

### Oral Histories- African Americans Remember Life on Long Island

In these interviews Jacqueline Collins, LeRoy M. Collins, and Marguerite Golden Rhodes, discuss their experiences on Long Island during the 1950's and 1960's. Read the interviews and answer the questions that follow them.

#### An Interview with Jacqueline Collins by Denise Del Valle and Stephanie Hunte

I was raised in New Rochelle but my husband was born and grew up on Long Island. A couple of months after we were married, he was sent to Korea, so I stayed with my family until after he got out of the service. After he got out, we moved to Long Island.

I was teaching in Valley Stream, so we moved to Lakeview. We lived in Lakeview for about nine years. When I moved to Lakeview it was a community that was basically Black. In 1954, the only houses that real estate agents would show a Black couple were shacks or in a solidly Black area. There were hardly any mixed neighborhoods at that time out here.

I guess what happened to Lakeview was that most people were victims of blockbusting. That was a big issue in the 1950's and 1960's. Unscrupulous real estate people would go ring bells in a white area and tell homeowners that Negroes were moving next door. At that time, we weren't Black people, we were Negroes. They would say, "Do you know what they will do to your property?" They were afraid if they waited too long to sell their home would depreciate. They wouldn't get their price when they tried to sell. So, white people would run; they would sell their houses real fast, and more Black people would come in.

My street was mostly middle class. The family across from us was from Sierra Leone. He was working for the United Nations. When Sierra Leone became independent, he got a big title and a car longer than this room. It would pick him up every morning and he would come out dressed up in his black suit. It was very exciting. The people on one side of me were both people with master's degrees and good jobs. On the other side was a New York City policeman and his wife. Most of the kids that came out of this neighborhood at that time have all done well.

At that time my husband was teaching in Lawrence and there was a teacher he was friendly with who told him about a house on her block that we might like to see. It was within walking distance of their school. We ran over to see that house. The next thing I know we were moving to Cedarhurst.

When we moved to Cedarhurst it was about a 90% Jewish neighborhood. Some people had a petition. They went through the neighborhood to try to keep us out of the home and to keep us from getting a mortgage, but they really couldn't do very much. Mrs. Hensler, a former teacher of my husband, refused to sign it. She told them, "Mr. Collins would be a role model for your children. You should be anxious to have him. He would be an asset to the community."

It was kind of hard to bring my children into that area. There were very few young children. When they got into the schools there were no other Black children for them. When we moved to the neighborhood, we used to be harassed by cops. They asked what we were doing on Barnard Avenue. They still stop you around this area. Recently my daughters fiancé was stopped and asked where he was going.

When my son got to junior high school he had a terrible time. They would beat him up and throw his books away. He had to eat by himself. There was one little girl that he was friendly with and they scared her. They threatened her if she stayed friendly with him or continued to eat with him. My son made friends with a Black child from Inwood. When they were together they had a great time, but when they were in school, the other boy would not stand up for him. My son was not a street fighter. Maybe his father should have made him tougher or I should have made him tougher, but he wasn't. I guess there are some kids like my daughter, no one would mess with her because she was a girl and she had that mouth. Finally, we sent my son to Woodmere Academy.

The Valley Stream school district was basically white, blue collar, lower middle class, lower kinds of professionals, office administrators, etc. I went into an all-white situation. At the end of the year, the principal would give the teachers a personal evaluation. He called me in and he told me that "your success here has been a personal triumph." I said, "Thank you very much, but I disagree. I came here as a teacher to teach children and children are children regardless of what color they are. I just did my job." The principal was always outside the door peaking in and there were always different people peaking in. I don't know what they thought.

Somehow in the north, when schools become predominantly Black, everything goes down. They have no equipment, the teachers attitudes are terrible. There is nothing equal about it. I worked in an all Black school and I know what it is like. Roosevelt was about 75% Black when I went there. When I left it was about 99.5% Black. The schools kept going down and there was constant fighting to get things that you needed. There is something in the north; the kind of prejudice here is really insidious. It is there even if you don't know it, but it has harmful ways of manifesting itself.

I was not personally involved in any protest movement or boycotts during the 60's. I really was not politically active. I was busy running around with the kids. I worked for the EOC (Educational Opportunities Center) for two summers. It was part of the war on poverty. That was the height of my involvement.

I didn't even go to the March on Washington. I didn't go for two reasons. I could not picture myself down there with all those people and I didn't know what to expect. I couldn't imagine that it would be civil. I never dreamed it would be the beautiful demonstration that it was. The second reason was that my kids were so young. So that's why I didn't go. I have regretted it ever since.

#### Questions:

- 1- According to Ms. Collins, how did Lakeview become an African American community?
- 2- In your opinion, should real estate brokers and home owners have the right to decide not to sell a home to a family from a particular race or ethnic background? Explain your answer.
- 3- What was life like for the Collins family in Cedarhurst?

4- In your opinion, was Ms. Collins a civil rights activist? Explain your answer.

**An Interview with LeRoy M. Collins**  
by Laurie Collins-Thomas and Jennifer Palacio

After LeRoy Collins graduated from Lawrence High School in 1945 he entered a segregated Army training program which sent him to Texas and Alabama. As a veteran of World War II, the G.I. Bill made it possible for him to attend Syracuse University where he received a B.A. in Physical Education in 1951. In September, 1951, he became the first African American welfare case worker in Nassau County. He married Jacqueline Wight in July, 1952 and served in the army in Korea as a First Lieutenant from 1952-1953.

In 1954, LeRoy and Jacqueline Collins purchased their first home in Lakeview, Long Island. They were directed to this community by local real estate brokers because they were Black. That year, his wife was hired as the first African American teacher in the Valley Stream school district.

In Lakeview, LeRoy Collins was President of the Pinebrook Civic Association. The group was founded by upwardly mobile African American professionals. They wanted to maintain Lakeview as a neighborhood of single family homes and to preserve education for their children. They became involved in campaigns to prevent Malverne from creating racially segregated schools, against rezoning that would allow both industry and multi-family dwellings in their community, and a boycott of the Woolworth in Hempstead because of discriminatory employment practices. After a number of years, conditions in Lakeview began to deteriorate. The brake line on LeRoy Collins' car was cut when he continued to oppose multi-family dwellings in the community. This incident prompted the Collins family to move to Cedarhurst in 1963.

From 1955 until 1958, LeRoy Collins worked as a probation officer in Nassau County and in 1958 he was hired as a physical education teacher in Lawrence. He was the first African American teacher in the district. In the fall of 1961, he became the first African American student in the Master's degree program for Guidance and Counseling at Hofstra University and he became a guidance counselor in Lawrence in 1966.

LeRoy Collins believes that by becoming a homeowner in Cedarhurst his family made a political statement in support of civil rights. He was able to purchase the home in this all white community because of the help of white colleagues from work who lived on the block. He also believes that during the early years of his career he was often used as a token, but that his activities helped to pave the way for other African American professionals.

LeRoy Collins feels that as a Black man living and working on Long Island he always had to be careful or he would place his family risk his family or lose his job. For these reasons, he did not attend the 1963 March on Washington. LeRoy Collins has always tried to be a role model for African American youth and to challenge injustice by working within the system.

**Questions:**

- 1- What was the purpose of the Pinebrook Civic Association?
- 2- Why did the Collins family move to Cedarhurst?
- 3- Why does Mr. Collins believe he always had to be "careful"? How did this belief shape his life?

**An Interview with Marguerite Golden Rhodes**  
by Karen Lewis

Marguerite Golden Rhodes was an elementary school teacher and principal. Currently she is an administrator at Hofstra University. Marguerite Golden Rhodes and her husband moved from Manhattan to Hempstead in 1961. They moved to Long Island because her husband's family lived here. At that time, white families in Hempstead were starting to move out. Mrs. Rhodes bought her house from a white couple. When they moved in, the neighborhood was still about half white.

On Marguerite's block there were few racial incidents because so many Black families already lived there. However, there were troubles in other parts of Hempstead. Once, while she was going into a store on Front Street and she heard a white man holler, "Nigger, go back where you came from, we moved to Long Island to get away from your kind of people." On another occasion, young white teenagers drove by her in a car and shouted out racial names. Mrs. Rhodes was very hurt by these incidents. She grew up in the south, but these things had never happened to her before.

When Mrs. Rhodes moved to Hempstead, she was a consultant on Early Childhood Education for New York City. She later became a guidance counselor in Hempstead, an assistant principal and a principal. When she retired, the Washington School was renamed for her.

Marguerite Golden Rhodes was active in the civil rights movement on Long Island. During the 1960's she participated in many local marches and protests and she helped to recruit more Black teachers for the Hempstead schools. She believes that the rapid change in Hempstead's population during the 1960's is a classic example of "white flight." There are almost no white students attending Hempstead public schools today. "It seemed as soon as the whites heard that Blacks were moving in, they all decided to move out."

**Questions:**

- 1- What was happening in Hempstead during the 1960's?
- 2- What evidence does Ms. Rhodes offer of racial tension in Hempstead?
- 3- In your opinion, why was a Hempstead school named after Marguerite Golden Rhodes?