

Melva Lowe de Goodin

.... = Unintelligible

Italics = Sounds like

I = Interviewer

M = Melva Lowe de Goodin

I: Thank you very much for agreeing to participate in the project. It will surely benefit the community now and in the future. So, we'll begin. Tell me about your place of birth and what was going on there when you were growing up. What was your childhood like?

M: Well, I was born in what was known as the Panama Canal Zone. The sector of the Canal Zone that was designated for the West Indian immigrants. I was born in a little town called Red Tank, which no longer exists. It's not very far from the Pedro Miguel Locks. But I grew up in another town called La Boca, which exists now, but exists with a different configuration, so to speak. At the time when I grew up, it was one of the communities for the Panamanian West Indian workers, and we lived there until about 1955 or '56, and then we moved into another Canal Zone town called Paraíso, and that was where I completed my junior high school and my high school.

I: What was it like growing up on the Canal Zone? What are your fondest childhood memories?

M: I think the fact that it was a small community, we all knew each other, and there was a library available in the Paraíso community, right close to the school, and I was very fond of books. I remember always going to the library on a Friday and coming out with about four or five books and spending my weekends reading. That was the time before TVs, so that was my best entertainment. So, I think that the fact that I grew up with books, I grew up reading, reading was entertainment for me, and the fact that the library was right there on the school premises within walking distance. That was a big help for me. That was my fondest memories.

I: So tell me, what was your favorite book? What do you remember?

M: I remember reading the Nancy Drew stories, and I just read all these short stories, and then as I grew older, I started getting the romantic stories, and then my father was a big fan of the Ebony Magazine so we always looked forward, at that time it had a bigger format, a different format, and we always looked forward to him bringing home Ebony Magazine. We always looked forward to him bringing home the Star Herald and the Panama Tribune. We fought over who would read it first. We followed the comic strips, and so it was, you know, fun for us to follow what appeared in the newspaper, the comic strips, and also some of the different publications that he brought home.

I: Who were your best friends? What were their lives and families like?

M: Most of the people in same my class. We moved in very closely together, and we did have a little group people who we also liked reading, and so we'd share books and we'd share ideas. Sometimes we would go to movies together. And then another thing that I liked about the community where I grew up, Paraíso particularly, was the fact that on the school premises there was a tennis court and a swimming pool. So I learned to swim in high school, and I started playing tennis from I was about twelve years old. Now I can't continue playing because of my knees, but I grew up playing tennis, and so some of my friends were the people that I played tennis with also. I was also into music at the time. My mother sent me to learn piano lessons. I studied with Judas Seward for many years. And then I went to the conservatory of Panama. Then once we got into high school, I took up the violin, and I learned to play that a little bit, and I was part of the school orchestra or band or whatever it was, and so we had a few performances. I don't play the piano or the violin anymore, but those were some of the pleasant experiences that I had and it contributed to my formation and, of course, we had the little Methodist Church on the hill, and that was a very important part of my formation because my mother and father all insisted that we grow up in the church. We were Methodists and the church contributed to my formation, in terms of enabling me to develop leadership qualities. When I was in my mid-teens, sixteen, seventeen, I had formed a girls' friendly group with younger girls in the church and we had programs that consisted of music and dancing and poetry readings and that sort of thing. So that was a part of my early training for leadership.

I: What music and poetry do you remember you all being interested in?

M: It depends where we were, you know? Once if we were in church, we were dealing with Methodists hymn book which comes out of Great Britain via the Caribbean, and so the traditional hymns that Methodists people sing, that's the type of music that we dealt with in church. Now once I started playing music in school, we dealt with, I don't think we, we dealt with more classical music. And at the conservatory also it was classical.

I: So tell me what music and poetry you remember being interested in.

M: Well, there's a variety of music in our community. If we're in church, we sang the kinds of hymns that came out of the traditional Methodist hymnbook, which came down to us from Great Britain. If I'm at the conservatory, I dealt with classical music mostly. And for the most part, in high school at the band, it was a combination of classical and maybe American semi-classical music. But at home I remember my father always liked spirituals. He liked black American music, so he'd always have spirituals, Mahalia Jackson, and those types of music playing. And he also liked a lot of calypso, so we'd always have calypso music and so forth. My father danced quadrille, too, and he also collected the quadrille music, so we also heard that a lot at home. So I would say we had quite a variety as we were growing up, but at home is where we'd hear the popular

music, except on Sundays, because in our home only religious music was played on Sundays.

I: So those childhood friends of yours, are you still in touch? Have those friendships been maintained? And what memories do you all talk about now?

M: Well, for example, I have a neighbor who lives across the street. Her name is Amy Boyce. Amy Boyce and her family were very close to our family. She is at least maybe eighteen years older than I am, and she served like my older sister. As a matter of fact, she's the person who taught me to read. And she and her sister would take us to church and to programs and things like that, and she is somebody that I remember from my earliest years, and our families have maintained our friendship over all these decades. It's more than a fifty-year friendship. We're almost like sisters, or maybe I could call her my aunt. She's had children and a granddaughter and the relationship has continued. So she is somebody that I really remember and, well, my classmates, we are in touch with each other, my high school classmates. As a matter of fact, this year we're planning a reunion. I know one of my classmates Ricardo *Mallette*, he was very instrumental in helping me with my son when my son was about to go to college in the United States. As a matter of fact, he stayed with him for awhile and he mentored him for awhile, so these are memories and folks from way back then, and we have maintained a contact; whenever he comes to Panama, we talk to each other or we see each other, and the same is true for some of my other friends. But I've made many new friends and sometimes, these days, I am in a mixture of circles.

I: So tell me about your parents and grandparents. What are they like? Where were they from? How did they come to Panama?

M: My parents were both born in Panama, but their parents were born in Jamaica. And as was the tradition then when their parents came to Panama, the social services, healthcare, education, were not very well provided for, so many of the men preferred that their wives go take the children back to Jamaica for schooling because the schools, there were not that many schools in the city of Panama or in the terminal cities of Panama and Colon, and it was a fight to get in, and sometimes these schools didn't want to accept English-speaking people. So many of the West Indian workers at the time, once their children got to school age, they'd send them back to the islands, and that's how my parents went back to Jamaica, for schooling. My mother's story is somewhat sad because her mother came to Panama and she had three children for Richard Wilson, and Richard said well, you know, "Go back and get the children in school, and I'll follow you six months later." Well, Richard never went back to Jamaica. He stayed in Panama and had another family, and I think he didn't provide for the three girls that he had with Ada Blanche Winter Wilson, and so Ada then had to go out to work in a home and she had to find families to place my mother and my aunts, and that has been very painful, or that had been very painful for my mother. I think she cried about it for, until she died, which was not very long ago. But she has had those painful memories.

I: Do you think there were other friends of hers that had painful memories like that?

M: Oh, I'm sure, I'm sure, I'm sure the separation of people coming and going, you know, some of them stayed here and started raising families, and some of the men went back, and some of the women came and weathered the hardships with their families. So there were mixed experiences which is why in the book that I wrote, From Barbados to Panama, what I wanted to bring out in that book are some of the hardships that many of our Western Indian immigrants faced once they immigrated to Panama, that it wasn't all colored man with the gold buckle and everything was fine. You know, they suffered from diseases. They've suffered accidents. And the breakup of the family was also one of the very painful effects of this migration. My father, he also went back and he also was separated; I think his father died young, so we don't know that much about his father. But his mother was here, and once he came back from Jamaica and he started to work here, he took very good care of his mother. You know, he was almost a mamma's boy. He took good care of his mother.

I: And what was school like? How and who were your teachers? What things do you remember about your time as a school child?

M: I attended the Panama Canal company schools, and I remember attending school in La Boca,....my primary school. And I remember attending my high school – I did it at Paraíso High School – and I think I had very productive experiences. Most of my teachers were West Indian Panamanians and they spoiled me because I always showed an interest in reading, an interest in excelling in my academic work, and I was also very, an active leader in the school. I participated in sports, in the band, in a number of committees and things like that, so I was always active and so they nurtured me. And they helped to prepare me to go on to college.

I: So what kind of music did you grow up hearing?....So tell me, what are your favorite foods and how did you come to like them so much?

M: Well, I like all kinds of food. I grew up eating mostly the kind of Panamanian West Indian cuisine that's very popular now, rice and what we call....peas and in Panama is called "arroz con....," coconut rice and rice with coconut and red peas, which I like even better. My mother always made a red pea stew that I love, you know, Jamaican style with the pig tail and the beef, you know, I love that and my mother was always good at making dumplings. I loved that. My mother is also very good at making....cod fish. She does it with bacon and green banana, real Jamaican style and I love that. You know, as I grew older, I learned to eat other types of West Indian foods, even though we never ate them at home as much like....I don't think *souse* comes out of Jamaica, but I learned it from other members of the community. We didn't eat *cooco* and fried fish in our house that much, but I learned to like it from other members of the community. I never really developed a taste for *magumbo*, tripe, but, you know, my mother-in-law loves it. And now that I'm older, I learned from my mother-in-law to like ox tail, even though when I was growing up I didn't eat ox tail, but now here in our house periodically, at least once a month, we make ox tail with black beans that's

excellent. So, you know, but mostly it's the West Indian cuisine, West Indian Panamanian cuisine that I love.

I: Have you ever heard of Louise Bennett? What thoughts, if any, come to mind when you hear that name?

M: I always think of my mother, because Louise Bennett and my mother were classmates, and my mother always talked about the fact that when they were in school, how easy it was for Louise to just get up and make a jingle, and make a poem using the Jamaican vernacular language. And as I grew older, and I started collecting her poems, and well, when we were young, there was one thing in our family that my mother tried to do, well, at least both my mother and my father, they tried to maintain our contact with the island, Jamaica. We made one trip in 1956 as a whole family. We went on a boat. I think it was a Queen Mary or something like that, but we traveled the by boat, the whole family, to Jamaica and we stayed there for six months. I had an aunt who lived in Jamaica, and she was a school teacher, so once we got there she put us in school and she made sure that we attended many of the cultural things. So we would attend the cultural things where Louise Bennett would be performing. And we sometimes went to the pantomime that they had back then. And so we really got a good sense of Jamaican culture and we got a good appreciation for Jamaican culture and for some of its artists, and Louise Bennett was one. I always admired her skill with words, and just how humorous she could be. I also remember in Jamaica enjoying reading, I think it was Lee Andrew, like a little comic caricature at the time, you know, that always come out with things that are current and social critique, but in a very humorous way using the Jamaican vernacular language. And I admire Louise Bennett for her skill in bringing that forward, and demanding the respect for it because it pleases me now that when she performed, I think in Toronto, that there were so many people who went to see her. She could sell her records. She can sell her books. And people appreciate her. I have videos of her. I have her books. And I have tape recordings of her work. And my sister does a very good impersonation of Louise Bennett, so she has been a person that's very close to us culturally.

I: Had you ever heard of The Mighty Sparrow?

M: Oh yes. Again as I said, my father always had The Mighty Sparrow records and tapes, no, well, I don't think we dealt with the tapes at that time it was those, '78, 45 records, especially the 45s, and whatever new from The Mighty Sparrow, my dad would get it, and he'd be singing it and he'd be playing it. So again we grew up calypso from The Mighty Sparrow.

I: Do you remember any particular songs that stick in your mind of his, or any lines?

M: There was this one about the woman and who had the baby and she went to the baby, or is it the man who wanted to get married to this girl and he went to the father and the father said you know, "Don't marry that girl because that girl is your sister, but

your mother don't know," and then he goes to the mother and said "What am I gonna do?" and mother says, well, don't worry because your father ain't your father, but your father don't know, or your daddy ain't your daddy but your daddy don't know, woe is me, shame and scandal and family. I think, I don't know if Sparrow wrote that, but it seems to me that I associate that with Sparrow; I'm not sure, but that's what comes to mind. I thought that was very cute.

I: So how would you classify yourself in terms of identity? Does it vary in different circumstances? How would you define yourself?

M: Well, I suppose at my age it can't vary too much, you know? I am a Panamanian West Indian, racially black, culturally mixed, because I acknowledge the Caribbean influences, the European influences, the African influences, and the Latino influences because of the living in Panama and the Spanish environment in which I am. So, you know, culturally, I know I'm mixed. Racially, I know I'm mixed also, but I think I project more of an African racial image, so I identify racially African. But, you know, culturally, I say I'm black Latina Caribbean, and that's how I, or, you know, in Panama sometimes they call us Panamanians Afro-Antillanas, which is Afro-Caribbean – Panamanians of Afro-Caribbean descent. So, you know, that's how I'd identify myself because the strongest influences in me are the racial ones, you know, my African past and African in a very broad sense, including Africans in the diaspora, that is, Africans in the Caribbean, Africans in the United States, since I spent so much time in the United States and among African Americans there. I identified pretty strongly with the African Americans when I was in the United States. So the African dimension is very important in my life.

I: What do you think are the general perceptions of blacks in Panamanian society?

M: It just depends on which group. I don't think there is just one perception there. There is a variety of perceptions. Black, it's just now I think in Panamanian society that we are learning to appreciate black and not have it always be identified with what is negative. You know, that is a struggle that those of us in *Semap*, which is the Sociedad de Amigos del Museo Afro-Antillano, this is a struggle that we have had over the past twenty-five, twenty-six years of existence of the group. We have wanted Panamanians to recognize the subtle and not so subtle ways of discriminating or just projecting black people in the society, that we're not all lazy, we're not all uneducated, we're not all poor, and that we need to be respected. I know like twenty-five years ago when I drove a Peugeot, and I drove it around, the police would stop me and ask me whose car that is. You know, now that I drive a brand new Honda, they no longer stop me and ask me, they assume that it's mine. I think that has changed because they have seen so many black people owning cars, but, you know, twenty-five, thirty years ago there was that perception by the law that if I was driving a nice car, then it had to be either stolen or borrowed from somebody. And because blacks were not identified to be rich, and so we still have a lot of work to do in terms of removing some of the stereotypes, and as some stereotypes linguistically, too, where we use terms like "negrear" to mean to exclude.

We need to stop doing that because it reinforces some of the negative stereotypes associated with blacks in the society.

I: And what do you think the perceptions of English speakers in Panama, whether black or white?

M: Well, you know, language very often is used politically, and that happens in the United States, it happens in Africa, it happens all over the world. And when we have political entities or nations that are formed of the conglomeration of people, there has to be one language that serves a lingua franca, and that language then empowers the people who speak it. And in our early years of Panama, because of the Canal, the building of the Canal, the presence of the Americans, the presence of so many English speaking Afro-Caribbean people in Panama, English started becoming very, very pervasive in the society and this scared the leaders of Panama because in our 1904 constitution there wasn't anything in the constitution that said that we had an official language. But I think that the fact that English was then becoming such a pervasive language in the society, then by the time they wrote the next constitution about 1941, then, or several laws in between, then we acquired an official language of Spanish, and it was emphasized that the language is Spanish. And during those early years there was a lot of discriminatory treatment then towards those, my parents and grandparents who spoke English, to the point where there are several generations of West Indian Panamanians who have grown up not speaking English because their parents wanted them to be integrated into the society and didn't want them to suffer any discriminatory treatment so they spoke to them only in English, and they just developed very negative attitudes towards English. And then during the time of when we were trying to get control of the Canal, there was an anti-American campaign going on, and many, an offshoot of that campaign was, well, you know, those people who speak English, you know, they looked not very favorably. So then again, you get a generation of people who shied away from speaking English just so they would fit in, politically, and integrate to the society. Now once we have, now that we have control of the Canal, now everybody is seeing the need for English, and the unfortunate thing is that those of us of Afro-Caribbean descent who had parents and grandparents who spoke English, we find that many of those people didn't given their grandchildren or great-grands the language, and those people are now at a disadvantage in getting jobs and doing well in school. So, you know, we keep getting the short end of the stick, so to speak, because at one time we were so eager to fit in that we shied away from using our mother tongue. Then once, you know, we grew up and we saw that "Oh, it's important to know English." So, you know, Curtis Russell writes a poem, you know, "Quien Soy."... "My name is Jones. Yo no hablo ingles." So that's the kind of confusion that has existed. Now that did not affect those of us who grew up in the Canal Zone communities because most of us spoke English in those communities and we did suffer discriminatory treatment because our Spanish wasn't as good and they laughed at us and made fun of us or mocked us because our Spanish wasn't, and we felt somewhat ashamed speaking Spanish because of that. You know, there are all those different identity crises that we go through, and right now for example, there is the American brand of English versus the Caribbean brand of English that our grandparents spoke. And I can tell that many of the

younger people didn't want to speak English because they didn't want to speak like their grandparents and be laughed at by the other members of the society, so, and since they didn't have the money maybe to go to private schools or American schools to acquire that American English, so they preferred just to speak Spanish. We go through all that. I remember when my nieces and nephew were young, my mother kept speaking to them in English, and they would always answer in Spanish. They always did it. But it was good that she continued speaking to them in English because I think that language was recorded mentally because once they went to a bilingual school, the English just came. So, you know, even if they answer, but what happens is that many of our parents and grandparents, they give in and they, instead of continuing to speak English to their offspring or grandchildren, they just speak to them in Spanish.

I: Are you married? How did you meet your husband?

M: Yes, I'm married to Orville Goodin, and you just interviewed his mother. You know, Orville's mother and my mother went to school together, and we have known each other most of our lives. And I remember when I was about twelve years old, she would tell him that "That's the girl I want you to marry." But, you know, our paths went different ways and we sort of wandered around the world, and the Jamaicans have a saying "What is feel you can't be unfeel," and it just seems as if his mother's words were prophetic. So, you know, we finally wandered back into each other's lives, and we've been married for more than thirty years now.

I: Do you have children? Tell me about them.

M: Yes, one son, *Kwaminah*. He just celebrated his thirty-fifth birthday, and he went to school here in Panama and he went to Florida State to complete his university education in business and finance. And he liked living in Florida, so he has continued living in the Broward County area of Florida, and he works for the state there.

I: Does he speak English, and why do you think this is? Have you ever spoken with him about his language choice?

M: Oh, well, English has been his first language, and he picked up Spanish second from TV and going to school here in Panama. But we always spoke to him, Orville and I, always spoke. Our home language is in English and my mother and father lived with, next to us, most of the time, and so they communicated with him in English. So his first language is English. But he's also equally strong in Spanish, so he's quite bilingual in English and Spanish. But I think he, one thing I noticed about him living in Florida, is that he identifies – I remember when I was living in the United States, which was about thirty some years ago – I identified mostly African-American at the time, and probably things have changed, and even though he identifies as Afro-Caribbean, he also identifies strongly Latino.

I: So what specific message do you want to communicate to the other generations, whether to the generations older than you or the generations behind you?

M: I'd like to communicate that we should be proud of who we are. But I suppose it's easier said than done. I think we have to know a little bit about ourselves to be proud about who we are, and it's the struggle that you and a number of people like myself are involved in, you know, pulling out our history, whether in an oral form or a written form, so that our younger people will get to know a little bit about our heritage and to be proud of who we are. I think it's also important for us never to lose sight of the value of education. I think many of our forefathers placed the greater store on education than some of the younger families that I see today, and that has been, I think, one of the keys to our success or survival. So I would certainly like to encourage the younger generation, and the older generation, the parents of the younger generation, to place a higher value on education, and a higher value on, I also believe in strong families and strong communities. And I believe in working within community groups to develop networks so that we can be helpful to each other. You know, no man is an island, and if we are going to achieve, we have to develop a certain, we have to bond together and we have, in order to get to certain level of achievement. So I would also like to stimulate that type of cohesiveness in our community.

I: Would you mind telling me your year of birth?

M: April 13, 1945. I am sixty-one years old. In April of this year, I'll be 62.

I: What was the last grade of school that you completed?

M: Well, I graduated from high school and then I went on to the university and I did a masters degree at the University of Wisconsin at Madison in English Literature.

I: What is your profession?

M: I'm an English professor at the University of Panama, and prior to that I was the person who developed the English language program for the Florida State University branch here in Panama. So I've been teaching both people to speak the language, and also to the speakers of the language, I have been teaching them literature, how to appreciate literature. And I've been trying to stimulate the more advanced speakers, especially those within our communities, to produce written works of literature or literary critique.

I: What city in Panama do you live in?

M: Right now I live on the outskirts of Panama City in a town site called Chanis, which is a part of the Parque Lefevre Corregimiento of Panama City.

I: Is there any other information you want to include that we have not yet touched upon?

M: Well, just the founding of *Semap*, which is my pet organization. It came out of a need, a need that I felt and a number of people like myself, to pay tribute to the work our ancestors have done in making this country what it is. And we felt that if we don't toot our own horns, nobody will toot our horns for us. And so when the museum was founded and we saw that there wasn't enough funds to keep it going, we realized that if we didn't do something as a community to raise funds to keep it going, it would die, and we wouldn't have a national tribute to the work that our forefathers have done in building the Canal and building the railroad and in doing so many other projects here in Panama. So once the director of the museum worked with us in starting our group, and it was established in 1981, and I'm really very proud to see that it has maintained a leadership role in the black community in Panama. We meet every single week, and we have our Gran Feria Antillana, which will be celebrated in a few days – we have had that for the last, this is our twenty-sixth year, I think. And what has been, I think, unique about the group is that many of the founding members have still continued to work in the group, that is, we don't have a new president move in and the old one moves out. No, we all stay there, and we continue to work. So that has been very rewarding to me. It's been a lot of hard work. But I've also learned a lot of things in working with that organization.

I: Are there any other projects in which you have been involved that you would like to talk about?

M: Well, I've also been the founder and first president of the Panama Chapter of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, which is an international organization for people who teach English as a second or foreign language in all parts of the world. And Panama did not have a chapter. We had many English teachers, but we did not have a formal chapter. So in 1986, after having attended several international conferences and seeing almost all these other countries, especially counties in Central America, all represented with their different chapters, I said "No, this can't be. You know, we have to start a chapter in Panama." And so that we did in 1986. And again I'm very happy to say that that group has also been a very strong group. It has two main activities every year. A convention in the month of September and, let me see, 1986, last year we celebrated our twentieth convention. And we have a dry season seminar in the month of January or February; and this year we also celebrated our twenty-first seminar, so, you know, I'm quite satisfied with those associations because I think they are contributing to our growth and development and to the fact that the presidents, the subsequent presidents, because we had been changing presidents almost every year, and most of the presidents of that organizations are people of Afro-Caribbean, Panamanian West Indians.