



HOW WE GOT THROUGH: VOICES OF OUR ELDERERS

Brenda Atchison, of Roxbury

INTERVIEWED BY JESS WEAVER, OF CAMBRIDGE

Brenda: I had a split childhood. I grew up in the Roxbury area of Boston, and also my teen years and graduated high school in a small town called Norton, Mass.

Jess: Whoa, okay. That must have been a significant transition. What was that like?

Brenda: Because we had had some exposure to being in a more rural-country setting, just going to visit relatives when we went South, it wasn't a complete culture shock. But we were definitely city kids.

Norton was very small then. Six thousand residents and the only thing people knew was Wheaton College was there. My parents wanted to do a farming type of situation so they got chickens and pigs and cows. We had acreage to do gardening and all that good stuff. And I enjoyed it. I enjoyed all the pets.

See? I still call them pets [laughs].

Jess: I'm kinda curious, what was that like for you as a young Black person, you know, moving to somewhere I gotta assume was much whiter. But maybe that's not true?

Brenda: Oh, I would say it is. [laughs] I would say it's a safe assumption. I was the only Black person in my graduating class. The class was only 98 people but I was still the only Black person.

But you know, I find it an interesting question because it really, from a race perspective, wasn't a dramatic change. At that time, in Boston, in Roxbury, the communities were still integrated. It was white flight, you knew that and you could see that, but I had white friends who were my neighbors. So I moved to Norton, and I got white friends who were my neighbors!

Not a whole lot of a difference. The percentage and the proportions were different of course, but I kinda understood that already, seeing what was happening with whites moving out.

So, you know, the few little racist comments- like I can remember when my parents were out looking for a place to buy, we'd go out on Sundays and we'd drive around in various communities. And my dad, he was at a gas station or something, and stopped and inquired about you know, any properties around for sale or anything like that, just trying to chat people up. I distinctly remember, in Norton, a guy who said "Well, I could tell you where the colored people live!" [laughs]

So you know, there were those casual types of comments. So I can't say I didn't hear any, but I heard less than I heard in Boston, to be honest with you.



I did a conversation on equality and equity in America- I co-hosted it with Encore at the end of June. So I wrote a story about an experience that just popped in my mind as a result of what's going on now with all these deaths at the hands of police officers, of Black men. I had a recollection back to an incident that happened in Norton, when my brother was shot at by a local police officer.

So I wrote up the story and I called my brother to say, "Was I imagining? Did this really happen?" And he had forgotten too, and he's like "No, you're right! It really did happen!" So we talked about the incident and what that had really meant to us as a family. He also compared the incident to growing up in Boston, where he experienced constant hostility and harassment as a Black teenager and young man.

So in talking and listening to him, I began to think about racism and our experiences in a way that I didn't before. Because I realized, for one thing--and even my brother said this, he said, "You know I think that's kind of why I left the town." And then he said, "The only thing I regret is not graduating from high school." He went into the service and finished there.

But I never really had the view before. I never really looked at our experiences and realized that, Huh, there was a clear incident of what could have had a devastating result wasn't--you know, it was just an incident and we went on and lived out our lives.



Jess: Were there other experiences that you've had the same realization around from your time in Boston? An experience where you knew immediately, "Oh, that's racism."

Brenda: Yeah, you knew it because it would be name calling or just nasty treatment towards you. For example, I will not go to Andrew Station after dark. Now, anybody could laugh at that today, but not then. So I mean there were tensions that you knew as a child were racial tensions, you were very much aware of it. And so comparing it to Norton, every once in a while there might have been a jerk, but that was it. In Boston, every day had a sense of racial tension.

Jess: When you were growing up in Roxbury, did your parents talk to you about racism?

Brenda: You know, not directly. You kind of learn it as you go along. I can't remember a specific sit down and talk about it. My parents focused more on being able to do and be and don't let any barriers get in your way. They may have talked about barriers, which of course are a result of racism, but the focus wasn't on racism. It was on overcoming obstacles, if that makes sense.

Jess: Coming to what you've been seeing now with the protests and response in Boston, what is making you hopeful about this moment, as someone who has grown up in this community and seen it change over the years?

Brenda: I'd say it's not so much hopeful in Boston as hopeful in the country.



I mean we- and I mean that as Blacks and whites- have invested so much in trying to move this pendulum, in trying to move beyond racism. We've had some accomplishments and achievements but we've yet to be able to strike at the core that continues to perpetuate a situation so that generation after generation gets sucked into it. So..hopeful that this time around, everyone old and young, all different races, people of all different origins, that there truly is not only an understanding, but the fortitude to realize that it's like the very breath you take.

I think I see that happening across the country. And it's interesting, because this is about racism and Boston, and I'm probably going to say some things that wouldn't make the city happy, that's for sure.

Jess: Funnily enough, that's not the goal, so go ahead!

Brenda: We wouldn't have left Roxbury, except that Roxbury had become abandoned. You couldn't even get a pothole in the street fixed. You would call up and you would ask for services-- and mind you, my parents were homeowners, they were paying taxes, so it's not like we don't have any investment in this city at all--so when you're struggling to get just the basics, it gets to be a little much.

That kind of behavior is gone. And it's a good thing to see. Even when I talk to my neighbors now, it went on for so long, we still have this sense of doubt that we're going to get any services. It's still there. We're always amazed when we call and that call is taken just like any other, and we get those services. It's a miracle!



So I can say that some of the things that used to shove out the community have been resolved. I remember, quite frankly, in my early days I would never even apply for a job in the Boston area. I always worked outside of Boston because I had a better chance of getting a job.

Jess: Was that something you knew just from doing the process or was that something you knew from other people saying don't even bother, it's not even worth it?

Brenda: I think it's a combination of growing up and seeing how you're treated. I remember when I was 18 and I think it was probably the first job that I was applying for and it was a drug store type of store. On Boylston Street. I think it was in the Pru. And they had an ad for someone at the cosmetics counter.

I still distinctly remember going in there with the ad and the manager, who was a white male, was very nice but he asked me about two or three questions, didn't spend much time, because he said he did not think that a Black person would be able to sell cosmetics to a white person.

Jess: And he said that outright?

Brenda: Yeah. I was a little taken aback. So that level of "No, we don't think you're right for us because you're Black" was prevalent.



Whereas in outlying areas, number one, they were smaller companies, they were start up companies. As long as they thought you could do the job, they're going to take you in and teach you. And those are the types of places I've always looked for.

And I didn't see those in my backyard. My backyard was all the big conglomerates, service industry, and I couldn't type, so the things they would have tried to put me in would not have fit.

I feel very fortunate, quite frankly, about the opportunities I was able to find within 30 miles of the city.

Jess: Well, I wanted to ask you about that--specifically about the personal computing kind of career that you ended up coming into, because that's certainly an industry that I think of as being extremely white. So what was that experience like, being in that industry?

Brenda: Well, it was even whiter during my time. During the whole time I was in that industry, I only encountered one other Black woman. It turns out, later in life, I met her again at Harvard University and I realized she was that woman I would see at a distance. **Jess:** Wow. **Brenda:** That's how rare it was.

It was a brand new industry. So you had all these little start up companies that had vision and, like I said, anybody who walked in the door who seemed like they could follow what the vision was, and go out there and create opportunities, they would hire you.



So I got hired by a small company called Leading Edge Products. It was a little engine that could. And we did extraordinary things.

I was in my 20s, this was the early 80s, and some of the things we did back then opened up where we are today. Because at that time, quite frankly, the only game in town was IBM.

And I was very proud to be a part of that, because I was there in R & D, I was there in sales, I was there in training.

Jess: I wanted to ask: How did you as a young person experience the white flight? What was the impact on the neighborhood? How were you seeing that in the day to day, or in your family's relationship with the community?

Brenda: I mean, you saw the white flight, it was very clear. In my day- I don't know how much you know the layout of Boston- well, let's just say the Franklin Park area going south was white, whereas from Franklin Park going north towards the city was very integrated.

Yeah, you saw it (white flight), but it didn't strike me in any way, to be honest with you. Well, don't forget, we left, too! And don't forget during that time was urban renewal. It had a huge impact. And that's one of the reasons quite frankly that we left, because we were in that urban renewal planning zone, but as we didn't know what would be happening, we lived in this constant fear of "What does it mean to us as a family?"

