

TRANSCRIPT—ANNIE BRADLEY FIADJIBE

Interviewee: ANNIE BRADLEY FIADJIBE
Interviewer: Dwana Waugh
Interview Date: July 12, 2006
Location: Charlotte, NC
Length: One CD, approximately 108 minutes

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DW: This is Dwana Waugh, and I am interviewing Mrs. Annie Fiadjigbe. It is Wednesday, July 12, 2006. Good morning.

AF: Good morning.

DW: What I first wanted to ask you is if you could just tell me a little bit about your early experiences living in Charlotte, and what you remember of Charlotte in your earlier days.

AF: I actually didn't grow up in Charlotte. I came to Charlotte when I was sixteen, and I can remember actually being frightened because I was coming from a smaller city, which was in the South. And to come to a place that was totally different from my upbringing was a scary experience. I came to Charlotte seeking a better life for myself, and stayed with a brother of mine for a couple of years, and got in school, and found a job. I didn't know much about Charlotte. I just had to learn. I was blessed because I could get on the bus from my brother's house and just about go anywhere that I needed to go. So it took me a while to really learn my way around, but I did. I was able to make that connection,

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being able to get to school, and get from a job back home. So pretty much my first couple of years here was just learning my way around.

DW: OK. Now when you moved here from York, South Carolina—.

AF: Rock Hill.

DW: Rock Hill, South Carolina. When you moved here, were you moving just by yourself when you moved in with your brother?

AF: Yes.

DW: OK. Did you move into the Belmont community?

AF: It was on Trelmont Avenue, which was off South Boulevard, in that area. At that time, it was a mixed community. Because no one in the family had the transportation, we had to use the bus as our transportation to get to and from. We were in an area where we could walk to the store, and to the movies, and to the laundry mat if we had to go. So we was kind of in an area where we was able to get the connections to all the things that we needed.

DW: Well, how did you end up at Piedmont Courts? How did that come about?

AF: Well, after I moved out from my brother, I stayed with a sister. During that time, I applied for public housing. That was probably 1975. What I was having to do was leave my child in Rock Hill, and I was coming to Charlotte through the week to work. I went back and forth to Rock Hill to Charlotte every weekend, so that I could see my child. During that time, I applied for public housing. About two years I stayed with my sister, and in 1976, my apartment became available in Piedmont Courts.

DW: What was that like? How was the Piedmont Courts that you remember in 1976?

AF: For me, it was totally different from my upbringing. My family was sharecroppers, so we grew up in the rural South, where houses may be two or three to ten miles apart. When I moved in Piedmont Courts, it was like everything was kind of close together. I had never seen so many people in such a small area all together, so the whole environment was different from my upbringing. I had a lot of adjustments to do.

DW: Now when you were talking about living in, or applying to live in Piedmont Courts, how did you feel about the process of the application to live there and the waiting period?

AF: I needed a place, so the wait for me was not a good wait. They approved me; the process was no problem. I think the scary thing, and I think this is happening with so many young ladies today, is that moving into your own apartment at eighteen or nineteen is a big step. I think that was the scariest thing of the whole process. I'm on my own; I'm moving into a place where I never experienced anything like it before. My child is going to be around lots of other children, because Piedmont Courts had lots of children, *lots* of children. So it's like all of these things is going through you, and you haven't built your network of services or your support. So you're moving into sort of an isolated place, not knowing anybody. It was a scary experience for me.

DW: Yeah. When you talk about this feeling of isolation, did you get a sense that there was a sense of community spirit there?

AF: Yes, in the wrong ways. Not a positive sense of community, but community was there, because you could see people grouping and going from one place to the other place, and visiting and communicating with each other. So it was a big community, but a lot

of it was not positive and stuff you wanted to get yourself involved in. I kind of kept to myself when I first got there.

DW: Could you talk a little bit about why you felt it was a negative, or not a positive, community spirit?

AF: Well, I had family to stay in Piedmont Courts years before I ever moved to Charlotte. You can always hear people talking about what goes on in the community, or what happened in the community. That was kind of like a fear of mine. You know, I've got to move here, and you never hear anything good about this place, but you need a place to live. Some of the things that I saw going on was those very things that I had heard people talk about. So I knew with my own eyes that it was not a good community.

DW: I'm just curious about Charlotte. We were talking about when you moved to Charlotte in the early seventies. What were job opportunities like then?

AF: Well, without connections, the inside connections, it was hard to get a job. My brother was employed at the place I was able to get a job at. It was like if you didn't have connections with someone on the inside, it was really hard to get a job. Even without an education, and you could know now how hard that is, but then it was the same. If you didn't have an education or didn't have an inside source, then it was really hard to get a job. One of the things that I learned that helped connect me was volunteering. That was one of the key things that gave me some type of experience and incentive to move forward and to get in some type of training and education.

DW: Where did you do a lot of your volunteer work?

AF: At Seigle Avenue Presbyterian Church.

DW: When you came to Charlotte initially, how did you get connected with Seigle Avenue?

AF: Now when I moved in Piedmont Courts, that's when I was connected to Seigle. I had one child who was a rambunctious five-year-old, and like I said, I was not very outgoing. Not at all. I could have stayed there probably years without connecting with anybody, except for going out and coming in. But my son, who was five at the time, got out; I let him go out one day to play in the yard. There were some other students across the street, other children who was a little older, but he went over, or they came over and talked with him. About fifteen minutes, this lady was knocking on my door, and she said, "Come on, go with me. I'm going to try to get your child in the after-school program," which was the after-school program at Seigle Avenue.

And so, I went with her, and we met the lady, who was Mary Carol Michie at that time, who was the after-school director there. We began where the lady was talking for me. I knew nothing of her, didn't even know her name. So we asked if my child could register for after-school program. The first things she asked is "How old is he?" And I said, "He's five." She started shaking her head, said, "We don't take five-year-olds." And the lady say, "Please, please." She was begging for him like we was kin or sisters or something. Mary Carol said, "I just can't take him. We don't take five-year-olds." Then she said, "Well, I will take him under one condition, that you volunteer." At that time, in 1976, I became a parent volunteer at Seigle Avenue Church. That was the whole turnaround in my life that day that my child got out and met the lady's children.

DW: Could you talk a bit about the impact you felt the church has had in your life?

AF: Yes, I can, because sometimes you wonder why you're in a place, and it may seem the worst place to be. But then, you make the best of it, and that's what I feel that my moving to Piedmont Courts did for me. Not only did the church family made a change in my life, but even the Piedmont Courts residents as a whole made a change in my life. When I committed to the volunteering at the church, there was a group of ladies who took me under their wings, and also the pastor there at the time. We went to the school about twice a month to mentor to some of the students there. Back then, mentoring wasn't a high priority thing, but at that time, the church was involved and the school system, mentoring students from the Piedmont Courts neighborhood. I had a chance to do that, and it made me feel good about doing it. I didn't have any thoughts or good feelings about myself having ability to do anything like that. So having that connection with the church really helped me.

There was a community worker, they call them, during that time in Piedmont Courts, and somehow—. I can't say to the day how I got connected to this lady. But that was the beginning of my being involved in the Piedmont Courts community as an advocate. I was once the president of the resident organization, which really connected me with different people and helped me to learn different leadership skills. I even had an opportunity to do my first plane flight, to Virginia, because of my involvement in the Piedmont Courts community. A lot of the senior citizens was my connection because during the time that I had resident meetings, I could depend on the senior citizens to be there. They highly respect me and highly respect my word. So I was put in a position to be a model, and I had to live that model because they really looked up to me and respected me. So I had to be that role model in the lives of the residents.

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The church and the community really helped mold my life and help me to recognize that what I was doing was what I was called to do. So many families touched my life and learned me so much. They always would say, well, what I've done for them, but they never recognized what they was also doing for me. I've done so much work in the church. I worked in the church for—. They hired me as a teacher's aide to work in the after-school program was my first job. That was like 1979, and from 1979 to 2004, I worked for the church, in just all sorts of different positions. Like I say, I could never repay or put a price on that experience that I've learned through just giving and being obedient to what I was called to do there.

DW: Yeah. I think I was reading a pamphlet that Seigle Avenue put out, and you were mentioned in it. What do you remember about attending Seigle Avenue, the church makeup, and things like that when you first came?

AF: When I first went to Seigle, Seigle was a small church. I think I did a lot of volunteer work before I actually started getting involved in the church itself. I came up in a church, so that was my backbone. I knew that the church, attending service, was my backbone, so I had to get in the church. I remember going to the church, and it was a mixed congregation. I had never, growing up Southern Baptist, never had worship with an intermixed congregation.

Mary Carol Michie was the person who would come across the street. A lot of people would not come into Piedmont Courts because of fear, but Mary Carol Michie worked with those children. She never had a fear of coming across the street. Everybody respected her, and everybody loved her. So she would come over, and she would invite people to church. She invited me to church. I came to church and enjoyed myself. I enjoyed myself at church

because it's a small church, they notice. They know when you're not there. They know when you're there. When you wasn't at church, they would come and see you. The minister there at that time was just a down to earth person, would come across the street also, would invite you to get involved. That was important to me.

Because we were so small, everybody just about had to do everything. I joined the choir, I became an elder, so it was like out of all these things I was doing, I never, never in my own self thought I would be able to do anything. But they made me feel important; they made me feel that I didn't have to be perfect or even near perfect to come and worship and work for the Lord. So Seigle was really kind of the wings under me that helped me mold myself into being able to reach back and do the same thing to help others that they done for me.

DW: Did you have a sense that a lot of the residents of Piedmont Courts felt the same way that you did about that church?

AF: Oh, yes. Like I say, Mary Carol have always been a person to get people to step across the street to get people involved. When I came to Seigle, it was still a mixed congregation. But before that time, it started as an all-white congregation, and the neighborhood was all white, because it was built for guys returning from the armed service. When I moved into Piedmont Courts, there was still several older white families that still lived in Piedmont Courts. Some of them attended Seigle, and the ones that had moved out was coming back in. The commitment of the members of Seigle was to serve Piedmont Courts. That was the mission. The whole mission of the church was to serve Piedmont Courts---. One of the hardest things that all of us have had to swallow, that everything is changing, because that was the church's mission. Even when it was all white, the church

started as a mission for the neighborhood that was across the street. So that was its purpose, and as people came, I think one of the draws for people to come to Seigle was its mission to the surrounding communities.

Like I say, they kept me under their wings, and I learned a lot. Because I was a resident and attended the church, then I had some type of connection with a lot of the residents. I was able to invite them to church. I was able to get them into other activities. We had a wonderful Wednesday program, which was our Wednesday night Bible study, which drew over a hundred children from the community. We had a summer program, which drew over ninety children from the community. It was just like a connection.

During my work, myself and another young lady, who was Libby Whitely, who was the director at that time, was asked a question that if we had the money to do anything, what would we do? And working with the students from Piedmont Courts, we realized that they was almost a year behind all the other students when they started to school. So one of the things we said, that if we had the money we needed, we would start a preschool program. And so it happened. We had people who—the Junior League, and the Presbytery of Charlotte was interested in what we had dreamed of. So we started the Seigle Avenue Preschool Cooperative. It's probably sixteen years old now, but we started the program and it was a co-op. The co-op meant that parents didn't have to pay, but parents had to volunteer in order for their child to stay in the program.

That was an experience for me that I would never forget. I was one of the first teachers, and they had hired someone to be the director. Even though I lived in the community with families, you never get to know people personally. You may get to know some, but during my time as the family advocate and the teacher, I learned a lot. I had to do

meetings, parent meetings; I had to set up workshops and activities for parents. It was amazing to find out things that parents didn't know, and it was amazing to find out things that parents did know. We had so many ministries and so many ways to connect families, not saying that you could only come to church on Sunday, but through other ways we helped families to feel welcome. It was just like from walking across the street from Piedmont Courts, walking across to the church was a totally different life for people.

That church set there as a light in the lives of many people. We have a prison mission group, and we just met Sunday past. We was talking about one of the guys who in prison right now, and he had told one of the ladies that he never came to church, but he always sat across the street in Piedmont Courts and watched the church, watched everything we did. So it's like the church have been there, a light in the lives of people who saw no other way out. I think one of the things that really helped me was to get involved in a positive way. There was other ways to get involved. In talking to one lady in particular who had just moved into Piedmont Courts, and she say she didn't like it. She didn't like it all. My words to her was to get involved. Get involved in doing something in the community, because it really was the key in my life to help me make the best of the situation that I was in at the time that I was there.

DW: With your activism, you were talking about the residents association. How did you come about getting involved with that?

AF: I really can't say. Like I say, I was not very outgoing. I wouldn't have never volunteered, but I was willing. I've always been willing to do something that I felt was the right thing to do. The pastor at the church at that time, Bob Morgan, was the person that got me involved into a lot of stuff. Like I say, they had a community worker, Ms. Evelyn

Freeman, who was in the community everyday, trying to get people involved into doing stuff. She connected me and would come everyday just about, and call me through the window. I would try to hide, but she would not allow me to hide. She would stand out there and call my name till I would come out. So I had a lot of people just like they was sent to just get me.

I was voted in as the president and didn't know what to do, but I was willing. I was willing to do it, and people were willing to help me. Like I say, the senior citizens was my support. Every year, we would take the senior citizens to Asheville, and they would shop at the mall, and they would buy apples, and it was something they looked forward to doing. We would do a field trip for the children every year. We would take them somewhere where they could have fun and enjoy themselves. Because the Housing Authority at that time was giving each family unit three dollars per unit, so we did have some money in the budget to do some activities with our students. We would have a Piedmont Courts Day, which was one of the biggest kind of outings held within the neighborhood every year. I had a lot of support and a willingness to participate.

DW: Now when you talk about the neighborhood association or organization, and that people voted to have you and—. Who made up most of the voters? Was it the senior citizens that did most of the participation and voting in?

AF: We had mostly senior citizens, but we did have young adults that attended the meetings. It was supposedly been one of the required meetings, but we did have a younger adult who did attend some of the meetings. But the senior citizens was—you could depend on them. Every meeting they would come, walking on their sticks or whatever, and it was just my makeup of the meetings. Along with the president, we had to vote in the vice-

president or the secretary, and so we did have a board of services. Not only president, but officers also.

DW: And that was for the whole community?

AF: It was for the whole community.

DW: You were talking about the meetings, that the senior citizens were reliable; they would be there. What would you say, I guess in terms of numbers, how many people probably came, a percentage of—?

AF: Well, out of three hundred, you would probably get between twenty and twenty-five, which was good, because it was not something that was an interest. Even being right in the community, it was not an interest. In their mind, wasn't anything going to change, no matter what we said or what we did as far as advocating for betterment or for whatever problems we had. If people don't know you, they're not going to trust you. So I had to be a trust with the core group of people. The way that I've always operated were to get to know a core group of people. Once you get to know those people, they know somebody else, and it's like a chain reaction that you have to have a play in, in order to get people involved. If they don't know you, they're not going to participate or support you into doing anything. Over the years, I had so many core group of people that I could depend as far as coming or getting somebody else to come. It's amazing how well that works, but it works. If somebody can say a good word about you, then somebody else is bound to let down their brick walls to let you in.

DW: Yeah, that's amazing how that can happen.

AF: It is; it's amazing.

DW: Well, how long were you president of the organization?

AF: Probably about three years. Things began to change as far as the importance of the residents organization. Mr. Clarence Westbrook took over once my term was up, and was a strong, powerful man as far as his leadership and making sure that-- he would always say if the residents don't want it, it's not going to happen. He'd confide in me a lot about different things. He would ask me what I thought, and made a wonderful president of the resident organization. And actually Mr. Westbrook passed, and he was such a strong force in the neighborhood, we actually named in our New Hope building the Westbrook Library after him. So he was a powerful person in making sure that things happened for Piedmont Courts.

DW: Now was there a set time, or you could keep running for office?

AF: You could keep running, but once your term was up, basically you was ready to go. [Laughter] You was ready to go. You not only had to deal with your immediate residents; you had to attend all the meetings. You had to work with the Housing Authority; you had to work with the management. It was work, and it was volunteer work, and it was time-consuming. They had a food co-op. You had to do the food co-op, where people were able to buy into getting food once a month. You had to deal with all of that, so it was a big job.

DW: What would you say were your primary goals when you were president, and then what you saw as the goals of Mr. Westbrook?

AF: My primary roles were to help residents, teach and show residents, how to advocate for themselves. One of the problems I faced was people in need of decent stoves and refrigerators. You can advocate for it, but if you don't have the backup of residents to support you, then your advocating is just in vain. So my goal was to teach and help residents to advocate for themselves, to know their rights, and to know that when you're wrong, you're

wrong. And if you're wrong, you don't have any rights, because you haven't done what you supposed to do. So that was basically my interest during the time I was president of Piedmont Courts.

Mr. Westbrook, I think he had a twofold [goal]. Part of his was to protect the residents of Piedmont Courts from allowing people to use them. It could be somebody coming in with a church bus, picking up the children, or coming in, setting up, doing some project, and going on. His main thing was that you come in, you set up, you're here for two days, and you're gone. Families and the children are looking forward to you, but you've gotten what you need to get and gone. So he was kind of on the protective side of residents. His other goal was the beautification of Piedmont Courts. He got a grant to pay students every Saturday or twice a month to clean Piedmont Courts, to pick up the trash, and they was given a stipend. So he had a twofold goals for Piedmont Courts.

DW: In looking at and talking about Piedmont Courts, you were talking about your goals was to get new stoves and refrigerators and things. Did the apartment community or the city—I don't know which one held that responsibility, but did they do a lot of renovation of the Courts?

AF: No, not during that time. They had maintenance, which would come out if you had anything that needed fixing. They would come out and fix it for you, but everything was deteriorating as far as the inside. There was, like I say, for the stove and refrigerator, there was residents who was having problems. One of the things that I did was guide residents to sign petitions, saying that they needed stoves and refrigerators. It was set up where I was supposed to meet with someone from the Housing Authority, so that we could go out and see some of the stoves and refrigerators in the residents' homes. But this person went out on

their own to do that, came from Housing Authority, went out to look at them himself, and it became an issue. And actually, the person that was helping me advocate, the minister from Siegle, Mr. Morgan, we talked about it, and we said that it wasn't right that he were to do that. So we called, and he actually apologized for not going along with what we had planned, the way that we had planned and said we was going to do it.

It's like nobody respected you or saw you as being anything except for living in a poor community and a high-crime community, useless, worthless. So you practically had to advocate for everything that you needed, or you really had to sometimes, as they say now, go off in order to get the respect that you deserved to get. One of the things that I say that I wanted to teach people to advocate is because you can't just say anything to get what you need done, even though people make you angry sometimes. Part of what I wanted to do was to help families learn how to deal with the outside world without getting angry or without going off. But yes, the residents that needed the stoves and refrigerators, they got them.

But Piedmont Courts had been deteriorating for the last thirty years or so. The Housing Authority was overwhelmed with deteriorating housing developments, and that's why they're in the process of have torn so many down, because there was nothing that they could do. They couldn't keep patch-working something that was falling apart. So they didn't. They would put screened doors on windows, screens on, and whatever. Residents would have to pay if they would tear them up, so it was like all of this stuff going on. Residents couldn't hardly pay their rent; how was they going to pay for screened doors? As it came closer to the Housing Authority being able to get funds to redo Piedmont Courts, things became really hectic as far as the residents paying for things, repairs or needed things done. They wasn't going to repair anything because they was going to tear them down.

DW: Are you talking about right before they—?

AF: Yeah, right before they realized they had the money to be able to renovate Piedmont Courts, it's just like residents began to talk about they got a bill for something they owe three years ago. And if their children had gotten into trouble, then they was bound to be evicted, so the whole process of just putting fear in people, or allowing people to live a certain way for so many years, then all of a sudden you want to change the rules and the regulations on them. Or you should have been following the rules and regulations from the beginning, but now you're enforcing them on people. I knew a lot of families that got put out. I went to court with a lot of families, and it was just like what's happening? There was a time, again, for advocating for families that didn't know how.

DW: When you talk about these rules, when you first moved to Piedmont Courts in the seventies, were the same rules in place in the seventies that were in place in 2004 or 2005?

AF: Practically yes. They give you a lease, and I could always read, but to understand, to comprehend what that little fine print was saying, was hard. I had parents that could not read, a lot of parents that could not read. I did a lot of paperwork for families that couldn't read, maybe their social security papers, where they had to be—. I had to fill those papers out, because they could not read. Now toward the last five years probably, they began to dwell on the lease. When I moved in 1976, I think, in Piedmont Courts, the one thing that I remember that the lease said was that you are not to allow anybody to stay with you, because it is a violation of your lease. I remember that, because I did not want to lose my dwellings. All of that other stuff, that fine print about damage to the property—. I knew paying my rent on time and all of that, but all the other stuff, the damage to the property,

criminals' activities, was not something that I even understood. They do not—. The lease is about this long; it may be two pages. They do not—they did not—take the time to go over the lease with me in detail, which have hurt so many residents in the end.

In the end is where they really dwelled on "You've done this, you've done that. You allowed your children to do this, you allowed your children to do that." So they did not help me to understand the lease. I heard the things like I said. I realized those were the things that they drilled in you, but all the other stuff, which probably they wasn't that keen on, or couldn't really pinpoint, or didn't have the manpower or the womanpower to deal with. No, like I said, people didn't understand their lease. A lot of them didn't because they couldn't read. You can read, and if you can't comprehend, then you're still in the green about your requirements.

DW: Right, right. Why do you think they chose to start enforcing different parts of the lease toward the end?

AF: Well, a law came down with HUD saying that residents was going to have to—. And this is really when I think they started enforcing, because like I say, I have worked with families in Piedmont Courts until two years ago, closely. HUD brung down a law saying—I think it was HUD—saying that residents was going to have to work, or volunteer forty hours if they were not working, in order to keep their dwellings in public housing. I think they attached that onto the lease, and during about the last five years or so, they have really dwelt on the lease, I mean really kind of detailed on it. Like I say, some families didn't understand anything about the lease, anything, except what come out of their mouth, like I tell you, that not paying the rent and having somebody staying with you will violate your lease.

But there's a lot of other things that will cause you to violate your lease. It was during the time that the Housing Authority had applied for the grant to redo Piedmont Courts, or to tear it down, that they started dwelling on the lease and all this stuff, and started coming out about you had a lease violation or—. I mean, they was practically giving lease violations for anything. If the police come to your house, that was a lease violation. If your children done so-and-so, or they *think* they're selling drugs, you get a lease violation. So really the last five years, they put a crackdown on Piedmont Courts, the police department and the Charlotte Housing Authority.

That's when they began to have their monthly meetings. They invited somebody in sometime to talk about the lease and the lease violations. If you get trash in your yard, you're going to get a twenty-five dollar fine. Piedmont Courts looked like a dump yard for years and years and years, but this last five years, anything that could be held against a person had began to come out as far as whatever was on that lease. "Well," they said, "it been in the lease the whole time; why are they just now enforcing it?" That was the attitude of the residents, because it have. You'd come to a meeting, and they'd tell you they're going to go over the lease; then they tell you about—. If litter is found around or near your house, you're charged twenty-five dollars. Well, that lease has been in place. Now you're pinpointing all these little details, because you're getting money to renovate the place, and you've got to find somewhere for me to go. And if I'm able to put you out, I don't have to worry about finding a place for you to go. So it's kind of like, I can't believe this is happening.

DW: So did the families who ended up getting put out—? Do you know what happened with their housing situation?

AF: One particular family got evicted, and I followed this family from our preschool. Our child was fourteen—was four when I connected with this family, and now he's sixteen. So that's how long I worked with her. Went to court with her with her children, went to court with her with herself, went to court with her with the Charlotte Housing Authority. As far as lease violations, son's selling drugs. This lady can practically read well. Her eighth grade son was tested in eighth grade and was reading on a first grade level. We had to go through the courts in order for the judge to recommend that this child be put or placed somewhere where he could get the education that he needs, Charlotte Mecklenburg—.

So she always felt that there was something against her, that Charlotte Housing Authority had something against her, because she felt that she knew what she had to do—but because she couldn't read well, and not reading well created a lot of other situations in your life—it felt that instead of the Housing Authority being a place where they work against you, that what can you do to help me? So she had struggled for years with not feeling that she'd gotten the kind of support she got before she got evicted. Right now, she don't have a place to live. I think she's living with daughters. So, it's just situations like that,—where why can't you work to help me be a better person, instead of holding against me those things that I have done that maybe I knew was wrong, or maybe I didn't know was wrong. Or maybe I need help making the right choice doing them.

DW: Yeah. Well, what do you think should be the responsibility of the Charlotte Housing Authority?

AF: Well, they've even gotten way away from just what they did do for families, because now it's a family like the lady I just described would not be eligible for Housing Authority. I don't have any problem with the direction the Charlotte Housing Authority's

going in, but we can sometime enslave people, because we allow people to get away with things that we know they shouldn't be doing. And then all of a sudden, bam, we want to change the rules. That's an example what happened to so many families in Piedmont Courts, that they had been able to live the life they wanted to live, they didn't have to work, they didn't have to do anything. They got on them sometime about keeping their house clean, but they had to do nothing, really.

But then all of a sudden, things began to change. You don't have anything in place to help families that have been enrooted in a cycle of poverty, or whatever you want to call it, and then change, but have not set a plan into place to get people to the point where they can do well wherever they go, whether they get evicted from Housing Authority or whether they move somewhere else in a Section Eight house sponsored by the Housing Authority. People were not ready for that. I know the young lady, five children, got put out of a Section Eight house, because she had poor housekeeping skills when she moved there, when she moved out of Piedmont Courts. So you're not preparing people to move forward, which may not be your job, but there are services somewhere that you ought to be able to, as a system as big as the Charlotte Housing Authority, to be able to connect people to, to get help that they need, before you start holding against people something that they haven't done.

I had self-motivation myself when I moved into Piedmont Courts because of my upbringing, so I wasn't going to allow myself to get tangled up into the way of depression. Depression probably ran in Piedmont Courts. There was more depression than there is in the city of Charlotte. Because we're taught as strong black women to be strong, we don't understand that we have depression. That's what I was dealing with, with a lot of the women in Piedmont Courts—depression. And if you're depressed, you don't know. You can't

practically get your children out for school every day. So it's like they wanted them to do it, they offered to do it, but nobody understood that those families was depressed and that if you never experienced depression, then you don't know the effects that it has on you, not wanting to even get out of bed.

I can't say that the Housing Authority—. Well, I can say that they should have done more, should have had a longer plan in place, for families to have the opportunity to move forward. They have a program called Stepping Stones, but it has regulations on it where if you didn't have this, then you couldn't be in the program. So it's like guidelines and stipulations that a lot of families could not meet. Some of the families are doing well; some of them are not, because some of them wasn't doing well in Piedmont Courts. I know without the church as the foundation and the support for some of these families—. They've been uprooted from the only source that they could depend on or could air out their pains and hurts and desires and needs to, to be put, to be scattered all over Charlotte. Some of them come back; some of them don't.

DW: It sounds like what you're saying is—and correct me, please, if I'm wrong—but that the Housing Authority should have some sort of educational, or some sort of agencies to provide education for people to better themselves and try to move forward in their lives, and it should be open to everybody. There shouldn't be any kind of things that exclude people.

AF: They should, and they did. But what I'm saying is, there was a lot of mental health issues, a lot of drug use, a lot of alcohol use in Piedmont Courts. I don't care—and I'm saying this because I know there was not a day, even when I moved out of Piedmont Courts, that I have not set feet in Piedmont Courts at least twice a week. That's what my job required me to do, and I did it. I know the situation of many of the families in Piedmont

Courts, so even when—. And as much as people trusted Miss Ann, and as much as people wanted to please me—. They wanted to please Miss Ann; they'd say, "Miss Ann, because you want me to do it, I'll do it." I had ladies and gentlemen that just couldn't do it. Because of mental issues, because of drug issues, because of stress, because of alcohol addiction, they just couldn't do it.

So in order to get people to take advantage of the education, the job training, you've got to deal with the underlying problems, which is those things that I just mentioned. They cannot do it. Where I'm living at now, when you go out that door, if you'll look, the corner probably full of people, because they're dealing with the same issues, the drugs, the stress, the homelessness, the alcohol. They can't get a job. They can't do it. They cannot hold down a job because of the underlying issues that is defeating. What have happened with the programs and the job-training stuff that the Charlotte Housing Authority done, any other job-training program have put into place with residents.

DW: Yeah. Well, what to do you think causes this depression and alcohol use and drug use?

AF: Like I said, when I moved in Piedmont Courts, if I had not gotten myself involved in something, I could been smoking reefer, drinking, doing whatever, every day, because there were individuals that was in my circle that did that. They every day was first thing in the morning, they would get them a beer. It's like a way out to forget about my problems, and here I sit every day. It's a way to forget about my problems and because the same problems linger every day, or linger an hour from after I get sober, I got to get another one. So it becomes an addiction, and they don't even understand that I'm an alcoholic or I'm

a drug addict. It's just that I got to do what I got to do to be able to survive. It's a survival tactic that people use.

DW: Who would you say should be, in terms of housing issues in Charlotte, responsible for things like the mental health issues or finding appropriate and affordable homes for Charlotte residents?

AF: I think it's a whole city problem, because the services that needed have to be available for people. If I get up enough whatever it takes to go to the Charlotte Housing Authority to get an apartment, if I got mental health issues, and part of me being honest is saying, "I got mental health issues," then the Charlotte Housing Authority ought to be able to recommend somebody to me where I can go get some help. Or *tell* me actually that you're going to have to get the mental health services before we can allow you to even be able to stay by yourself in a Charlotte Housing dwelling. One family in particular, and it's a family that I worked with, and I still work with her today—. When they sent in intake workers—and these are individuals who knew probably none of the families, knew anything about the families, but go in and talk to the families, try to get to know the families—was said that they was going to take so much time with each individual to make sure they got a case plan and all of that. Well, it didn't happen that way, because you got so many families, you got too few workers, so you got to go get what you got to get.

One lady in particular had gotten real close to me. She don't trust easily, but allowed me to work with her family. She had five children, twenty-five years old, allowed me to work with her—I knew she had mental illness—actually allowed me to go on a counseling session with her to mental health. When the intake worker went in, told her that she was going to need to get on her medication and get to mental health, she didn't do it. She told

them she wasn't going to do it. They allowed her to move anyway, and this young lady have had trouble, have lost her house, lost her children, and right now is in a terrible way because of we're putting other things before the interest of a human being or the way of being of a human.

That's what bothers me so much about a lot of our services, that we're putting other interests before the wellbeing of our people. Mental health is a big thing. It's a big issue around here; it's a big problem around here, where I see it every day. Every day, if I don't see five people or more that need mental health, and I know you can't make people get it, but something got to be done. We got sick people walking the street here every day that went to nursing homes, that walked away from nursing homes, and really sick. Very sick, so it's a city problem, and everybody's responsible. We are all called to be servants, and we'll give account if we don't serve our brothers and sisters who are in need.

One of my things is that I—. Just this week I said to myself that I wasn't going to do anything for anybody for me. Well, this week I've done more things for other people in one week than I've done in a month. In self, I can say that, but in who I'm called to be and what I'm called to be, I have to do it. I don't want to wake up at four o'clock in the morning and say I should have gave somebody some crackers or some potato chips or a towel to wash their face. I'm faced with that every day. I don't get into "Well so-and-so got this or got that, got the money to do these things with." I do what I do, because we see each other every day, and we have to support each other. I just think it's a city problem that we have that we need to take more time to deal with the less fortunate in our city. We're going to always have them, but at least we could focus on trying to change some of the things that is not working for them.

DW: How do you feel that the city is doing on that count?

AF: We have homeless on every side of town. They find somewhere to hang out. We have the Urban Ministry; we have Crisis Assistance; there are churches that help during the winter time. Our church is one of the churches that does Room-in-the-Inn as far as bringing in guys and women when the weather's cold outside, but we can do more. We can do more. Just in the paper, they had that at the women's shelter that they can only take—I think they said a hundred and fifty people, and they had three hundred and something. That shouldn't have to be. There's money in the city of Charlotte; we're just putting it in the wrong places.

As I said, we will give account for not serving those people who so many people call worthless, they can do better, or they don't have to be that. That's not true. Because of mental issues, alcohol, and drugs, they can't. And no, we didn't tell them to get on it, but what are we doing to help them get off it, is the key thing. I don't think that we're doing enough to do that. The churches are responsible for making sure that we take care of the less fortunate. I consider myself blessed because I'm able to give. And sometimes I sit up and I feel bad that I'm not able to give. It really bothers me if I can't give, because that's what I'm called to do. I know that if I give, even when I don't see that I have it, it's made available to me to do it. So I have to give. I have to give.

DW: I just had a question and it just flew out of my mind. [Laughter] I guess I'm curious about the city of Charlotte, and what's your take about—we're kind of dancing around this now—but what's your take on the housing situation? I've read some articles where, or seen stuff almost every day or every other day—. There are some articles in the

Charlotte Observer talking about the housing, too few houses for so many people. What would you say would be a solution, or could be a possible solution, to the housing issue?

AF: They're building. Around here, the property value of the inner city is really skyrocketing. There are a lot of people around here who rent, and a lot of people's going to lose their living quarters because of the property value going up. The property owners is going to sell, and nobody is going to be able to pay the rent or buy the houses that's going to go up for market in the inner city. People are not interested any more in providing housing for low income residents, because even—. Like I say, part of what HUD has said to people is that HUD and the city of Charlotte is saying to residents who are low income residents, who are Section Eight people, that they're going to have to either volunteer for their hours, or they're going to have to get a job and go to work. It takes us back to what I said: everybody is not able to do that. Because of their education, they cannot read, they cannot do this, they cannot do that. The alcohol and drugs. So we're creating, even with there being fewer houses or not enough housing, we're creating a system where we're going to produce more homelessness, or produce more people having need to shelter, because people can't afford it.

And then, even though they're talking about going up on the living wages, if I get a job making five dollars, what can I pay? What can I do with five dollars an hour? I cannot do it. The standards of living in Charlotte is way above that. I can't do it. So either Section Eight is going to have to find more money to help people with part of their rent, and push for people who can work to get jobs, and we're going to have a lot more homeless people in our city. Everything is being revitalized or renewed, and you don't renew stuff without going up on the value of it. That means everything; the value of everything is going up. If you're

going to push people to work and get jobs, and the value of property and rent and stuff is going up, if I'm already struggling, I'm not going to be able to make it.

DW: So did you live in Piedmont Courts until they tore down Piedmont Courts?

AF: No, I moved out of Piedmont Courts. I've been here in this place thirteen years, so I moved out of Piedmont Courts thirteen years ago. I stayed there twelve years.

DW: How did you come about finding a home?

AF: There's a wonderful program, Habitat for Humanity. I applied there, and when I first applied, they was not taking families from certain zip codes. Piedmont Courts was the 28205 zip code; they was not pulling residents from there. So I applied again; then they did accept my application. I was accepted.

DW: Were there other families in Piedmont Courts that you feel took advantage of the Habitat for Humanity houses?

AF: I encouraged a lot of families that was working and that I knew probably could qualify, because one of the things that Habitat does is allow you to work your hours and not have to save money for a down payment. So I inquired to a lot of the families; I even did one of the parent meetings, had someone to come from Habitat, to talk about the Habitat. But there was a fear that if I lose my job in Piedmont Courts, my rent is going to go down, or I'm not going to have to pay any rent. So it was like slavery within itself, or it's like just putting you in a place where you're comfortable with, and so people felt safe in public housing.

In the private sector, if you lose your job, your rent is going to stay the same. In Piedmont Courts, your rent will go down, or either you will have free rent. Your lights and your water and everything was included. So it was like, no, uh-uhn, I'm safe here; I'm not moving. That's why it's been such a big change to a lot of the families, and they're not able

to balance out because they didn't have water, they didn't have gas, they didn't have light bills. So they're having to kind of figure out and save and budget enough to do all of that. Like I say, none of this stuff was taught, was provided for residents to learn how to budget. If you stayed in that situation for fifteen, sixteen years. It's like, to move out and have to pay the extra is a big move.

DW: Yeah. OK. So was your sense that of people that lived in Piedmont Courts, that many of the residents kind of looked at Piedmont Courts not as temporary housing, but—.

AF: Uh-uhn, no. The Housing Authority did not enforce the rule of temporary housing. It did not. You had to want to do better and see it as a stepping stone. They did implement programs as far as residents being able to move up and out, but all this stuff came down-- you may have been living in Piedmont Courts fifteen years. Then all of a sudden, all of this stuff start coming out, that you're able to--. Well, I'm not interested. I've stayed here all these years, and I'm not taking advantage of a program that's going to help me get up and out into the private sector, and where I might have to pay all this separate stuff. So enforcement have been one of the weakest things with Charlotte Housing Authority. That's what have caused people to be entrapped in the situation that so many of them is struggling to get out of.

Like I say, if I hadn't got connected with the right people, I could be in that same situation myself. I didn't have to work; I could get food stamps. I could get a check. I didn't have to work. I could have sat home every day and done just as well as somebody making a hundred thousand dollars a year, because in my environment, that's what it was. No environment outside of that. Piedmont Courts was its own little city, its own little world.

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I could have lived comfortable in that setting and felt good with what I had and what I was able to get, because I'm with my people that was in the same condition that I was in. It's like we're all in the same boat.

DW: Yeah. Did you feel that there was a stigma attached to living in public housing?

AF: Mm-hmm. Oh, yeah. I was uptown one time and met a gentleman, and we was just waiting on the bus together. He asked me where I lived. I said, "I live in Piedmont Courts." He said, "Oh, yeah. Piedmont Courts, that's where you can come and get anything you want." Like I say, before I moved in Piedmont Courts, I used to hear things about it. For me, it was good, because it gave me the opportunity to better myself. It's anywhere you go in life, you've got to have a vision of what you want to do, whether it's good or bad. I saw a vision of doing better, and that's what Piedmont Courts should be.

But everybody is not able to do that on their own. They have to be some set of rules, some set of regulations put in place in order to help some people move up the ladder in a better position. It was not in place for public housing residents all over the city of Charlotte, all over the world, really. It's changing, but as it changes, it's creating homelessness for a lot of people, because they've been able to live with so many handouts for so many years, and under so many rules that haven't been enforced for so many years.

DW: Yeah. When you say it's changing, do you mean also the stigma is starting to change with public housing?

AF: Well, the stigma going to have to change, because the whole idea of what public housing is done changed. They are mixed income now, so you can't say low income housing no more, because you can't say public housing no more, because you're putting hundred

thousand dollar homes and sixty thousand and up condos mixed with low income housing. Quite naturally, the hundred thousand dollar homes is going to take the place of the low income housing, so you can't say low income housing any more. One of the things that I knew would happen also with the process of what it had taken to revitalize public housing is that you've taken families who, like I say, have gotten set in ways of doing things which is not always the good way of doing things. And to have allowed them to move into neighborhoods that are well-kept, well-groomed, peaceful, and have taken families—my people, I love them, but I know them—and put them in places where they have really created chaos. In talking to people that I know stay in these places have really said that to me. I knew that it would happen, because like I say, you cannot take a person that have lived one way for so long and expect for them to change, even in a different setting.

I think it was in 1985 when they had the shootout in Piedmont Courts, and we formed a task force and came up with all kind of wonderful ideas and all kind of plans of what we was going to do to change the environment in Piedmont Courts. We started out probably four good months. Things started easing down, police started not coming like they supposed to come, the programs that supposed to have been put in place didn't. If you start something and don't finish, then it's not going to work, especially if it's not in place long enough to make a difference. If I'm able to play my loud music, to have company over all time of night, coming and going, and I've got to move, all of a sudden I'm moving and going somewhere else, that's me, that's who I am. I don't know any different. I'm taking that with me. And that's what have happened in so many of the nice quiet neighborhoods that—. What I was able to do in public housing is coming with me. I have not changed.

DW: Yeah, I was going to ask you, with the revitalization that's taking place, and then the goals of Hope Six, what do you think will be the success or failures of mixed income communities?

AF: We're changing structure; we're not changing people. And that's what happened for the 1985 when the shootout took place in Piedmont Courts. Now they came in and did a lot of work in Piedmont Courts, but you can do what you want to do. Like I said, if you don't change the habits and the behavior of people, you can build what you want to build. The one thing that I found out about our African-American families is that if I have a boyfriend, whether we're married or not, and I care about my boyfriend, he's going with me. You can put me where you want to put me, and if my boyfriend is a drug dealer, if my boyfriend doesn't work, then I'm bringing back the same habits and behaviors in this new dwelling that I had in the old dwelling. So we can change structures, but we're not changing people.

DW: Yeah. Some of the people I've talked with seem to think that mixed income communities will be beneficial because then lower income people will have some role models within the community that they can look up to and then change. How would you respond to that?

AF: Change come from within. Rules might help me to change, but change come from within. I might follow your rules, but it doesn't mean that I'm going to look up to you and change. It might change the attitude of the people that's going to be working and making the neighborhood look like it look, but it doesn't change the mind or the behavior of the people who have not had the opportunity to change. The only thing that changed them is

their rules. And that's all good, but we want to change people. Not set rules in place that people have to follow when they're in one place.

We got people who have moved in nice neighborhoods and may be doing well, but if they're drug dealers, or if they're alcoholics, they come back these neighborhoods and do the same thing. But when they go home, they follow the rules. That's what's happening. So we need to try to find a way to change people, from the inside out, so that wherever they go, they can follow rules or do the right thing. It's more so with our children. I see our children—. Well, people say, "Well, they don't do that at home." Well, you would rather for them to do it at home than when they go out in the street. Do better. But it's not, it's not happening.

DW: Yeah, I was going to ask you—you had mentioned before about a family that you work with, where I think the son had a first-grade education in the eighth grade—what you think about the schools in Charlotte, or the schools for the Piedmont Courts residents or the Belmont residents. Was that case of the child having a first-grade reading level because of the school system, or were there other factors that—?

AF: It's an overwhelming factor for the schools when children come in not ready. Our expectation as educators is for students to be ready when they start to school. With all the preschool programs and everything in place, then that's the expectations that the teachers have when the students come. To have a student who is not ready, you don't know until third grade. You begin to really see where a child is falling behind. Testing is not done early in a child's life. If it is, it's not a test that's really going to focus in on what's really wrong or why the child's not learning. Because there are so many students in a classroom, it's impossible to focus in on the learning style of one particular child.

Now there have been developed the individual student plan for students who teachers recognize need the special help. The individual student plan focus on the individual needs of that student in particular, which have been a big help to students who are struggling or students who have a different style of learning. So I can't say that they have not wised up, or expand the idea that all students are not ready to learn when they enter school. There may be a lot of other things that's on the line, the reason why the child cannot learn the way we say that student's supposed to learn. We're getting better about expanding and being creative in learning styles. This child in particular did not get tested until fifth grade, so therefore all of his elementary years in school was not learning for him. When they did test him in fifth grade, they found out that there was some learning disabilities, and did try to put him in different settings.

But once they get that age, and the student realize that they can't read well, then it becomes a behavior issue because they're embarrassed. So then you have to begin to deal with all the other stuff, the mental health issues and the behavior problems and all of that. The older they get, then realize that they can't read well. They get to a point where they either drop out of school or they put them in self-contained classes because it becomes a behavior issue because other students is going to pick at them. But the school system is doing a better job at reaching each child on an individual level as far as their learning styles. Civil rights—Leave No Child Behind have done a big job on helping get those regulations into place.

DW: Since we're I guess going over a little bit—. I don't want to keep you, but I guess I just wanted to get your opinion of what you think is the future of Belmont and the

future of Piedmont Courts after their revitalization is finished, or even through the process of this revitalization.

AF: Well, as I said, as you ride through the neighborhoods, you can begin to see houses for sale, houses that have been in poor condition being fixed up, property value going up. People that own the property are selling. People that is renting is going to pay higher rent, or have to find somewhere to go. If this process is taking place all over the city, inner city, then we're setting up a system that going to create more homeless people. Like I say, people already struggling trying to pay rent, so if it go up any more, they not going to be able to pay it. If somebody want to sell their house and you can't buy it, then you have to go. People are still living in rented houses with a for sale sign in the yard, so it's like once I sell it, you got to go.

DW: Yeah. You said property taxes are now starting to rise—

AF: Excuse me one minute. This is my daughter calling. [stopped to answer the phone].

DW: Oh. Well, I was just curious. You were saying that the property taxes are now starting to rise on houses—

AF: Um-hmm. Property value, property taxes.

DW: Yeah. Well, do you foresee this revitalization becoming a problem for homeowners, given the rise in property taxes?

AF: Yes, because I know there are some that is retired and living on a fixed income. Myself, I work, but it doesn't mean that I'm going to be able to pay higher property taxes when the time come. It's like the whole area is going to change, and we know the change is coming. I'm ready for the change to come, but I'm not ready to see people homeless or

people not losing their homes because they're not able to pay the property taxes. So how can people be prepared for what's coming, because it is coming. Not being a mix-up of people battling for ownership, because right now it's a rat race on people buying up the property around here.

DW: I guess my last question is, do you think the former Piedmont Courts residents will be able to move back to the Courts once they've changed?

AF: I think that the residents in Piedmont Courts during the time that they was getting ready to give them the opportunity to move back or to become homeowners, I think the ones that was able to become homeowners became homeowners, and the ones that was not, that was placed in other places, is not interested in coming back. They're not interested because of some of the requirements that's going to be in place. Because of their living styles, and because they can't afford it.

DW: I know I said that was the last question [laugh] but I just wanted to ask you—. You had mentioned before about civil rights with the No Child Left Behind. How do you see the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement playing out in Piedmont Courts or Belmont, with the residents and housing?

AF: There was a younger generation of families in Piedmont Courts. When I say I was the president, the senior citizens was really my core group of supporters. Well, they came a time that they moved all of the senior citizens from Piedmont Courts, and there's left a younger generation to deal with. I don't think that they understand well enough what had to take place and what still needs to take place in order to continue to make things better for our children and for their grandchildren. Usually in schools when black history months come, it's Dr. Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, the same—.

DW: Harriet Tubman.

AF: Harriet Tubman, Madame C. J. Walker. It's the same group of African-Americans that our children are exposed to, and there are a lot of other African-Americans who have done things that have paved the way for us to have a better life. As parents and grandparents, we don't know enough about our history, about the struggle, in order to share it with our children, our grandchildren, in order for them to know that in certain situations, you need to stand up for yourself, and you need to know that you have a right. I don't think that we're educating ourselves, or our children, or our grandchildren enough on the struggle of the civil rights in order for us to see that we haven't arrived yet, that in order for us to arrive, we're going to have to keep pushing what was set in place to even make the changes that have taken place. It's not happening.

DW: That's still going on.

AF: Um-hmm.

DW: Well, I want to ask you if there's anything I didn't ask you about that you want to mention or anything that you want to say.

AF: No, I just might for me—. Like I say, I'm on a spiritual journey. I'm in my mid-age, and what's most to me all along have been my spiritual journey. But I'm really into that now, and that's what have kept me and helped me to be focused on doing what's right toward others. That's what I was called to do, and I believe I was placed at this place, at this time, for that reason. I used to ride by here when I stayed in Piedmont Courts and used to see all the people hanging out on the corners, and I would just say to myself, "Ain't no way I could live there. How in the world can they do it?" And the Lord placed me right in the

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place, right in the midst of all what was happening, and I know it's for a reason. I just have to be obedient and stay and do it.

DW: Yeah. I want to thank you for doing this interview with me.

AF: Sure.

DW: Really great.

END OF TRANSCRIPT

Transcribed by Carrie Blackstock, July 2006

Edited by Dwana Waugh. September 2006