I was born and raised in Madison, and growing up in the ’50s South Madison certainly wasn’t what it is today. I remember when there was the removal and displacement of people from what was known as the Greenbush, and many of those people came to South Madison for housing and other kinds of things. A couple of churches moved out here.

Urban renewal was quite popular throughout the country. And “the powers that be” came in and broke up the Greenbush community, which was made up of African Americans, Jewish people, Italians, and some whites. And they scattered people all over between the west side and the south side.

As a young child, I lived in the Greenbush. My father’s family had lived in the Greenbush. My mother’s family came here at the turn of the century and settled in the Mifflin Street area, Tenney-Lapham, and old Market Place neighborhood. They came from Kentucky at the request of then-governor LaFollette, because my grandfather was a lawyer and Governor LaFollette wanted him to work with him. The irony of this whole idea of coming to a better place was that my grandfather couldn’t practice law and my grandmother couldn’t teach school. Both my grandparents could probably have passed for white, and they wouldn’t do that. So LaFollette couldn’t really hire my grandfather as one of his aides. It wasn’t the political thing to do, and Bob LaFollette was very political. My grandparents were both educated and were part of what was called “The Talented Tenth,” W.E.B. Du Bois’s talented tenth. Du Bois was a good friend of my grandfather’s, and often came to Madison to strategize regarding what was going to happen to black people across the country. My grandparents were the contact people.

My grandfather and grandmother, William and Anna Mae Miller, bought two houses here. One was a boarding house, so when people did migrate to Madison they’d have a place to stay. They were sort of a two-person urban league. Both of them were very involved in social justice issues. My grandmother would often speak at the legislature on women’s and children’s issues also. They were progressives. Those were the years from about 1902. My grandfather also formed the Book Lover’s Club, which was the forerunner of the NAACP here.

The South Madison that I grew up knowing felt like that was the heart of the black community. My parents had a restaurant for a little while where Bram Hill Apartments are now. It was called Hilltop Restaurant. Very small, homey-type restaurant. It was American-style food, and the major feature was barbecued ribs.

We were all steeped in our church lives which provided a way for us to network and support each other. At that time there was Mount Zion, Second Baptist, and St. Paul AME church.

In the ’50s there were so few of us that the opportunity to really stereotype us wasn’t always there because we were more like the majority than we were different. And even though we were fighting the battles...Odell Tagliaferro, Hilton Hanna, Demetra Shivers, my aunt Lucile...me and my brothers and sisters just grew up understanding how you make social change via the political vehicle. We also grew up understanding the issues of race.

I went to Lapham School and there was a movie about Africa, and they showed Africans doing their tribal native dances and some of the women were bare-breasted. I remember watching that and thinking it’s a good thing everybody is seeing this, and other children were laughing and snickering and making fun. I went home and told my parents how bad it made me feel because they were making fun of something I thought was beautiful. Those were my people. We know we were from Madagascar.

My mother was very fair-skinned, and people were willing to sell her a house. And when my father came along, who was a dark-skinned man, then the house was sold or they wouldn’t sell to them.
South Madison used to be a swamp, so it wasn’t the greatest place to build anything.

The whole sense of community really grew out in South Madison, but it touched all of us no matter where we lived. As I was growing up, I watched all the subsidized housing be dumped in South Madison, and watched neglect happen in South Madison. In my opinion things didn’t really turn around until probably in the ’70s when Mayor Joel Skornicka was the first mayor to really pay attention to the needs of South Madison in terms of recreation and streets and that kind of thing.

My mother and her sisters were also big fans of Eleanor Roosevelt. I always thought Eleanor was a relative because she kind of looked like my aunt and my grandmother. I used to wonder why didn’t she ever come and visit?

I published my own newspaper and produced my own TV show. The newspaper was published from ’83 to ’91. It was *The Wisconsin Free Press* and then it was *The Madison Times*. The TV show went from ’89 to ’91. It was a show for teens. Our message was about staying off of drugs, getting away from sex before time. We were concerned about teenage smoking. In 1989 we did a story that was called The Glass Saxophone. It was about cocaine, and in 1989 nobody really paid attention to it. Heads were still in the sand.

The Saint Martin House doesn’t get the credit that it deserves. It pioneered many things in South Madison. The first headstart was located at Saint Martin House. They had an orphanage. They provided lots of recreation opportunities and worked real hard at the whole idea of diversity before it was the word that I’m sick of now. I used to laugh and say we were honorary Catholics because we went to sewing class. My aunt, Arlene Miller, is a seamstress and she was a part of the Saint Martin House guild and taught the sewing class. My father helped build Saint Martin House. It was the ’50s.

South Madison is wherever there’s a crime committed. I’m being facetious, but it’s true. I heard something happened out in Nakoma. They said it was in South Madison.

I’m no Republican conservative, but we began to depend less on each other. Some of us were thrown some crumbs so we drifted away. This is true of what integration did for black people mainly. It broke up our neighborhoods. You know, doctors and lawyers, teachers, bricklayers, we lived in the same neighborhoods and we were able to see our role models live next door to us. We had a different sense of community. It feels like we paid a price for something that was ours anyway. It feels like we paid a price to be a lawyer. In 1902 we probably had a strong political voice. And as we went through the decades our voice became weaker because our community became more fractured. I think there’s a price to pay when you turn your back on who you are. We are torn as a community about that. We label each other out of frustration and being torn by, yeah, I want a house, I want a car, I want my kids to go to college, I want to be an American, I want all these things. And how do you do that? Because it is true that we will pay a price. No matter who we are. We pay a price for becoming that CEO, or becoming whatever we become.

We didn’t even have black music here until 1968. They didn’t even play it on the radios until 1968. Hard to believe, isn’t it? Black people of my generation who lived in Madison probably knew about Randy’s Record Shop out of Nashville, Tennessee. They used to play blues and black music.

If something happened, “the powers that be” would just be so aghast. It’d be like, what’s wrong with our black people? Why are they mad?

Women who were at home with their kids are no longer at home with their kids. They can’t. They are out there doing something. I attribute that to the change in the neighborhood, and also to W-2. They have to either be in some kind of community work experience or they have to be looking for a job or have found a job.

Part of the mission and vision of this Harambee Center is that we connect with the community. People feel good when they walk in the building. They feel important when you ask them to participate in a panel discussion or to sit down and plan something with us.

African Americans are spread out all over. But we still have that need to call some place home. In South Madison historically has been the heart of the black community, and so we come back here. It doesn’t matter
if somebody lives wherever they live. When they come to South Madison, they see themselves. It doesn’t feel alien.

We have a history as African Americans of being brought over here and literally stripped away from everything we knew. One of the most interesting movies I think is Amistad, because those slaves didn’t speak English.

Even if I don’t want to celebrate Kwanzaa, or I don’t want to go to Juneteenth, there is a reason why we need this, and it’s not just a few of us. There are many of us who need that. It goes back to that whole affirmation. We have always struggled to make an important statement. And in a place like Madison, the struggle is harder. They were talking about people who made significant differences in the century. Not one black person. They named Paul Soglin, the county executive, Bob LaFollette, all these people. Here we had a small group of black people who were fighting for social justice in the ’40s and ’50s and they are not recognized. That says a lot to me. It’s insulting.

We as a people, African Americans, we struggle so hard with this whole notion of who we are and how we fit here. We are all so angry about things. The most vocal and angry really get put down. Gene Parks is a good example. Well, Gene Parks is angry and so am I. And so was Velma Hamilton. And we act out our anger in different ways. But who wouldn’t be angry? Who wouldn’t be angry? Those are the kinds of things that polarize us also, the degree of anger. We want to be a part of “mainstream America.” Well, I’m not so sure that’s what I want to be. I want to be me, and I don’t want to be like white people. I really don’t. I have never, a day in my life, ever wanted to be white.

I see what racism, conscious racism, the things that were done over 500 years ago, the things that were done that we are still paying for. We are still paying for slavery and the breaking up of our families, and the snatching away of our history, and a sense of who we are.

Racism is too complicated to think you can have a task force for a year. This whole issue of race, the African-American community needs to take it on. We need to force the issue.

When the board was being formed there were some of us who said we will not sit at a table with just one or two of us. The woman sitting next to me may not be as experienced as you are. But she’s gonna sit there because she has something to say and she’s a member of this community. We have to insist that we belong everywhere. I won’t sit on a board where I am the only person of color. I do not find that an honor.

I think people feel overwhelmed when someone says we need to do something. There are commitments that we can make. There are visions we can share. I am convinced of that no matter how hard the struggle gets. I feel like here in Madison we have become polarized in terms of class and race to the point where it’s just uncomfortable.

In America we haven’t learned how to normalize race. I said to (an acquaintance), and I don’t mean this to be an insult or a putdown, but do you have an Ebony Magazine in your house? Do you have any pictures that depict somebody else? The other people? If you are sincere about it, you will do something about it.

My mother was very active in South Madison in issues of the elderly and children. And I feel more like her every day. I feel like I’m earning my wings here. I’ve sort of had it. I’ve decided I’m going for broke here. People don’t have to agree with me, but I feel like something has to be said and I’d like to say it.

Most of us feel so powerless. I give myself my own power. I don’t need the mayor to tell me anything. I don’t need the county exec, the supreme court. That’s what I try to give my kids, the power to do, to think.

If you don’t understand your own history, you don’t know where you’re going. You don’t have to be in denial to have two cars. You don’t have to be in denial to be in the chancellor’s office. You could achieve those things and still be who you are. We all have the same history. Nobody came over here and didn’t have that history who is African American. And they got where they are because somebody walked.