

Episode #2 transcript - Josephine Baker - Asbury UMC DC Oral Histories podcast

Asbury United Methodist Church, Washington, DC

Narrator: Josephine Baker

Interviewer: Pandit Wright

Host: Kelvin Childs

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## **MUSIC**

### **INTRO CLIP:**

“My kids always scored in the 90, 90-plus percentile and in testing, but more than that, they became thinkers, and this is really what you want. You want creative thinkers. And cognitive thinkers. So, the more I dealt with the mythology and the ancient civilizations, the more I realized how I could use it as a vehicle for expanding their knowledge.”

WELCOME TO THIS EPISODE OF ASBURY UMC DC ORAL HISTORIES, FEATURING INTERVIEWS FROM ASBURY UNITED METHODIST CHURCH IN WASHINGTON, DC.

THESE EPISODES ARE DRAWN FROM ORAL HISTORIES OF MEMBERS OF ONE OF WASHINGTON’S HISTORIC BLACK CHURCHES. ASBURY HAS BEEN AT THE CORNER OF 11TH AND K STREETS, NORTHWEST, SINCE ITS FOUNDING IN 1836. THESE CHURCH MEMBERS SHARE THEIR PERSONAL EXPERIENCES WITH BLACK HISTORY, NATIONAL HISTORY AND THE HISTORY OF THE WASHINGTON, DC, AREA.

THIS EPISODE WILL FEATURE JOSEPHINE BAKER, A NATIVE WASHINGTONIAN, HOWARD UNIVERSITY GRADUATE AND LONGTIME EDUCATOR. IN THIS CONVERSATION FROM 2018 WITH INTERVIEWER PANDIT WRIGHT, SHE DISCUSSES HER DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA CHILDHOOD, HER WORK AS A TEACHER IN DC PUBLIC SCHOOLS FOR 25 YEARS AND HER ROLES WITH THE DC PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOL BOARD UNTIL HER RETIREMENT IN 2011.

WE START WITH JOSEPHINE BAKER’S RECOUNTING OF HOW HER FAMILY CAME TO BE IN WASHINGTON AND HER EARLY MEMORIES OF LIFE IN THE THEN-SEGREGATED CITY.

2:01

Josephine Baker: My parents were born in Mississippi and they migrated here in the early 1920s. I'd say they were part of the Great Migration and coming here to escape some of the indignities that existed in the South. And my mother had a, actually had a college degree, something that many African American women at that time did not have, but her mother and grandmother had seen to it that she actually went

to Rust College, which still exists and still is promoting education for African Americans in Mississippi. So that they came here to again find a way to use their talents, and to raise a family.

2:48

Pandit Wright: And your experiences with schooling, starting with elementary school. Where did you go to

elementary school?

JB: I went to Bruce Elementary School. [Known as Monroe Elementary at that time.] It's now a charter school. And I went to Banneker Junior High and then I went to Dunbar, of course. And, of course, my college was at Howard University.

PW: What was the situation in your earliest remembrance of school? Did you have experience with segregation yourself? You mentioned your parents migrated to escape some of those indignities. Did it ever personally come true for you, ring true for you here in the District?

3:21

JB: Well, we were insulated. [slight shuffling in the background] It's amazing, when you look back, how much we were protected from things that your parents had existing for them in the South. I walked less than a block to school. I could walk a block and a half to 11th Street from my home on Irving Street and I actually caught the bus there to go down to 11th and K, which is where Asbury is and that still, that bus still runs today. That same bus, meaning the same route. [narrator clears her throat] And I went to Banneker [junior high school at that time; high school at time of interview]. I was able to walk to school. Again, because it's not that far. I could walk or ride to Dunbar [High School] depending on time and friends. And so there was something about segregation that forces you to depend upon each other in a way that you might not. And which we know now so many young people lack that sense of community because this was what you were and this is where you were and this is what you had. So -- DC was a very segregated place. Going downtown, I tell, I remember the experience and not until an adult did I realize what the protection was that my father was giving me. We would go downtown on the Georgia Avenue bus, or the trolley probably, and we would go into what was then a five and ten cent store and they had a lunch counter and I would want to buy a hot dog. And my dad would say, "Well yeah, I'll buy you a hot dog, but we'll take it home." And I could never understand: Why can't we eat the hot dog here? Well, he was not going to have *me* have to stand and eat that dog because you could not sit at the counter and eat a hot dog if you were an African-American. So that, but it took me as an adult to understand that dynamic. And yeah, I got the hot dog, but I had to bring it home. And you might buy popcorn and he might, whatever we were going downtown for, we did that, but this was a kind of a treat. But, it was not a treat that other, non-African Americans had to modify.

5:37

## MUSIC

[NARRATION/BRIDGE] JOSEPHINE BAKER RECALLED HOW SHE USED TO PUSH THE BOUNDARIES SET IN THE CLASSROOM WHEN SHE ATTENDED AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL THAT AT THE TIME OF HER INTERVIEW HAD BECOME CESAR CHAVEZ CHARTER SCHOOL.

PW: Was your mother very involved in your education?

JB: She was. She was a homemaker, so, there were times that she had to come to school to see about her daughter, [narrator laughs] making sure that she was following the rules, which I didn't always do. But ...

PW: Would you like to share a story of some rules that you broke? [interviewer and narrator laugh]

JB: Things like chewing gum. I remember she caught, she came one day, she would just drop in. I was standing in front of the class with a wad of gum on my forehead, which was part of the teacher's supposed embarrassment of me for chewing gum and my mother came and of course she was not happy, and I caught it a bit when I got home, but I didn't chew gum after that. [Narrator laughs] It wasn't worth it.

6:39

PW: And Howard, was that always your first choice as far as college was concerned?

JB: Yes. It was. There were other choices that my mother said, we could consider if I wanted them, but I was quite comfortable with Howard. I had been a part of the Junior School of Music at Howard since I was six years old, so I took piano there and the campus was a part of my whole environment. So going to Howard, and I had friends who went there from Dunbar as well. So it was quite an acceptable place to go.

7:18

PW: For a lot of people who may be listening or who may get to know you through this: They won't know the importance and significance that Howard has in Washington, DC. Can you talk about that a bit? I know you started going to Howard as you just said, to do music when you were younger, but can you talk about Howard's place in your life but also in the life of this city?

JB: Well, there were many things that went on at Howard. Of course, Howard had its chapel service every Sunday morning. They do still have a chapel service. It's grown to -- the student body, such now that they have it in the auditorium and not in Rankin Chapel itself. But there were other activities on the campus because the city was segregated. So that Howard became a place where you would go for cultural activities. They had an opera season every year where they'd build a platform in front of Douglass Hall on that campus and for a week you could go to see the opera of -- that was being staged here, because you couldn't go to Constitution Hall or, to see an opera. So, it was a place that provided many, many cultural activities for the city, for African-Americans here in the city.

PW: Did you perform in any of those operas?

JB: Oh no. This was all professional.

PW: Professional companies.

JB: Yeah, yeah yeah. Very professional.

8:33

## **MUSIC**

[NARRATION/BRIDGE] JOSEPHINE BAKER GOES ON TO DESCRIBE HOW GENERATIONS OF HER FAMILY HAVE BEEN CONNECTED TO ASBURY, ESPECIALLY TO THE MUSICAL ASPECTS OF THE CHURCH, INCLUDING THE WESLEYAN CHOIR, OF WHICH SHE HAS BEEN A LONGTIME MEMBER.

8:51

PW: [Interviewer breathes in, laughing] You have a very deep love of music.

JB: I do, I do. I, my mother was a singer, actually she sang in the Wesleyan Choir when I was, from before I was born, and actually did stop singing in '45 when my father passed.

PW: Are there any other stories that you would like to share with us about just sort of how Asbury made you feel being a part of that church family? How did it sort of resonate with you going forward in life?

JB: Well, I think it was, was a part of who I am. And I, it goes farther than myself and I say that because, particularly my second daughter, just remembers Asbury as being nurturing and looking out for its young people. And she will to the, to this day, remember things she, she knew. And when she comes back to visit, she just feels that this is home because people always were caring and supportive. We had our young people playing their musical instruments for our choir concerts. When we did the "Messiah," they would play and they would bring some of their playing mates in the DC Youth Orchestra because my kids played in the DC Youth Orchestra and we would have orchestral accompaniment. They were, they were involved in just everything that the church did. So, it was family and, and while, yes, they were children and young adults, or even teenagers before they became young adults, they were valued. And so, I think that valuing supported both the parents as well as the children.

10:36

PW: And did you feel that way too when you were growing up in the church? If your mother and father hadn't said you better be at church on Sunday morning or whatever, would you have still found your way to Asbury?

JB: Well, I don't, we didn't have a choice. [narrator laughs] Now my father was not an Asburyan --

PW: O.K.

JB: -- my father was Baptist and they decided early in their marriage that she would stay Methodist and he would stay Baptist and there was no conflict and occasionally I went to his church as a visitor, but my brother went with my father to church and the two girls went with my mother to church and no conflict, it was just what we did. So, it all worked so very smoothly, you know it's sort of like in retrospect because it was just, that was how we functioned.

PW: And you enjoyed it?

JB: Yes. Yes, definitely, definitely. And from Sunday school, to plays in Sunday school, to youth choir, you know, to all of that. And of course, from the youth choir, even when I was at Howard singing in the Howard choir, when I could I sang with the youth choir.

11:40

## MUSIC

[NARRATION/BRIDGE] JOSEPHINE BAKER TURNS TO DISCUSSION OF HER MANY YEARS AS A DC SCHOOL TEACHER, A PROFESSION SHE GRADUALLY DETERMINED WAS THE BEST FIT FOR HER.

JB: It's sort of funny when people say, oh, you know, did you take the education? No, I don't. When I was in undergraduate school, teaching was something that I vowed I would never do. That just seemed to be something that wasn't suitable for me and I majored in sociology and minored in psychology and enjoyed that, but loved statistics and actually had been accepted at the University of Michigan to get a master's degree in statistics. However, Isham Baker did propose and I decided I preferred my MRS. to my MA. So I, uh, I got married instead and um --

PW: He was at Howard?

JB: He was at, yeah, he went to architecture school at Howard. Yes. And we both graduated in the same class. So then as kids came along and I was working with them and I had friends, my sister, of course, was a teacher and all her friends who were teachers; they would always give me things that they thought I might find useful at home, etc. I began to say, you know, this is not, this is kind of fun or you know, this is something that you can do that's going to make a difference or whatever. And so I, when all were in school, when my youngest started school, I decided that maybe teaching, I could give it a stab. So actually it started out as a substitute teacher and my sister who's a teacher, said, well, you know, if you like subbing, teaching will be a breeze [narrator laughs slightly] because we all, anyone who knows anything about education, knows that kids will act up when there's a substitute teacher in the room. But I did find it challenging but gratifying at the same time. So I went back and did a few courses. The reason I couldn't do the undergraduate teaching courses was because I was a psych maj--, MINOR, and a soc [sociology] major and so much of what they were teaching was just the same stuff except, now, look at it in an educational setting. Well, I figured that, you know, if, if I couldn't do that, I couldn't make that happen, then something, somehow I didn't really need to be there in the first place. So I just refused to take education courses in undergraduate school. So I didn't take, I had to take conversion courses -- very few -- in order to become certified to teach. And that's what I did for 25 years.

14:13

PW: Now I want to share with you a compliment that one of your let's see, a parent of some of your former students told me: There never has been a teacher [narrator laughs softly] like Josephine Baker. There never will be. [narrator laughs softly] All right? And they, you taught their kids at Shepherd --

JB: OK.

PW: -- Elementary and they talked about how you taught those children mythology ...

JB: I did.

PW: How did you develop some of these loves and skills that have people talking about you still to this day? 'Cause this young man now has children of his own.

JB: [Narrator chuckles] Wow. Well, let me just say that for me, teaching someone else's child was almost like teaching my own child except I had, then I had a pretty big family. But I just felt, and I used to tell parents when they would sometimes be objections about the, the rigidi-- well I won't say rigid -- the requirements, the things that, the standards that I established, that I taught everyone else's children as if each of them was my own. And it meant that I held high standards for them. That I had behavioral standards that they had to meet because I knew that as African-American children, even when I went to Shepherd, I had an integrated class, eventually it became close to all but -- those African-American children that I was teaching, that the world did not receive them in a way that they would survive unless they had the skills to do that. And so if, I would say to parents, if this is not what you, if you don't, if I'm too hard, or if my standards are too high, then your child is in the wrong place. And my principal would say the same thing: "If Mrs. Baker's class is too difficult for your child I can put them somewhere else." And they'd say, "Oh no, never mind." So, I felt that every child deserved the same kind of, of, of support that I expected for my own children.

16:14

PW: So mythology. Let's talk a bit more about that.

JB: I don't know exactly how this love of mythology developed, but, I would began to read myths along with my, my interest in ancient civilizations and so that, as a part of my program -- Here again because I had a very, I won't say generous, but flexible administrator who said if these are things that you think will benefit children then do them as long as the kids do well. And my kids always scored in the 90, 90-plus percentile and in testing, but more than that, they became thinkers, and this is really what you want. You want creative thinkers. And cognitive thinkers. So, the more I dealt with the mythology and the ancient civilizations, the more I realized how I could use it as a vehicle for expanding their knowledge, and so much so that I got a Cafritz grant and I actually went to Greece. And actually, the one exciting thing was that I took a picture of the ruins of Athena Temple. And when I came back, and we were looking at the, a textbook that had some, some historical mythology, kinds of old, ancient civilization kinds of things, the same temple was in their textbook. And that was so, it meant a reality to them that this really existed. I had a picture and yet the picture was in the textbook. So mythology then

became developed into a, a part of my own curriculum. I used part of my grant to get books that provided them with lots of myths and so forth. And then a culminating activity. One of the years was, I had an artist [narrator swallows] who was an artist in residence and she did printmaking and so they did printmaking and they did it for lots of things, but then the culminating activity was for them to decide what mythological person or scene that they want to, to describe and to do it through art and printmaking. And we had an art show. And I had a parent who hung, who put some wood panels on the, on the wall so that we could hang their paintings. And then the refreshments were all Greek food. So it was just carrying all of that to that maximum. And so that was fun. We read Homer, and while we read a children's Homer it was still in the language of Homer. I did Shakespeare with my kids and I did it through the Shakespeare Theatre and there -- and they had actually 10-minute performances of a section of a play. And they had to do it in the language of Shakespeare. So you, many times I would take a Shakespeare play and condense it and take out, because Shakespeare repeats you know, Shakespeare wants to say the same thing over and over and over, just with different words. And so I could condense it so that they could, could present that. So they did "Hamlet" and "A Midsummer Night's Dream" and all of that so.

19:36

JB: I had fun –

PW: Yes.

JB: - and, and to me, how do you go to work every day and not enjoy it? So I had fun, I loved kids, I pushed them, and I had kids to come back years later saying you know, I finally get it, you really were making me do what I needed to do in order to be where I am now.

19:55

## **MUSIC**

[NARRATION/BRIDGE] JOSEPHINE BAKER GOES ON TO TALK ABOUT HOW SHE TOOK ON NEW ROLES IN EDUCATION AFTER LEAVING THE ELEMENTARY CLASSROOM IN THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA PUBLIC SCHOOLS.

JB: And then [narrator chuckles] I got a call, well I taught at GW [George Washington University]. I got, I was asked to come there and fill a vacancy that, for a tenured spot, which I didn't qualify for, no Ph.D., and I taught there for about five years. But in the process I got a call asking me to consider being on a DC Public Charter School Board. And looked, thought about it because I was not anti-DCPS [District of Columbia Public Schools]. I did not have any, any, um, no, no beefs, you know, I was, I didn't want it and I didn't want to do anything that I thought was, was meant to destroy or to minimize, but I was about the business of how does this help children? Is this something that can be beneficial for the city? And my analysis, not based on a lot of information, there wasn't a lot to get, that it seemed to be something that could make a difference. And so that's when I did accept that offer to be, have my name submitted and was subsequently chosen as one of the original seven members for the DC Public Charter School Board.

PW: And then how long before you became the executive director?

JB: About two and a half years. We had an executive director who left and we went about six or eight months searching and they, we weren't getting the kinds of responses or, we had some interviews, but it just didn't seem that -- there were not that, that many good fits and by that time, because I was retired and though I was still teaching at GW, I was able to be in the office a lot to make sure that things moved along and they said, well, you're doing it, you're doing what needs to be done. Maybe you should take the job. And so that's, that's how that happened.

22:00

PW: And how do you think that your field has changed, in Washington or in the nation when you look at education, whether public, charter, whatever it may be? What do you think the biggest changes are that you've seen over these past years?

JB: Well, you know, you can't isolate it. The changes in who we are as a people now and how we live as a people and where our values are as a people. I mean, when I say people, I mean U.S. citizens. Family values, or how families relate. How much time parents spend with children, uh, whether they farm the children out to have somebody else do what needs to be done. And all of this obviously affects how children respond when they come to school every day. And I don't know that we as adults or those who run schools have been able to come to grips with how we meet those changes in a positive way. And I don't say that they're not trying. It's just saying it's kind of tough and hard to make it happen. And, so that I think some of the alternatives and some of the ideas of choice -- And remember that we have educational systems that were set up at the time of the American Revolution and shortly thereafter, and this is not the same citizenry and not the same environment, not the same attitude. And all of those things make a difference in how education is successful or not successful. So I think that that's where we've got to figure it out. The children are here, they will continue to be here, there will be new children coming along and we have not done the kind of educating of our overall population in a way that gives us a kind of citizenry that we obviously would like to have.

23:58

PW: What was the biggest or the most positive change that you believe you were able to affect when you were with the charter school movement?

JB: Well, we certainly have been able to provide choice to parents who wanted to, to have a choice, and because we as a board had an attitude, nonpolitical attitude about what it was, what was our job, what was it that we were being asked to do under this law and, and the way in which to do this that was going to serve children well. And there is no perfect world and there's no perfect charter school and there's no perfect teacher. We know all of that. But then what can we put together that's going to provide something that's strong enough to take children where they need to go? Because the bottom line is that's what it's all about. It's not about the adults. It's not about the superintendents and not about the DC Public Charter School Board. It's all about how do we serve children well.

25:00

PW: And what did you see? If you looked at it and you said, all right, I'm proud of this. I can look at this and see some positive change that has been made or something that you felt or measured. You were statistics [interviewer laughs], something that you measured in terms of that.

JB: Well, I think that what we have been able to accomplish maybe, and there are those who will refute it, deny it, say it's not really what has happened, but I think over time there has been the recognition that first of all, one school doesn't fit all. That we do need a variety. That we do need choices. Not only in the school but in the approach. Just as you and your family: Did you teach -- did you treat each of your children, whether there were two or six, the same? Were they the same? Obviously not. And so how do you make that happen in a public situation? And of course, I feel that public education is essential. I don't think we can give every parent x number of dollars and say go find a school because that's abdicating our responsibility to provide, you know, meaningful education. I think that charter schools have provided the kind of choice that certainly [narrator coughs] [f]or a while, uh, we were ignored or rather there was not -- We were the enemy, uh, with, uh, those in DCPS and, uh, but we kept on doing what we thought was the appropriate thing and the right thing to do. And somewhere along the way, there were a number of things that we did that the school system began to say, well, maybe we can do a little of this, or, or certainly maybe looking at themselves in a way that brought about some of the changes that maybe have made some things better. I know we hear all the bad stuff, you know, high schools and that, but in the long run I have to believe and we have to believe that somehow things have moved upward and where they, are they where they need to be? Obviously not. Test scores are not the only thing and I don't know, you have to have something concrete to measure and when you have that concrete item, it doesn't really tell you everything that you need to know about what's happening in education. So, I don't know that there's a, I don't know what the solution to that is, but we have to keep remembering that they, children, are our most valuable resource and if we don't educate them well then we are going, we're going to find ourselves in even more trouble than we are already.

27:46

## **MUSIC**

[NARRATION/BRIDGE] JUST AS SHE HAS HAD HOPES FOR INNOVATION IN EDUCATION, JOSEPHINE BAKER INSISTS ON THE NEED FOR HISTORIC BLACK CHURCHES LIKE HER OWN TO CREATIVELY PAVE THE WAY FOR THEIR FUTURE.

PW: In terms of the activities that you still have at Asbury and the things that you do in the community, what do you hope for? What are your aspirations, for example, for Asbury? What are you looking at as the next steps?

JB: Well, we're having [narrator clears her throat] some challenges obviously, and I think that, first of all, that those of us who have the capacity or the health, good health, when I say capacity, good health to participate, need to continue to be supportive and we need to find creative ways in which we can somehow convince people beyond who are presently a part of our community, that there is something

there for them as well and that may not look like what I have come to expect. And so, and it's hard. It's hard for those of us who have been there for years to, to look at a different Asbury. But if it takes a different Asbury, I think the one thing, I think the final thing is that Asbury has to survive. This city cannot be a city with no African-American churches in it. That is just counter to the history of the city and to the needs of the city. So how can we be sure that we can continue to be a part of that? If it takes, our, our modifying, of reaching out to different groups, of whatever it takes and I'm not sure we know what that is yet. We're fiddling with it and trying to figure it out.

29:42

PW: Is it a labor of love?

JB: Well, I guess! It's natural for me. If you look at it from afar, maybe it is a labor of love. It's also commitment to provide for other African-Americans while we are fewer in number in this city, that we can say that we are here, and we've been here now for 181 years and we're not going anywhere.

30:13

PW: Does the gentrification, does the change that we see in the city, does that in any way motivate or inspire more of the actions that you're talking about now?

JB: Probably. I just think that we have to be sure that -- just as history does not always recognize the importance of what the slave and the subsequent Negro population and the present African American population have given to this city. Then likewise, I think that we don't realize that, that there's still a very much, there needs to be an African-American presence so that it is not forgotten. Because the city would not be what it is now if we had not been a part of it.

31:00

PW: So all the things that you've done in your life, what has been the greatest blessing?

JB: Wow! [Narrator laughs] Well, probably if I look at it all, none of the things that have been successful would have been successful had I not had family, family growing up, family as a married woman, whose husband appreciated her as a person, as an individual. And who you know, took joy in, in my success as I took joy in his. And so, I think that then you can move into other spheres and do other things because you have that sense of, of worth that you get from that kind of support.

31:50

## **MUSIC**

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**MUSIC**

32:52