

**UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS -AMHERST
DEPARTMENT OF AFRO-AMERICAN STUDIES**

Oral History Project – Fall Semester 2004

AfroAm 297A: Black Springfield: Revisited

Course Instructors: *annalise fonza*, Doctoral Student –Department of Landscape Architecture & Regional Planning; *Dr. John H. Bracey* – Department of Afro-American Studies; and *Representative Benjamin Swan* of Springfield, Massachusetts

General Topic of this Interview: In this interview, Mrs. Pryor and I talked about education; mostly, we talked about where she received her education (Fisk University and the University of Chicago), and where she taught (Kentucky State College (formerly Kentucky State College for Negroes), Springfield Technical High School, and finally Springfield Technical Community College). We talked at length about her recollections of Fisk, during the early 1940's, as well as her employment/teaching experiences schools in Springfield during the 1950's. Mrs. Pryor was proud to talk about her husband and children; she has one son and one daughter. She has been married to Dr. Albert J. Pryor for fifty-six years (it will be fifty-seven years on December 27, 2004). Mrs. Pryor recalls the local racism and adversities her husband, Dr. Albert J. Pryor, faced while working toward his PhD. He is fondly remembered at Western New England College (WNEC) where he established the Department of Social Work. Her husband is currently living with Alzheimer's. Throughout this interview we discussed how it was difficult at times for her children to grow up in Springfield with two influential and educated black parents. According to Mrs. Pryor, their social and class status was frequently met with jealousy in the black community, and racism in the white community. Mrs. Pryor, a lifetime resident of Springfield, raised a number of issues that are historically relevant to the formation of Springfield's history in general, especially when it comes to education.

Date: November 28, 2004

Interviewer: *Alexis Miller*

Place: (Mrs. Pryor's home) Springfield, MA

Personal data:

Interviewee: *Mrs. Dorothy J. Pryor*

Birth Date: December 4, 1923

Background: Mrs. Pryor was raised in Springfield, Massachusetts. Her parents moved here when she was five months old. She received her education at Fisk University, a historical black college/university (HBCU), taught at the college level in Kentucky, and obtained a Master's degree in English from the University of Chicago. In Springfield, Mrs. Pryor spent most of her life teaching for the Springfield Public School District; eventually, she became a professor at Springfield Technical Community College (STCC) and was appointed by Governor Michael Dukakis as a trustee in the late 80's. Every first Wednesday in April is Dorothy Jordan Pryor Day at STCC. An award is given in her honor to a deserving professor.

Interview Length: 49 minutes (some of the interview was lost due to human error).

BIOGRAPHY

Mrs. Pryor is an 81-year-old retired professor. She was educated in the Springfield public schools and attended college at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. From there, she went on to teach at Kentucky State College for a few years. She received a Master's in English from the University of Chicago and returned to teach in Springfield, MA. After teaching for many years in Springfield's public schools, she was offered a professorship at the newly opened community college, Springfield Technical Community College (STCC). Mrs. Pryor was one of the only black teachers in the school system and helped pave the way for many up-and-coming educators. She is now enjoying retirement in Springfield at Reeds Landing, a well-manicured assisted living center located on the far eastern side of Springfield in the neighborhood known as Sixteen Acres.

INTERVIEWER'S COMMENTS

This interview was a very enlightening experience. I learned a lot about the schools in Springfield and what it was like to be a teacher in troubled times. The interview was by far the easiest part of the project. I was nervous at first because it was my first interview, but it turned out to be a really positive experience. Of course, the hardest part was typing the verbatim; that was something I underestimated. During the interview, I learned that there is much that I do not know about Springfield's history, and ladies like Mrs. Pryor have a lot to teach us. I allowed myself to be personally involved in this interview, and it seemed like a lot of what we discussed did not pertain directly to Springfield. I think this happened for a number of reasons. This was the first interview of this sort that I've ever done and I did not feel comfortable interrupting or redirecting Mrs. Pryor. I felt a little insecure with what I knew about Springfield, and it was easy to let her take the lead. On the other hand, while we did not talk much about Springfield's black history, her interview is very relevant to this course. This interview is important because so many black women and their accomplishments are ignored and written out of history. In its written form, her story can be shared for generations to come. During this course we touched on important topics like education, church, and youth. All of these topics were also discussed during class time, but this interview helped me to discuss them at length and walk away with a better understanding of local history and a fascinating introduction to one of Springfield's finest.

Alexis: So, I guess we'll just start. How long have you lived in Springfield?

Mrs. Pryor: Well, I was brought up here, I wasn't born here but my parents brought me here when I was five months old, and so it's my home. I was educated here. I graduated from Classical High School in '41. Ah, I got a chance because, , the, I, I didn't have any money, but the only thing I could do was to do well in school, and I got a scholarship to go to go to Fisk, and I borrowed money and you know, there wasn't any financial aid so every summer that I was out of school I worked. I worked at the Armory.

Alexis: Okay.

Mrs. Pryor: And you know.

Alexis: That's now Springfield.....S....

Mrs. Pryor: Where S-T-C-C [Springfield Technical Community College] is now, but that was the Armory, we were making ammunitions. I was a shop checker for ah, I, um, I think gun parts or whatever, but whatever, and a lot of people worked there, but that's how I made my money to go to school. There was any school, there wasn't any ah student aid, you know, there weren't any ah funds for colleges. You, you, you made your own or, or your parents had money, you know.

Alexis: Right.

Mrs. Pryor: My folks loved me dearly, that's my mother and daddy right there (pointing to a picture behind me), they loved me dearly and they, my mother always wanted to have an education, but, um, she was she was poor and, and they encouraged me to do well in school and that's how I got the scholarships to go, but I had to work.

Alexis: Right. Now growing up, did you own a house, (Mrs. Pryor: Oh no, no.), did you rent a house?

Mrs. Pryor: No, no, rented. When I grew up I grew up in the Depression, honey. And, uh, there were... I can think maybe of one, maybe two, black families that owned their property. They rented.

Alexis: Okay.

Mrs. Pryor: You know. Ah, after the war, people came, uh, came, ah families came up here to work in some of the of the plants, not munitions plants, and bought, and had (pausing) boy most of the Southerners came up here had had the idea of, of home ownership. We, there weren't that many blacks whom owned homes here. I mean the minister might own one, (inaudible) I mean, you know, people rented, and (pausing) so it was, one of the things that we did when we came back here eventually was (inaudible) was that we would buy a house.

Alexis: So, you moved away (**Mrs. Pryor:** Oh, yeah.) and then you came back?

Mrs. Pryor: Oh yeah, I went to Fisk, at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee.

Alexis: Oh, okay.

Mrs. Pryor: And, uh, I graduated, I graduated the top of my class and I got a scholarship, uh, well, I was supposed to get a scholarship to go to the University of Chicago, but ah at that point they stopped giving them to graduating seniors from undergrad. They were only giving them to the grad students and I said, “oh boy,” so I didn’t know what I was going to do, but the Dean at Fisk who knew that I was top of my class happened—just you know, just luck or blessings or God’s will or whatever--happened to meet, on a train now, the president of what was then The Kentucky State College for Negroes in Frankfurt, Kentucky.

Alexis: Okay.

Mrs. Pryor: And he was complaining because... President Atwood, Rufus (inaudible) Atwood was complaining because some young person, I don’t know whether it was a man or a woman, he had hired to teach French and English had wired him (that’s how you got in touch with people, you didn’t call them that much. You’d teleg-, you’d send them a telegram if they couldn’t come), and he was wondering how in the next month he was gonna find somebody to fill this position. Well, you know God works in mysterious ways, and, and ah Dean (inaudible) was like, “I’ve got just the person for ya.” So, I got a telegram from the (people didn’t do as much long distance calling) from President Atwood at Kentucky State offering me an instructor’s ah, ah position. Now, I was gonna make (thinking out loud), what was it, a hundred and twenty five-dollars a month plus my, plus my meals, my lodging and that was, that was, good money, it was better money than what I could make here, and I got the job (pause) in the English Department and I taught French that first year and then the French teacher came back so I just taught English from then on.

Alexis: Was Fisk an all-black university, also?

Mrs. Pryor: Yes, yes, ah, but not the faculty; there were a number of dedicated faculty members at Fisk. See, Fisk was, was an American Missionary Association school. It was one of those traditional black schools that people from, Yankees, from ah New England, would go down and teach at these schools to, to, to make, to help build the school, and ah, because there weren’t that many black teachers who were yet college professors, there were few, but not many. And, uh, those people deserve so much credit from these historically black colleges, because those white teachers who were actually cut off from society in, in the cities where they lived, if they had the nerve to teach those, you know what they called us.

Alexis: Right [chuckling about the word nigger].

Mrs. Pryor: Uh, they had to live by themselves. I know the, the organist, and the, one of the teachers over at Fisk, he was a brilliant man and, uh, I had marvelous teachers. Ah, there was a mister, ah, oh God, let's see, it begins with a "C," I'll remember it at some point, but he was a history teacher. He was great, and you know, and, and there was Dr. Vanhorn who was a math teacher who they, they simply made their life in the community with the black folks, 'cuz white people weren't having anything to do with them. It was the, it was weird but I got a beautiful, beautiful education (inaudible). I had a, had a Creole teacher, uh, Mr. Lemiere... who I used to say could spot an upside-down period at 20 paces (laughs) but he was, he was awful but, but he was so good, he was such a good teacher, and I had had good teachers at Classical, but because I took care of business in school, I was in the top classes and I took honors English my senior year with the guy who wrote the book, Edwin Smith. Yeah, at, at Classical, I'm going backwards, but at Classical when I was there from what, let me see from thirty-nine to forty-one, half the people there wrote the books we used. The Smith Brothers wrote the, wrote the geometry and algebra books and trigonometry books and, and Mr. Edwin Smith wrote a book called--I have a copy of it somewhere here--it's very valuable now, Enjoyment of Literature, which taught us how to love reading and to love, and how to analyze characters and what-not, and to have English with him was just a joy, and so you know, when I got to Fisk I was in good shape to do well.

Alexis: You were, you were prepared.

Mrs. Pryor: I was prepared and ah I stayed at the top of my class. Now, I lost some friends 'cause you know, they wanted me to kind of "hang," I couldn't hang. I had no money. If I didn't earn scholarships, I wouldn't be there.

Alexis: So, it was all business.

Mrs. Pryor: I had to take care of business and it was hard. Fisk had a lot of fine folk there, and ah, even if, uh, it happened, I went to school, you know, during (pause) Pearl Harbor Day...was the, was in my freshman year, I can remember it well. When I entered Fisk in the fall of forty-one, there were fifty boys and gals in the class. Well, in the June of forty-two, by that time, there were only the girls, because the fellows had all been sent off to war.

Alexis: Sent off to war.

Mrs. Pryor: And the only fellas were the fellas at, at Meharry Medical College, across which is across the, the street from Fisk.

Alexis: Okay.

Mrs. Pryor: And ah, they all, they thought they were just the, the "last word," you know, and they all had the sixty-four dollar question, and you'd better have the sixty-four fifty answer or you were in trouble, ha, ha.

Alexis: (laughing)

Mrs. Pryor: And that...I, (reflecting) they were charming fellows, but you know, you had to take care of business, some people didn't, but you had to take care of business. If you, I knew where I was going, I couldn't disappoint my mother and father. There wasn't any other way for me to go to school so, I mean, I wasn't all that good, I just had to do it in order to stay there.

(laughter in unison)

Mrs. Pryor: You have the loveliest dimples.

Alexis: Oh, thank you. I got 'em from my dad.

Mrs. Pryor: Oh, lovely.

Alexis: So, when, what year did you come back to Springfield? Was that right after you graduated from college?

Mrs. Pryor: No, no, no. Remember when I was telling you the, the, the President of...the, the dean, Dean Taylor?

Alexis: Oh, right.

Mrs. Pryor: ...from Fisk, was on the train with the president of Kentucky State and in the fall of forty-five he, he wired me and I took the job in Frankfurt, Kentucky. I had never been in Frankfurt in my life, but, uh, and the schools of course were segregated and it was called at that point Kentucky State College for Negroes. Now, it is now Kentucky State University and is part of the University system in Kentucky, but, um, in those days it was absolutely illegal for blacks and whites to go to school together. For whites to teach blacks or blacks to teach...I mean, oh, they had, they had what was it, was it the Day Law? Well, they had some kind of law in Kentucky that made it illegal for intermingling in education.

Alexis: Okay.

Mrs. Pryor: Ridiculous. But they, they...it wasn't like Fisk; Fisk was in Tennessee. This was in Kentucky. See, I had white teachers in Tennessee at Fisk. We used to call him, I remember the man's name, Mr. Courier in, in, in the History Department and Dr. Vanhorn. If they, if Fisk had been in, in Kentucky (Alexis: That wouldn't have happened.) (agreeing)...that wouldn't have happened, which shows you how foolish segregation was (Alexis: Yeah.) and how, how it hurt (inaudible). But anyway, I went there in the fall of forty-five as an assistant instructor but I was, I had good training, good training at Classical, good training at Fisk, and I found immediately that I loved teaching. I really did, and uh, it was funny, I have to tell you this, this little incident. I was, they

had a uh, a, what do you call it, a picnic for the new, for the freshman, ah, before classes began and, I, I was just barely, was I, I was just barely twenty-one, you know, and I went to the picnic with my hair pulled back in a pony, ponytail and, and shorts and what-not, you know, and um, I'd gotten up and they had food you know, I was still young, young, they had all this good barbeque so I got in line and this dude uh, came and broke, he cut in the line in front of me. I said, "Why don't you wait your turn?" You, you can't get in front of other people, and he said, "Who do you think you are? Caldonia?" I think that it was Caldonia, or... (inaudible mumbling) Anyway, at, at which point somebody grabbed my arm and was like, "Miss Jordan," I was a Jordan then (okay), "Miss Jordan, the faculty can sit down... We'll serve you... We'll bring you your dinner." Well (pause), two or three days later when classes began I didn't have on shorts, I didn't have, I had my hair (motioning) you know. I had on a pretty little gray pinstripe bolero suit and some navy blue, I never could wear high, high heels but medium heels and what-not (Alexis: Uh huh.), and this dude who had cut in front of me and said, "Who do you think you are, Caldonia?" walked into my class and said, "Oh my God," I said, "Yes, it's Caldonia's turn now. Ha, ha!

Mrs. Pryor: And the thing of it is, I had a lot of veterans and they were my age, because, I mean, you know, they were my age, so I had a very serious choice to make: do you teach them or do you date them? And, I said I had a feeling that I better teach them. You can't, you know, I doesn't work... like that gal who went to jail, you know, playing around... no! And, and, and it was, it was hard to say no, but, no, I had to be a grown up. And ah, you know, I, I, I was, I had a class to, to advise and all of these things, but, I, I kept, I was friendly, I used to them and I used to dance with them at the dances and all of those things, but I was a chaperone.

Alexis: You had to be professional.

Mrs. Pryor: I had to be professional, and ah, it was funny. One of my, on of my former students who was exactly my age, still keeps in touch with me, right now, he lives in Las Vegas, but ah, he, he got back in touch with me and ah he said, "Oh, Mrs. Pryor." Well, look, I wasn't Mrs. Pryor by the time he graduated. So anyway, the next year my husband, my for-, my future husband arrived on the campus because the guy who, um, was in the History Department, he had been, he had head of the History Department, was he head, I don't know, but he was in the History Department, was at the University of Chicago with my husband. They were both studying sociology and history and what-not, and he told, Dr. Cheney, he's my son's godfather, as it turns out, he told my husband about me. He said, "Oh there's this young lady from New England that's down there." So, in the fall of forty-six, my husband, my future husband arrived on the campus and he decided he liked what he saw and he proceeded to pursue me. However, the first semester I didn't even speak to him, because he was just, oh he was just (chuckling), ah, I mean he was something else, anyway, but ah, I had a girlfriend, a sorority sister who said to me um, well (inaudible), "Dorothy, you don't have to marry him, just talk to him, get to know him." I got to know him second semester, at the end of which he proposed and, he didn't really propose, he told me that I was going to marry him, and I married him on at the end.. , on December 27, 1947. And we've been married, it'll be fifty-seven years

this, this December 27th (**Alexis:** Congratulations!). Yeah, thank you, thank you, and, and, we've done a lot of things together, we've traveled, we've had, I've had so much, he's been, he's been such a beautiful man to me and he's thirteen years older than I am but it didn't make any difference until about three years ago when he came down, he, his Alzheimer's. My husband is down in the ah, right now, he's down in the nursing home part of this, this facility because he has, I go see him everyday, and he has Alzheimer's but he's, he's wheelchair bound, and that's terrible because he used to, he played tennis for fifty years, ah but he's, he's special so, you know, I still get to see him. It's ah, it was a long-term commitment; I meant what I said and so did he.

Alexis: Now, what year did the two of you move, come back here?

Mrs. Pryor: Okay, we ah, Al got the job, my husband, in fifty-three, I think it was, either fifty-two or fifty-three, ah, was offered a job teaching here in Springfield. Oh, and he, he was told to apply for it. You've heard about Reverend Charles Cobb, haven't you? Well, maybe you haven't, but he was a pastor. I knew him, I had met him when he was, I have to back track, when Reverend Cobb was the chaplain at Kentucky State and also was in a sm, small Bapti-, ah Methodist Church in Frankfurt, Kentucky, down in the city. I had met him, his sis, wife, Martha, was my sorority sister and I just got to know him, and he and Albert were, were close friends. They were alike, they were, (pausing) they were, what do you call it, they would break the mold, they were in a sense, mild revolutionaries, not revolutionaries really, but they would shake things up, you know. And ah, my daddy, who's in that picture (points behind me) was the ah, head deacon at St. John's Church and they, one of the ministers the ministers they had was getting ready to leave and uh, he.... I had talked about Reverend Cobb and he said, "Well, why don't you ask him to apply here in Springfield?" Well, he thought about it, and in those days you did everything over the telephone, so they, they invited him up and I guess sent him his, his train fare; in those days, you didn't do that much flying (**Alexis:** Right!). And ah, he preached one sermon and they invited him by a plane to be the minister of St. John's, and he was the minister there for fifteen years until the denomination, the Congregational Church, ah, knew he was good and asked him to take an administrative position in the national office of the church in, in New York and, and from which he went into other things. He was uh, part of the Commiss-, Commission for Racial Justice which is still part of the ah, national church, the Congregational Church. Okay, well, he came and of course, he told my husband, they were buddies, they were frat brothers among other things and, both of them (inaudible), anyway, he told my husband that he should apply here because they had only a few black teachers. Ah, they had two or three, two or four in elementary school, and a couple in junior high including the lady for whom ah, the Rebecca Johnson School is named after. But they didn't have anybody in high school and Reverend Cobb suggested to my husband that he should apply for a job in high school. Well, they didn't want, they really didn't want integra-, integration in the faculty, so but they, my husband had at that, by that time had had a year, maybe a year and a half on his doc-, on his PhD at the University of Chicago, he had finished his Master's, and so had I at the University of Chicago, but anyway, ah, he came and they interviewed him for a job at Classical, which is now Central, and when they hired him, they put him out at Trade. Now, Trade High School in those days, Putnam (**Alexis:** Okay.) Trade High

School, in those days--did you ever see the picture of black boy jungle? (**Alexis:** No.) Well, it had to do with a vocational school where the kids were going crazy. They put him out there because they knew that if those kids who were driving their white teachers crazy would really do it to this black teacher and they could just wipe their hands and, and say that black teachers weren't qualified to teach in high school. But you know, wherever there is somebody evil, God usually places somebody good, and Edmund P. Garvey, who was the principal of Trade School, was somebody good. The, the superintendent of schools, Superintendent Saunders, and Esther Skelly who was the assistant superintendent, they'd write up all this mess, absolutely false about my husband's teaching ability but, see, if it didn't get signed by the principal, it didn't go, and Mr. Garvey wouldn't sign it and, see, in those days, if you worked for three years you got tenure and my, he waited until my husband had tenure. Then he said, "Okay, I'm gonna give you all your classes in the morning, you go on down to UCONN (University of Connecticut) and finish your doctorate," which he did. I mean he was, oh, Mr. Garvey was marvelous. And then Mr. Garvey was a, was a forward-thinking man, cuz it's, it's his idea that started STCC (**Alexis:** Right.). In the meantime, I was teaching as a sub and ah, (**Alexis:** At Classical?) I taught, I taught, well, primarily, I taught, well first of all I taught, I was just an ordinary sub, I got a chance to teach once, ah or twice at Forest Park and at CI-, at ah Technical High School, and at, maybe once or twice at Classical. But, it was my teaching, God works in mysterious ways, it was my teaching, my subbing at Tech for just about, oh maybe about three or four weeks, I was the substitute for the lady who was the head of the English Department, Alice Kerry at Tech. And Mr. Gifford, Don Gifford who was the principal at Tech, noticed this, but then I got a, what they call a preferred sub assignment at Buckingham Junior High School, and I taught at Buckingham (sighs), boy, junior high school is my fav-, if I had to stay at junior high school, I mean, the kids are growing, every, everything is growing, every, every molecule, every cell, (laughing) they are a trip, and I had eighth grade, oh God, and, and I had a slow group, you know, (**Alexis:** Uh Huh.) and, but I made them do what they were supposed to do and in fact I've met some of the kids that I, they're grownups, they're old-, they're almost as old as, well, not almost as old as I am, but I at it, at Tech, at ah Buckingham they said, "You didn't stand for no nonsense." I said, "No." But, ah, I knew I couldn't stand it, and right around the middle of the, the second semester, ah, Mr. Giff-, Technical High School was a huge high school, it was the biggest, it was, it had the biggest enrollment and they had college prep and they had, you know, they had uh, tech - what do you call them (**Alexis:** technical) and then they had the general courses, but they had almost 3,000 students at Tech (**Alexis:** Oh, wow!) , and Mr. Gifford remembered me and asked me to, to take a, take a position in the English Department at Tech, and there were all kinds of people who wanted those positions, but oh, I got it and honey, I enjoyed it. I, I, I loved my students and uh, it's amazing (inaudible), kids are...I don't know whether they are the same way now but my students then were just (pause) beautiful. They, they were surprised to see my black face in class, but after about three weeks the only color they knew was my red pen on their papers (laughing), because I, I really loved teaching and you know, they knew that I, I cared about them. I would tell them, "I don't care what you made in your other classes, you have an "A" with me until you prove that you don't." And they would work their tails off for me, in fact I was honored last month, no, was it last month, yes, I was honored October 23rd by the class of 1964 at their

fortieth reunion, and (pause) they sent a car for me. They ah, I'll have to go get the citation and show it to you, but I loved teaching those kids. But I mean, you know, and they forgot-, their parents would come for parent's night (**Alexis:** Uh huh.), and they'd look right at me, and I would be really - teachers dress up for parent's night, and they'd look right at me and ask, "We'd like to speak to Mrs. Pryor." And I'd say, I'd quietly say, "I'm Mrs. Pryor." "Ah, we're looking for Mrs. Pryor," I finally had to raise my voice and say, "I am Mrs. Pryor," and I'd wave the record book at 'em. "Oh but they didn't tell," I said, no, they didn't tell, many would forget after about what color I was (giggling), and they didn't, half of them, didn't tell their parents that I was black. Oh, it was funny and tragic in a sense, you know.

Alexis: So, it wasn't really the kids that had (Mrs. Pryor: Huh?), it was like the parents who had the issue?

Mrs. Pryor: Well, they, well they didn't, they hadn't had, the parents hadn't had any exposure, you know. Ah, you, you can't respect what you've heard a whole lot of junk about and you haven't had a chance to have, to know different, you know? That's, that's the thing, you know. I (pause), I could've gotten angry but I didn't because I knew they didn't know. They, they, they, the popular culture said that blacks were inferior and so forth, and they believed-, you know, when you believe all of that crap, excuse me (laughs), oh, you're quoting me (both laugh) you're in trouble, but they believed it. And, when they were faced with something that was different, and I hate it when people would tell me, "Oh, but you're different," I'm not different, except that I had opp- opportunities that a lot of other people haven't had. Don't tell me I'm different (pause) you know, because if, if, if you want to believe that mess, then of course, you can, you can be all (pause) proud and what not but no, no, no, no, but anyway, it was great.

Alexis: Now where did you live in Springfield?

Mrs. Pryor: Well, I lived ah, on Westminster Street, you know its right off...of ah, what's on the corner of Westminster Street now? There is a, uh, we had a bunch of these dollar stores and whatnot (**Alexis:** Oh, like the Dollar Tree?), yeah, it's one of those dollar stores. It's on the corner of Westminster Street, and I was on the second block of Westminster Street, when it was really a very...it was part of the, it's part of the historical area. I lived in 120 Westminster Street, and that house is still, I think, on the historical record, you know, but we had a big house, (pause) by that time I had the two children, you know. I had, I brought Chan- with me.., : my son was three and my daughter was a, an infant, she wasn't even a year old yet and ah, we lived there for eight years, almost nine, and um, then we moved out to, ah, Sixteen Acres, out to, right off of Plumtree Road (inaudible. (**Alexis:** My aunt used to live on Plumtree) Hmm? (**Alexis:** My aunt and uncle used to live on Plumtree.) Who are your aunt and uncle?

Alexis: Um, the Samplatsky's.

Mrs. Pryor: Yeah, well, they, they would (pause) do they, are they still around?

Alexis: They live in Pittsfield now.

Mrs. Pryor: Ask them if they knew Mrs., Dr. and Mrs. Pryor. We lived on Newton Road which was right off of Plumtree, we lived up on the - , and Newton Road is almost like a circle, and we lived there for thirty-three years, I'll show you a picture of the house in a minute. We sold that house to move in here.

Alexis: So, you've lived in Springfield quite a long time?

Mrs. Pryor: Oh, I grew up here and like, I was gone for eight or nine years and now I'm back. It was ironic. I almost didn't want to come home because see when you come home, everyone treats you like the kid you, you know. I mean to I had to announce that I grew up. I'm married, I've got, I've got two degrees, I'm married, I have two children...I am grown. They all wanted me to be little Dottie Jordan.

Alexis: Now, going back to little Dottie Jordan um, what kinds of things did you do when you were younger in Springfield, like in your neighborhood for fun?

Mrs. Pryor: Well, I had some...we did things in groups when I was a teenager, ah, when it was much safer. I mean we, we when went to parties, you went in groups. You, you didn't have a lot of this going steady with somebody, you didn't. You went, you went, you went in groups and we partied, you danced, and what-not, you know and you'd play "Spin the Bottle" and whatever but you, but you know, you were right in your homes, you know, and ah, I remember (giggling), we went to one lady's house and the kids put magazines over the top of the lamps so it wouldn't be so bright in the room, and she came along and took them... (laughs). Oh, Lord, but, but we had fun...we danced, you know, oh everybody danced, you, we had a record player and you danced. They were vinyl records and then, let's see, I think little thirty-three, those little ones came out after, when I was a little more grown, but anyway we, we had fun with the records and jitterbug...oh, and I was a good dancer; it bothers me now to have arthritis and two, and, I have two artificial knees, I guess I must have danced them away.

Alexis: You danced them away!

Mrs. Pryor: Actually, my husband and I used to dance so well together that people would stop and watch us. He was a good dancer, too, now that's one of the things that that I guess drew us together, even though he was thirteen years older, he was smooth, well, there's my wedding picture (points behind me).

Alexis: Oh, it's beautiful.

Mrs. Pryor: I got married in St. John's Church, too, I got married in, ah on the night after, the day after one of the biggest snow storms we've ever had and half my guests didn't get there but that's all right, and we got on the last train going out of Springfield and we went to Washington, oh no, we went to New York and stayed at the...what's the famous black hotel? (Alexis: I don't know the name of it.) Um, oh wait a minute, the

uh, Hotel Theresa (pause). It was lovely and there was snow everywhere and we walked around and it was beautiful.

Alexis: So, you've been a member of St. John's a long time?

Mrs. Pryor: All my life. I helped write the history of the church. And then I helped do the video on the history of the church, yeah.

Alexis: And your kids went to St. John's?

Mrs. Pryor: Yea, they went to St. John's; they didn't have the same experience as I had. They had a negative experience, because Al and I were among the few black teachers in the city and you know jealousy translates, you know, and some of my good buddies who would be nice to me but their kids would be messy to my children. It's different now, I mean my kids are grown now, but it marked them, they were unhappy at church because kids took it out on them, their jealousy of us. Re-, Remember, when you do well, ah you won't have but so many friends (Alexis: Right.), you know, and that's true in life that your biggest value in life is, is your family and friends. And if you have real, real friends, they're priceless, you won't have many. I lost one a year ago, almost a year ago today, a lady who, who had been my friend when I was at Kentucky State and ah...but hey, you don't have that many friends, but when you have them...I only have two children but I have a lot of play children, oh yes, (Alexis: Adopted children?) adopted kids, oh yea, that that lady right there is a teacher down in, in a (inaudible) Florida. That's Bernice Dawson, and ah, I have, they may call me. "How's Mom? Ma Pryor, how are ya?" It's beautiful.

Alexis: Now, did your kids attend Springfield Public Schools?

Mrs. Pryor: Yea, well, my son did, ah, and my daughter did until she was in sixth grade. Now the gal who is the film, the documentary filmmaker, she is, she was angry [speaking of her daughter, Claudia]. Well, she was angry by the way she was treated by some people (inaudible). Also, I guess, she was a little jealous of her brother, turns out she did a lot better than he did in some ways, but she (pause), one of her teachers got word to us anonymously, that Claudia was flunking math in order to stay with the slow group and raise hell in the back of the classroom, this was in sixth grade. And we knew Claudia could do the math and all those other things, and could read and do, you know, when she was a toddler, almost. So, we did, we took her down to MacDuffie (Alexis: I almost went there...inaudible). We almost dragged her, kicking and screaming, not quite, but we took her down to MacDuffie, and there was a lovely woman there who was head of admissions, Miss Marie Hall, and ah she welcomed us and Claudia (dryer buzzes in the background) I had something in the dryer, I know I have to put it back on but I'll go check it later - ah, she knew that Claudia, you know, was, was reluctant and you know, she was...we practically had to drag her kicking and screaming, but not quite. So Miss Hall said, welcomed her and ah gave her a thirty-minute Otis Test, and Claudia took the pencil for about 15-20 minutes and then she threw it back on, back on Miss Hall's desk. I had to look at my husband, 'cause he wanted to snatch her (laughs), but she was so...she

looked at us, Miss Hall looked at us with such pity until she corrected it. That little witch had passed it even though she didn't want to, and she said, "Oh, Claudia, we'll be glad to welcome you in the fall." Well, Claudia, Claudia did all kinds of things, not, not violent things, but she talked out of turn all of the time, all of her first year, her seventh grade year, and she made all kind of, she made a record out of the kinds of detention she got. But we weren't moving her, we wouldn't even discuss having her go to public schools. And by the time she got through the seventh grade, and then went to summer school to make up the math that she had deliberately flunked, she met...ah, the classes were small and she met classes, people who, and she was the only black in her class, no, she wasn't, there was one other gal, but she was the only black in her class and she met some kid, including Meredith Berdman whose daddy owns Yale Genton (**Alexis:** Who?), and Meredith and she became close friends, and Claudia discovered that you didn't have to be...you could do well and not be square not to be you know, and she learned to love to learn, and ah, she graduated, Claudia graduated with general honors from MacDuffie and was the only one in her class to be accepted to Harvard when she graduated.

Alexis: Impressive.

Mrs. Pryor: Oh, yea, she graduated cum laude (laughs) anyhow, but she was also the senior prefect because she had pulled so much mess that she knew exactly how to get straightened out, they couldn't get anything passed her. She loved it, after three years at MacDuffie, she realized she was where she needed to be and she wanted to march in June in that white gown with the red roses (**Alexis:** Yeah.), so she did. But you know, we had to take her out of an environment where there were people who were jealous of us and would pull her down, and she, she didn't feel that she belonged, I guess, but she belonged at MacDuffie and she belonged at Harvard and then she went on. So, it's been a...she's fascinating. Now my son was, was much more popular, but if he'd been a little less popular he might have done better, but you know it took him longer to find his way, but he's got lots of personality and lots of ability, and the, the real blessing in my life is that my two children love one another.

Alexis: Important.

Mrs. Pryor: That's very important that they are supportive of one another, ah, Claudia, as it turns out, has made much more money than he has. Uh, but he, they make life, society makes life very difficult for black men, and for a black man to succeed he has to take a lot of crap, excuse me, but he does, and if he doesn't know how to deal with it, he can just be (pause), just punished and will not succeed. See, he's got to learn that there's more to it than, you know, after learning to swallow a lot of stuff and what-not. Honey, a black man who succeeds in this society, this American society, has paid his dues over and over and over again, and that's why my husband as a teacher, first at Tech, at ah, at Trade, and then he became a counselor and then he was hired, he was the first black they hired at Western New England, and the man over there recognized that he had ability, gave him instant tenure, and the people who, you know, who still remember him. We get invited to all of this alumni and retiree stuff at Western New England, he can't do it

anymore because ah, after the Alzheimer's, but we get invitations to all kinds of stuff because of what he started, the social work program, at, at Western New England.

Alexis: Oh, really? (Mrs. Pryor: Yeah.) That's my major!

Mrs. Pryor: He started the social work program at Western New England.

Alexis: Now, where did your teaching path go, did you eventually become a professor (Mrs. Pryor: Yeah. I went, I went...)? Did you teach at Classical?

Mrs. Pryor: No, I didn't teach at Classical, I was at Technical High School and then when they opened STCC, ah, everybody wanted to go and I didn't, I didn't go right away but I knew somebody that was a dean there and he said, "You ought to apply," and a fella there by the name of Jim Curran and I, both of whom, both of us had our master's degree's from the University of Chicago in our discipline, we were the only two teachers out of Tech that they took, because to be a teacher in the college you had to have your Master's in your discipline, not in education, but in your discipline.

Alexis: So, you had your Master's in...?

Mrs. Pryor: I had my Master's in English, and Jim Curran had his Master's in Biology, and oh, you talk about people having, being bent out of shape, 'cuz everybody wanted to get into this new community college.

Alexis: Now, at that time was it mostly black students going to STCC?

Mrs. Pryor: Oh, no, no! It's never been mostly black students (inaudible). No, but uh, it was mostly adult students, now it's still not mostly black students. We don't have that many black students but... 'cause most of our kids, we have a lot of kids who, who are taking ah remedial subjects, but...you, they don't think they can do that, and I, I tried, I was a trustee at STCC for ten years. I retired early because my husband wanted me to come home when he had to retire, and then three years later Governor Dukakis appointed me as a trustee, and then he reappointed me in eight, oh pardon me in ninety, and then he appointed me in ninety-five, no, he appointed me in '85 and then reappointed me in '90. And, you can only serve as trustee for ten years but I was on the Board of Trustees for ten years at Tech [STCC?]. And they, every first Wednesday in April is Dorothy Jordan Pryor Day at STCC. They give an award in my honor. Well, they sort of, they give it to somebody who has done what I did, who works, lives in the community and works at STCC. And, you know, it's nice they give money with it now, I never got any money with it (both laugh).

Alexis: That's okay, it has your name on it.

Mrs. Pryor: It has my name on it. It's okay, you know, you learn that money is only a means to an end. Now, you gotta save and that's one thing my husband learned, you can't spend it all, you have to save you just can't, (pause) my son was late learning it.

My daughter and her husband, her Jewish husband, really know how to save (chuckling), but you know you have to save, and don't limit yourself. You are lovely, but be sure when you choose somebody to share your life with that you choose not lust, and not everybody who is boyfriend material is husband material. You have to know. One of the loveliest gals in my experience, a life-long friend of mine, told me that. She was Miss Virginia State College when she was a senior...a beautiful woman. But you gotta have hard sense, she said, "Dorothy, you gotta know what's husband material and what's boyfriend material. You don't marry boyfriend material." And she didn't. Much to the, much to the chagrin of [inaudible]...because she was so pretty, but she's got hard sense.

Alexis: Now, was there a lot of black, like black community leaders [when you were] growing up or living in Springfield?

Mrs. Pryor: Well, you had a few. Dr. DeBerry was the, was the main one (Alexis: Right.). And your ministers were, ah, ah, a Reverend Fullilove and, and Dr. Reverend Dupree. The ministers were the ones who, who had much of the...they didn't have a lot of leaders, black leaders, but when I was growing up the ministers had the power, but you know they didn't have any blacks teaching in the schools, but eventually uh some of those young men, young black students did go to, some of those black male students at Springfield College, which was and is a, a YMCA College but of course now it's coed. But when I was in high school, the fellas that came to our parties went there and who came to our formals at St. John's before Springfield College became coed we had our pick of Springfield College students, they ah, they attended our parties, too, and it was interesting.

Alexis: So, the church is like the main community?

Mrs. Pryor: Yea, it was the main community thing, the ah, the social activities that Dr. DeBerry started was what became the Dunbar. The Dunbar literally grew out of, out of St. John's, out of Dr. DeBerry's work. And you know churches very often are the, the seed for community activities because I think...what's the name of the Presbyterian Church, (thinking out loud) what's the name of the Presbyterian Church? (pause) Martin Luther King (MLK) Community Presbyterian Church, that's where MLK Center really grew out of, you know, because church leaders know that young people really do need something constructive to do and, and something that they enjoy, like basketball games and sports and that kind of thing. So, if your churches don't do it, you know, a lot of community activities grew out of the church.

Alexis: So, it fell mainly on the church's shoulders mostly?

Mrs. Pryor: In my time, now, of course, now you have other avenues, but even so, the, the churches are still important, they're, they're ah, safe turf in a sense. I go to St. John's now, three services...they must have a couple thousand members.

TAPE ENDS. TURN TO SIDE B

Alexis: What, they have three, three services on Sunday?

Mrs. Pryor: Oh, there's one at 7:30, 9:30, and one at 11:30. I try to make the one at 9:30 one, because this facility provides church transportation, on a limited scale, to the residents here who want to go to church, but they have to take the van, the little van, ah, at 9:30, and I'm the first one they drop off and then everybody else. Let's see, there's only three black people living here, yeah, ah, my husband and I, and Dr. Joseph Peterson.

Alexis: That's it?

Mrs. Pryor: That's it, it's very expensive here. You know, you have to have money when you move in here and when you buy, buy into your time, your living space and we've been here nine years. We couldn't, we couldn't afford that, it's gone up, but see when got in, when it first (pause) on the ground floor, we, the, the place opened in May (pause) and we moved in in October. October 26th, we have been here nine years.

Alexis: That's a long time.

Mrs. Pryor: Uh huh. And my husband wanted me to do this, you know, here again, social work. He understood that you need, you need to have a place where you can have these services and be independent when you need to be, and have these health care services available to you and not be a burden on your children, and ah, honey, honey, let me show you the house (Mrs. Pryor leads me around the apartment). See it on the wall over there? We lived there thirty-three years.

Alexis: This one right here?

Mrs. Pryor: Yeah, and we had three-quarters of an acre of land. And see, a house is...

Alexis: A lot to take care of.

Mrs. Pryor: Yeah, it's a lot to take care of, see, you need to have one for a while, but when Al got to be...let's see, when we moved in here Al was 85 or 86, but anyway, he realized that we need help. And we hired people when he could no longer do the snow in the driveway and do the grass and whatnot, so we had to hire people, and some people worked well and some didn't, and he got tired of it. Enough already (laughs), and he wanted to be here. And I used to tell people, "I thank God for keeping my mouth shut." I didn't say nothing, you know, I never let the thirteen year difference, age difference, never made a difference, until about three years ago when his Alzheimer's really got bad, and they came from the staff here and were like, "Mrs. Pryor, you're trying to take care of him and you can't. He's too much for you." He was wandering around getting lost and he was becoming incontinent and the whole mess. So, they said, "No, you can't do it." He got on the elevator one day and was lost on the elevator one day until I came down to the elevator and somebody encouraged him to come off. It's sad 'cause he was such a, such a, marvelous companion, we went everywhere. We went to Aspen, we went to Europe, our daughter took us to Hawaii. Ah, it's life, life has (pause) to keep from

feeling sorry for myself, all I have to remember are the good times, the good things I have. I'll show you something....I'll show you two things from my bedroom.

Break in the tape.....interview resumes

Alexis: So um, considering like, what you now know, is there any advice or recommendations? How do you feel about Springfield now?

Tape shuts off....

Mrs. Pryor went on to talk about the importance of education and keeping our children out of trouble. She stated that she thinks Springfield is a good place to raise your children, you just have to keep them on the right track. Mrs. Pryor talked about how she had no problem raising her children here and thinks that it can be done and the outcome can be good.

Courtesy of Annalisa Ronza and the Museum of Springfield History, Springfield, MA