excited, you came up and said you're the principal they'd say, so what.

CP: Well, that's the end of my list. Is there anything else that you want to talk about?

AB: I just want to know about what the things that you're reproducing and things, will they be available in a bank online? For the researchers? That's great, really, because that's the one thing I worried about is what happens to the history of this place.

CP: Well, that's what we're trying to do is to capture as much of that as we can and preserve it for future use.

AB: Good, good. Well, thank you so much for doing that. You've guys got a great job.

[end 01:03:27]