

Myrtle Davis Downing: At that time we weren't called Black, we were called Colored. Which one was first, Colored, then Negro, then Black, then Afro-American. We've had five names. But I had—it just did not dawn on me until in the late sixties that girl, you're Black. You can't go here. You can't go there. What? You're joking, really? My skin different color than yours. Oh, okay. And that's just when it hit me. I just could not understand what is the big fuss? What's the big fuss? Because by my father being a contractor, and my parents being in business, they associated with Whites all their life. And so I was always around White children. And when the White kids would come over here in this neighborhood when I was a kid, the other folk would look and say, what you doing with a little White kid on her bicycle.

Myrtle Davis Downing: It was strange to them, but it didn't bother me because I just saw kids as kids. I didn't see kids as color. And even now teaching kids, I don't see kids as color. I can remember in teaching in Maryland, I had a class one year and they're all White kids. And it didn't dawn on me. I didn't realize until the end of the school year there was not a child in there that were Black. And I stood up and I said, kids what's the matter, I said, you're no Black kids in this room. I said, didn't you know that? I said, well, I just never paid attention. I didn't. And it was a strangest thing. They said, all year long you never, I said, I never thought, I just never realized that there was no Black kids in this class. And that was the first year I'd ever had all White class.

Chris Stewart: Wow.

Myrtle Davis Downing: All White. And I said, God, how do I go a whole year not realize I got Black—no Black kids. But like I said, I teach kids, I don't teach color.

Chris Stewart: Right.

Myrtle Davis Downing: I don't know. And when I never got called out on my name until, God, when I get called on my name? I never got called a nigger until I taught in Maryland. And I could not believe, I was teaching a church school, I could not believe that somebody actually called me that.

Chris Stewart: In a church school?

Myrtle Davis Downing: In a church school in Maryland. And all the kids in that class were White, every one of them. And I was writing on the board and I turned, I said, I didn't hear what I thought I heard, did I? That's when the kids said, yes ma'am. I wasn't married then so I turned around, I kept on writing on the board and I turned back and a guy said, I did—did I really hear that? Somebody actually called me a name. They—and the kids, they were all quiet because they didn't know what I was going to do. Because hadn't never had a Black teacher before. And they said, yes ma'am. I kept writing on. But all the time now I'm— my blood pressure's steaming and rising.

Myrtle Davis Downing: And I turned around again. I looked at him, I hit the desk. I said, who was it that called me a nigger? And somebody pointed to this little White boy. I said, do you know what one is? Yes ma'am. It's somebody who's, I said, wait a minute. I said, who told you that? That's what mama said. I said, I'm going to tell you something. I said, your mama is a liar. I said, she doesn't know what a nigger is. I said a nigger does not apply to color. I said, somebody who is ignorant and what you are right now is ignorant. I said, you—I made him get the dictionary, I said, you write it 500 times what the definition of nigger is.

Myrtle Davis Downing: And he rolled up, he didn't like that one bit. His mom got mad. I said, I didn't give a rip. I said, I just want you to know that nigger has nothing to do with color. I said, you could be one just like me. Anybody could be one just like—and that's not, I just, I don't know. I just got so upset. I said, great day in the morning. Because the first time I ever experienced that, I said I woo anyway, I finally got over that. And then I got called out again at Brister by a parent. And I told him, I said, you want to see what one is? I said, you come out here. And I said, I'll show you what a nigger is. I was so mad. I was crying on the phone. And folk know when I start crying that I am really mad. You better get out of my way.

Myrtle Davis Downing: And honey, somebody got the principal said, Ms. White, you better come down in there because Myrtle is upset. And she is crying said, and I don't know who she's talking to, but they have really made her mad. And he had, this man had a son who had called three of my little kids niggers. And I had gotten on him about it over and over again. And I said, now I'm sick and tired of it. I said, I will not tolerate name calling in my room and talking about people's parents. I say, you don't know their parents and don't you talk about them. Anyway, I called her daddy and I told her dad, I said, Greg has something to tell you. And Greg said, Miss Myrtle said I called her a nigger blah, blah blah. And I didn't say that.

Myrtle Davis Downing: I said, Greg, if you stand here and lie to your dad in front of me. And he did. And so I took the phone, I talked to him. I said, yes he did. I said, how did I know he called him. I said, let me tell you something. I said, this is the third time he's done it. And I have told him over and over about it. And I will not tolerate the name calling in my room. Well how do I know you might be a nigger? I said, I beg your pardon. He said, that's what you just might be one. I said, really? I said, do you all see one? I said, come out here honey. I'll be there. I said, come right on.

Myrtle Davis Downing: And he came and honey my principal came and got me. And he said, Myrtle, he said, calm down. I said, this man don't know who he's talking to. I went in the teacher's lounge and I was so upset. And so the man came and Mr. White talked to him and told him, you don't know this lady. Said she's a big woman. She is a strong woman and you don't know who you messing with. Now you done hit the wrong one calling her a nigger. And so he came and told me, he said, Myrtle, he said, Mr. [indistinct 00:05:08] is here. He said, you can talk to us if you like. He said—I said, Mr. White. I said, I don't want to talk to him. I said, but I will talk to him and I said, I'm not going to promise you that I'm going to be responsible for the reactions. He said, now come on Myrtle. He said, now you are better than that. He said, you're not going to do anything foolish. I said, I'll try not.

Myrtle Davis Downing: I said, but if he makes me mad, I said I'm going to knock him out. And honey, I went down to the office, went down to the office, and Mr. White had three seats sitting there. And the guy looked

at me and stood up. And when he looked—he stood up he had to look up at me. He said, how you doing Ms. Myrtle? He says, I'm so sorry. He says, I do apologize. He said, I really didn't mean to say that. And I looked at him, I said, yes sir, Mr. [indistinct 00:05:44]. I said, if it had been my child, I said, or a Black child would call another child nigger, I said, I done the same thing. I said, I didn't do it because Greg was White. I said, but I just do not tolerate name calling. He says, I'm really sorry. He saw how big I was and he backed off quick. And I never heard from that parent again.

Chris Stewart: Do you think that your height has been a benefit in your life?

Myrtle Davis Downing: Oh yes it has. Oh yes it has. I have found, and I hate that though, but I found out that my statue intimidates people. I mean it intimidates adults as well as children. Now, I don't want anybody afraid of me. And I have a lot of kids in my school. They love me to death, especially the little ones and all of, they love me to death because I can relate to them. I play with them outside on the playground. I play kick ball with them. I'm playing softball with them and whatever. And they can relate to me. And they know when I'm playing, I'm playing. And when I'm serious, I'm serious and I mean business. I'm their friend when I'm playing but I'm Ms Myrtle when I'm in my classroom and any other thing. But yes, my statue has intimidated a lot of folk.

Chris Stewart: You used it too?

Myrtle Davis Downing: And well, I don't have to honey, just look at me. And sometimes I wear three inch heels and that really push me up there. And there's not a person in my school who's taller than me. I got teachers that hit me breast height and it's like, God, you're a big woman. I said, you won't bother me will you? No, I'm not going to mess with you now. I said, all right then. Just know there's no use.

Chris Stewart: Have there been any downsides to that do you think?

Myrtle Davis Downing: Yes, because it has frightened some children. And when they fear me it bothers me. Because I don't want any of my children afraid of me. And I don't want them to think that because I have a deep voice and I have a large statue that I'm going to hurt them. And sometimes I can give them this evil look. I don't have to yell at my kids. All I got to do is catch them doing something wrong. And I look at them funny and they'll stop. That's all it takes. But I don't want to be used as a disciplinarian for smaller children. I've had teachers to bring me kindergarten kids and first grade kids because they feel I'm going to scare the daylights out of them.

Myrtle Davis Downing: And they come in my room screaming and hollering, crying or whatever. I say, sit over there the corner, be quiet. I'm teaching class. I don't want to go back to my class. I said, you behave yourself you don't have to come back down here no more. And I just don't like that. And the [indistinct 00:07:57] brought me some kids, I said, that tells me you can't handle the children you bring them to me for me to do what? Scare them to death. Don't use me. I'm not—I said I'm not going to be used that way this year. I made up my mind, you not—nobody's bringing me anybody for discipline. You discipline your child. They bring them to me, Ms Down and so on, do his work and so on. And I look and I say, am I the principal? Take him

down. I'm not the principal.

Chris Stewart: Right.

Myrtle Davis Downing: But they look at me as if I am because they know that all I got to do, look at them one time, call the name one time, I'll say, Hey, everything stops.

Chris Stewart: Right.

Myrtle Davis Downing: When the cafeteria gets too loud, I'll stand up, tone down people, everybody stop. Teacher stop talking. Everybody stop talking. They say God Ms Down you speak everybody shh. I say, yeah. But it has its advantages and the disadvantages. It really does. As far as teaching is concerned. Now, if I was in a junior high school, in high school, then they wouldn't bother me at all.

Chris Stewart: Right.

Myrtle Davis Downing: But when I'm with elementary kids and these kids are little small and I walk around the corner and they love me now, the little ones not afraid of me. And they look up at me, Hey, Ms Down you a big woman. You so big. I say, yes, sweetheart. They keep on going and I disrupt the lines because the kids want to touch me and they want to hug me and they want to grab around my waist. They can't get the arms around me. And the teachers are standing trying to keep the lines quiet and keep it in order. And I kind of go, shh. And they smile at me. I want to be in your room when I get to fourth grade. I say, if I'm still here. If I'm still here. But I enjoy teaching.

Chris Stewart: You mentioned earlier when you were in high school, when—that there were some—what—that was the sit-ins and things were happening in high school. Well not actually in high school, but while you were in high school. And you also mentioned that this was a time when the KKK started people, you started to find out who was in the KKK. What did they do?

Myrtle Davis Downing: Well, let's see. Of course KKK burned crosses in your yard. They made themselves known in Craven County area. But I cannot recall of any incidents where a Black was actually strung up, hung or killed by one. Not going to say they weren't, but I can't recall. And I'm sure before then, sometime earlier maybe but I know in the deeper southern part of the states they were. But I know that unfortunately Bridgeton is considered to be a very strong KKK town. And-

Chris Stewart: Bridgetown?

Myrtle Davis Downing: Bridgeton where I teach.

Chris Stewart: Bridgeton.

Myrtle Davis Downing: So I heard and out near, let see, where is it? Is it out near Cole City area? Pleasant Hill

area, out that way. There are some out there, but I don't know any, I don't know anybody who is one.

Chris Stewart: Do you know of anybody in—

Myrtle Davis Downing: No, I don't. I really don't. Not in any county. But like I said, I'm not going to say that weren't, but I guarantee you there was some, but I cannot tell you anybody who has, because I don't know anybody who's had a cross burned in the yard.

Chris Stewart: How was the town's reaction? What was the town's reaction to this beginning of a student, the students beginning to challenge the segregation laws?

Myrtle Davis Downing: Oh, a lot of them were very rebellious. Very rebellious. Because at that time, Dr. King was just now becoming, beginning to become known. And he was going to come to New Bern while I was in high school to make a speech. And unfortunately he was killed the day before. And there was a group called RAF Munch Group, some kind of RAF, something to do with RAF Munch. And they had a meeting at the courthouse I'll never forget. And they had talked so much about how Dr. King was a troublemaker. He was this, that and they didn't want him in New Bern. I mean it was a big mess. They didn't want him in New Bern. They didn't want him to come. And they almost poised a lot of the Blacks against him who did not know him or know anything about him or what he stood for.

Myrtle Davis Downing: And so they thought he was a troublemaker. But Ralph Abernathy came and he came to the airport and he had a delegation, went out to meet him and whatnot. They spoke to him out there. They would not let him come in town. Because I guess they were afraid of what might happen to him if he came into the city of New Bern. But when the youth began to challenge the Blacks, I began to challenge the Whites at that time. Or try to get—try to integrate certain things. We got evil eyes. People just, now people really begin to come out and call us names and they would throw things at you and tell you, we don't serve niggers here. They ain't say—didn't say, some of them wouldn't even be courteous and say, we don't serve Coloreds, we don't serve niggers here.

Myrtle Davis Downing: But I'll never forget this incident where they served my mother and her sister. And they didn't realize they were Black. Because—

Chris Stewart: You have to tell the story.

Myrtle Davis Downing: Yeah. God, I must have been, let me see, I was in junior high school at the time and my mother was very fair, but her sister was much fairer. And she had this real slim eyes and she looked like she was Chinese. And when she smiled, she had this pretty smile and her eyes were closed and she had jet Black hair, jet Black hair. And so she was here visiting from Hamlet and Aunt Charlotte said, sister, I'm thirsty. I'm going in here by Soda Monday. Momma said no, they don't serve Blacks at the counter. Well I'm going in here anyway. Aunt Charlotte strutted back there [indistinct 00:13:27] and asked the lady for a drink and this, that. And now the woman gave it to her and they didn't say a word about it. Then my mom she went strutting back down and the lady served her too. I say, gee, whizz.

Myrtle Davis Downing: I said, I'm going back here with my mom. And Lord knows when I went back there, my little [indistinct 00:13:46] they look at me, well I'm sorry honey, we don't serve Blacks here. I say, you do. I say, you just served my mom and her sister. What? Oh well we just, and honey, I—all I could do was fall out. I just laughed and laughed and laughed. I got so tickled. I said, see, they can't even tell us, honey. I said, God has blessed us. We come in a rainbow of colors. I mean we come in all colors, all shades, all kinds of hair, this, that and other. And they could not tell about those two. And the woman served them anyway. I said, I know she thought that was her job.

Chris Stewart: Right.

Myrtle Davis Downing: I know she thought that that was her job. But it was—I didn't experience a lot of it, but I know what we went through, the things that we could not do and places we could not go. It was really sad.

Chris Stewart: When the businesses start opening up. I've heard that in New Bern especially that restaurants would totally shut out to glass, there were side entrances where you could get food to go.

Myrtle Davis Downing: TO backdoor like Moore's Barbecue?

Chris Stewart: Right.

Myrtle Davis Downing: Moore's Barbecue used to be on Broad Street right there where Scotchman is now. And they would not serve you in the front. You had to go to the back and get barbecue. And people still cater to them today. Still cater to them. I cater to them, I admit, yeah, I cater to them because I love barbecue and they make best barbecue around for me. But it's sad though, that you could cook their food but you couldn't go in and eat the food. But honey believe me, I am sure that during that time some of those folk ate some the worst food in the world because they don't know what Blacks did to the food. Because they'd spit in them as far as they knew they could have, could chopped that little bug put and there wouldn't know any difference. And I know in some places, like in DC they did, somebody told me that they chopped up a mouse, found a mouse and chopped up the mouse and put it in chicken.

Myrtle Davis Downing: I said, whoa. You did what? They put it right in chicken. One lady said she bought a box of chicken and found a dead mouse at the bottom. A whole mouse at the bottom of the chicken barrel. I said, God. But they did. They did. I'm sure they did a lot of things. Excuse me. I'm sure they did a lot of things. Things that they shouldn't have done. But still, I mean, you tell me I can cook your food, but yet still I'm not good enough to eat with you. But I can cook it and you want to eat my cooking and you don't know what I'm doing to it. And you the fool, did you ever see the movie Color Purple? Did you see what she did to the glass of water? Oh God, I tell you. I tell you. It was strange.

Chris Stewart: How was it inside in school? What were the, say between students in high school? Were all the students for those students who were going to picket? Or was there some tension amongst students in high

school or that—

Myrtle Davis Downing: Some of the kids, I feel like, okay, all of the kids, all of the Black kids especially wanted better education, wanted all of the benefits that the White students was having. And a lot of them were supportive of those kids who were brave enough to go out in the forefront. But they might not have been brave enough to go out there with them. They might have come from families, some of them came from families where, well I can't do that, but whatever you do, I go along with you. But I can't do that. They let other people who they thought had less to lose than themselves or less embarrassment to their family as themselves if they—we had some students, we had some Black students whose parents were doctors. Dr. Bryant for one.

Myrtle Davis Downing: Now I don't think he had any children old enough or was she old enough? No I don't think his daughter was old enough at the time to remember, to have been involved in the sit-ins or whatever. But if they came from families who you might consider elite, they might not have stepped out and they let the other children do it. But there were a lot of kids who were really, really brave that actually got out there and fought for what they believed in. And they didn't cause trouble. They just go and sit and they wouldn't get served and whatever and stuff like that.

Chris Stewart: What was the relationship between New Bern kids and James City kids?

Myrtle Davis Downing: Oh my goodness. New Bern kids and James City kids were like kids from two different countries. It's a shame. But that's—they, the New Bern kids, the Black kids in New Bern unfortunately treated us like we were nothing. It's like they look down on us because we lived over here and at that time James City was classified almost like Trip Park, Trip Court or Craven Terrace. And that's the way he looked at us. And I don't know why because the kids over here were just as decent, just as clean, just as smart as the kids in New Bern were. They really were. And more than likely quieter. And they're probably quieter and had just as many honor students and whatnot. And to come out of James City as they did New Bern. And we have kids who grew up in James City that are teachers, that are doctors, that are lawyers, that are principals like Mr. Hickson he grew up over here.

Myrtle Davis Downing: Okay, he's a principal now. But they would, they looked down on us and made us feel like we weren't as good as they were. Now the sororities have a pageant every year.

Chris Stewart: Sororities?

Myrtle Davis Downing: Sororities like the Delta Sigma Theta or the Zetas or the AKAs. And so I'll never forget the Deltas had a pageant when I was in 11th grade and all of course they had contestants from Jones County, Craven County, Pitt County probably, Colorado County. And I was a contestant. I had a cousin by marriage who taught school who taught me in the 11th grade English, who had a cousin that was in my class that was also running for the same position. And she really wanted her to win. Now she lived in Perry Town, [indistinct 00:20:03]. She lived in Perry Town, I lived over here.

Myrtle Davis Downing: She really wanted her to win. But she didn't win. I won. I won. Yes I did. We have had about three that I know of probably more girls from this area that were queens of these pageants. Nowadays these pageants consist of raising 10, 12, 13, \$15,000. And this is how much they said how much money they raised to win now. But when I won I only won 400 something. Back then there wasn't a lot of money. You won 400 something. And I think Mr. Louise Deadly daughter, Deadly's daughter was one of the queens of the Jab Walk. It was called the Jab Walk pageant. I was one. And I think there's been another one since then. But I'll tell you honey, sure these people were almost killed to try to win these pageants. They should but there was sometimes a lot of rivalry between the New Bern kids and the James City kids.

Myrtle Davis Downing: And I just never understood why, I said, I guess they think they're better than we are. And it was a shame that they thought that. I said, you Black just like we are. I mean you have, and a lot of them didn't have any much more than we did. A lot of them didn't have as much as we did. And sure, at least some of us, a lot of us had both parents. Some of them didn't, they had one or they had—and we weren't troubled with a lot of alcoholics in our families over here. Parents drinking and drugs and whatnot. And no telling what those folk did over there. No telling.

Chris Stewart: Speaking of alcoholics and things, were there any bad places in town that you weren't supposed to go to? That you were, across the highway?

Myrtle Davis Downing: Yeah. Well, gee whizz there were bad place in town that people were not supposed to go to, but I don't even know where it were because I never went. Oh ships, oh, let's see. I don't know. I'm trying, oh, Main Street. When I got in high school, there was a place on Main Street. I don't know the name of the club. I went there one time. It wasn't all that bad, but they sold liquor in there. It was like a little bar and stuff. And I was go in there with a girlfriend of mine. But I wouldn't, I never drank. I never drank and I don't smoke. And so, believe me, I'm sure there were a lot of little, what they call honey holes around. I don't know where they were. I really don't know where they were. But I'm sure there was. Because I know there one over in James City though a little—

Chris Stewart: Is there any in this area?

Myrtle Davis Downing: A little honey hole across the highway where they call it honey hole. No, that's what I call a honey hole. But then you would call the honey hole and then some other area over here they had where that you weren't, that kids were not allowed to go to.

Chris Stewart: Right.

Myrtle Davis Downing: I don't know, but I'm sure. I'm sure there were. I'm sure.

Chris Stewart: Miss Gavin was telling me that her father owned a pool.

Myrtle Davis Downing: A pool hall. Yeah. The building's still standing now.

Chris Stewart: Did—was—he still have it while you were coming up? Was that a place that you weren't supposed to go?

Myrtle Davis Downing: I never went there either. Now he would say all like she does, he sold all candy and stuff like that for the children. And I can't recall ever going there to buy anything. But I think his pool business might've been upstairs further in the back. Further in the backside.

Chris Stewart: Tell me that all men.

Myrtle Davis Downing: Yeah, basically. Kids, no, the kids weren't allowed to go and hang out then they didn't.

Chris Stewart: What about, you said you didn't date at all?

Myrtle Davis Downing: I sure didn't.

Chris Stewart: Were you interested in the other men?

Myrtle Davis Downing: Not really. There was not, there was not a man, a young guy in James City that I was interested in. And I was very well content. That was just not, I don't know. Well, I really don't know why, but I know my daddy just, my daddy was living. He would not allow a young man even watch us. But I was too young for anybody to come see me anyway. But I'll never forget when I was eight years old, he let me go to the store to Miss Anna's store was down here. And there was these group of boys, about six of them hiding in the bushes right over here. And it was just about, just dark. Hadn't gotten dark yet. He never let me go out by myself. And they jumped out after me. And when they jumped out after me, I screamed and ran back home and he got mad.

Myrtle Davis Downing: He says, because he just knew they had attacked me and everything. And so he get in the car, get in the car, and we got in the car and drove down here and the boys came out there. Mr. [indistinct 00:24:24] we didn't bother. We didn't touch her, we didn't touch her. Mr. we didn't bother. We didn't bother. He said, if you did then I'd take you to jail. He's like, all you to jail like you. But that was the last time I think my dad ever let me go anywhere by myself that young and go out. But oh, I wasn't interested in the young boys over—

Chris Stewart: What about any social clubs, your organizations in high school?

Myrtle Davis Downing: Let me see. I guess the social clubs that probably, that were was like the, no, this was the social club. The Tri High While was an Honor society. I was not a member of the Tri High. We had the FTA, Future Teachers of America. We had student government, we had the chorus. I was a member of the chorus. We had the debating team. I was not a member of the debating team. Homemakers of America. I was a member of Homemakers. What else do we have? I don't know if we had any science clubs or not. I don't recall. Basically that was it. Cheerleader, was not a cheerleader, but I was, like I said, I was quit job walking

high school and that was that. Yeah. So we didn't have, I guess, enough for us. There was the band. I was not a member of the band. I was a member of the chorus.

Chris Stewart: Where did you go to college?

Myrtle Davis Downing: I started at Fayetteville State. I went there for two years and I transferred, went to Elizabeth City.

Chris Stewart: Why'd you transfer?

Myrtle Davis Downing: Well my mom had had an accident. Broke her leg.

Chris Stewart: Oh, okay.

Myrtle Davis Downing: And so I decided I'd go from where I considered closer and I was—I almost stayed up my junior year of school. But I went back so I went to Elizabeth City and finished out there and had a nice time at Elizabeth City.

Chris Stewart: Yeah?

Myrtle Davis Downing: Yeah. Quite a few experiences. That's when I had my first boyfriend.

Chris Stewart: Okay.

Myrtle Davis Downing: Yeah, sure did. He was a basketball player, captain of the basketball team. A senior. And I was a freshman because I had to go back. I lost credit so then I had to jump from a freshman to a junior the second year. And then I went on to be a senior. But Elizabeth City was pretty nice. It was pretty nice. It's all Black school, state supported school. And I majored in educational, minored in music. And they wanted me to major in music. But I said no because I knew it was a lot of headache. And I had a friend that majored in music and he was younger than myself. And he was bald before he got out of high, but before his junior year, lost all his hair. But he was an excellent musician. He was an excellent musician. And I became interested in another young man who taught in the system.

Myrtle Davis Downing: I was in college, he was older than me. I don't know how many years. Couldn't have been more than seven if he was that much older. And I was interested in him. But he was so quiet. He was so easy going. And he was shorter than me. I said, oh God no. But I was always attracted to musicians and always attracted to brilliant minds. And he was an excellent pianist too. Then I got interested in another young man who lives in South Carolina now, who was an excellent musician. Nice looking. I said, something has to be wrong with him because he is too pretty and he plays too well. And come to find out he couldn't talk. He's stammered like crazy.

Chris Stewart: There you go.

Myrtle Davis Downing: Oh, he was tall, nice looking. Yes indeed. And then unfortunately turned out that he had other interests. I said, okay, fine. That's what you want. Okay. I did my best to save you. And after that I left. He was gone so I couldn't save him. And my friend said, well Myrtle, they got him now. I said, okay. And I hated that. I really hated that. But he felt that that's what he wanted to do or felt that's the way he was. He said his mom and dad always suspected that's the way he was. I said, what I, oh, I cried like a baby. When he said Myrtle, we can't see each other anymore. And he gave me back my ring. I said, why? I said no. He said, I'm this way. He said, you know how I am. I said, no you're not. He said, yes I am. He said, and you just don't want admit it. He said, let's just do it.

Myrtle Davis Downing: He said, I can't find it anymore. I wouldn't argue with him. But I have his address and phone number. I called every now and then just to check on how he's doing. And hopefully he's doing well. I said, well just be careful. Commit finally, and get in favor that you don't want to.

Chris Stewart: Yeah.

Myrtle Davis Downing: Yeah.

Chris Stewart: What would you do on a date?

Myrtle Davis Downing: Huh?

Chris Stewart: What would you do on date? Where would you go?

Myrtle Davis Downing: In college?

Chris Stewart: Yeah.

Myrtle Davis Downing: Oh, basically—

Chris Stewart: Away from home.

Myrtle Davis Downing: Away from home. Basically I stayed on the campus or either go downtown shopping a group of girls that go downtown shopping. I didn't like, I don't know I never took an interest in football games so I wouldn't even go to football games. I think I only went to two games the whole time I was in school. And if I went more than that, it's because I went with a friends or all I would do was sit around, holler and yell. And I didn't understand the game so didn't matter to me where I went or not. But by me being in the college choir, we had a chance, I did a lot of touring. And we would go to New York, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. We would go to Pennsylvania, go to New Jersey. How far away did we go? I think the furthest we went was New York and we hit the East coast all the way down to Virginia.

Chris Stewart: Did you ever go further south?

Myrtle Davis Downing: Yes. Well, not in college, but I have traveled further south.

Chris Stewart: But the college chorus?

Myrtle Davis Downing: The college course, no, we didn't go further south. After I graduated, they ended up going to England. And I really, I was, oh man, I should take off a year and go with them. But yeah, they went to England after I graduated and I really missed that. I really did.

Chris Stewart: Were there—did you get involved in any organizations on campus or in college?

Myrtle Davis Downing: I almost joined the AKAs sorority while I was in college. I started off, because I had 3.0 average-

Chris Stewart: Almost?

Myrtle Davis Downing: Well the thing was a lot of the kids, the big sisters were younger than me and I could not have those little girls telling me what to do. I said, I'm not sitting in trash cans for anybody and I'm not going to stay on the sidewalk and say, good morning big sister and you standing don't say nothing to me. Walk past me and I got standing like a fool waiting for you to speak to me. I said, no, I'll wait and go and postgraduate, graduate chapters or whatever. But I have not joined a graduate chapter yet other than the one that I'm in now.

Myrtle Davis Downing: So no, I was not in any organizations other than chorus again in the music club in school. And I had one professor that wanted me to major in biology. Because she said, oh you're very good, very good. I said, no ma'am, I don't like biology that well. She said, but your grades are so well and you just love these asylums and you love these classes of water and blah blah blah. I said, I don't like biology because I can't stand dissecting frogs. I looked at dead animals so no, I just went on elementary education because I wanted to teach children. I went to teach, I sure did.

Chris Stewart: What time—where did your dream of becoming a teacher come from?

Myrtle Davis Downing: I think it came from my mom. By her being a teacher. I think I decided I was going to walk in her shoes. It was either that or nursing. And I had an experience of working in the hospital my senior year in high school just before I went to college. Because I had never worked before and I wanted to do something. Well we had the Coastal Progress Organization at that time and they were trying to find children from low income families to work and was going to pay them to train them to do certain jobs and whatever. And the lady came by here and she said, Myrtle, are you interested in working? I said, yes I am. She said, well, I'm afraid you don't qualify. I said, but why? She said, because your mother makes too much money.

Myrtle Davis Downing: I said, that's not fair. She said, well you can volunteer. I said, I'll volunteer then. And so I volunteered at Craven County and worked on the fourth floor. I learned everything the LPNs knew.

Chris Stewart: Wow.

Myrtle Davis Downing: The first week and they put me on payroll.

Chris Stewart: Wow.

Myrtle Davis Downing: Made me a private duty nurse. And I enjoyed it immensely. I mean I was doing everything LPN nurses were doing and I just really enjoyed it so if I had not taught school, I'd have gone into nursing. I really would have.

Chris Stewart: What is it about teaching that you love so much?

Myrtle Davis Downing: Oh, the reward is the progress and the glow in the children's eyes. And they having been able to accomplish something. Being around kids, I guess being an only child, I love kids. I just love children. I have 11 godchildren, 11. I sure do. And I'm still considering adopting a child when my high school kids get a little older. I really am. Crystal wants me adopt one so bad now she wants an older child that she can paddle around with. But I am considering adopting a child even to today. But I want an infant. One that will grow up with me.

Chris Stewart: A baby?

Myrtle Davis Downing: Yes, I want a baby, but my reward is just seeing the children progress and learn. I really enjoy that. If I can just save one life or save one child from streets or help in some way to mold him to be a better adult or to be a productive citizen, then that's my joy. And I have talked to a lot of kids and taught a lot of children who have said, Ms Down, I want to be a teacher just like you. I said, really? They said, yes ma'am, I want to be a teacher just like you. In fact, I had a little boy that called me the other day who I had in the fourth grade that he is now in the eighth. And he said, Ms Down, he says, I'm going to teach school.

Myrtle Davis Downing: I said, really? He said, yeah. He said, I'm going to teach it just like you. He said, because you were hard on me and you made me see what was really in me and brought out the potential that I really had in me and made me really do well. And you didn't let me slide by and just do nothing. And I said, great. And they said, I'm going to be a teacher just like you. And I have heard that from a lot of kids. I've heard that from a lot of kids. And it makes me feel so good that children find something in me that they want to emulate. That I'm an example for them or a role model for them. Doesn't matter what race the child is. If I can touch them in a way where they see that education is rewarding and being a productive citizen is rewarding, then whatever I can do to help them reach that dream.

Myrtle Davis Downing: And I tell them, I say set your goals high. Set them higher than you probably can accomplish. Set them high and reach as high as you can. Just don't be satisfied doing mediocre stuff. Minimum. Be satisfied making minimum wage. I said make it. I said, no, I'll talk—do you want to be flipping

burger all your life? No ma'am. Do you want to go down downtown standing bread line? Do you want to have to live on food stamps for all time? I said, now there are some people who do that. I said, but some of them cannot help but do that. And we are not knocking those that do. But if you can do better for yourself, then do so. Then do so. I said, because one thing I hate is a lazy person who is physically able to work and my tax dollars got to buy your food stamps for you and take care of your butt while you lay right here and have baby after baby after baby living on welfare.

Myrtle Davis Downing: I said, I have no pity for anybody like that. And I said, now in my classroom, I see, doctors, lawyers, teachers, nurses. And I tell them all the time, they sit right there and listen. I give lectures, I tell myself getting off on a tantrum and do lectures in the classroom. And I hear the kids, oh there she go. Ms Down going to start talking there, talk us to death. And I tell them stories all the time. Every time we study something, I may run across a word or run across a picture of something that reminds me of something that's happened in my life. And I share my personal experiences with them. And the parents say, Ms Down I've heard so many stories about you and I just enjoy the story that the kids come home and tell about you.

Myrtle Davis Downing: And I have told them the story, my accident with my arm, with my foot, with the bicycle. We had ghosts in our house in Maryland. I told them a story about that. Yeah.

Chris Stewart: Oh my goodness.

Myrtle Davis Downing: I mean real life ghost. Real, real dead ghosting. We had real ghost.

Chris Stewart: Well tell me.

Myrtle Davis Downing: Oh God. It was, let's see. We lived on Kramer Court. The last house was village where we lived in the Maryland. The first time I saw one was in the lower area. The first, second house that we lived in, in that community. And my daughter was, I guess about maybe two if she was that old. But she stayed in the crib and she was in our bedroom. And this particular night my husband got up and went to the bathroom and I turned over and I just drifted off, went back to sleep. Well then when I woke up and I turned around and looked, this figure was peering down on me. And that's what you looking at me for? He didn't say anything. And he looked right at me like he was mad. I said, I get your butt in the bed before I hit you, stop staring at me like you crazy. And so he still didn't say anything.

Myrtle Davis Downing: And I kept looking. I said, I'm going to slap you in a minute if you don't get in the bed. And I reached up, I slap it in my hand right through it. I said, oh. And I turned the light on and went and looked and Bill was in the bed sounds asleep. I didn't even know he was back. I woke him up, he got scared. He said, oh my goodness, it's your daddy. It's your daddy. He don't like me. I said, my daddy don't know you. And he did. My daddy didn't know him. Well that was the first experience. Then we moved to a three bedroom house, apartment. And the kids were, Crystal was in the first grade. Lacy was in the third and Everett was in fifth, sixth, about sixth or eight.

Myrtle Davis Downing: And the way the house was situated, my room's in the front. And then you walk out

my room and into the hall, you turn right and the kids, the boys' room and that my daughter's going to be on the same side of the bathroom, be over here and always let the light on the bathroom so they have some light upstairs. And we'd be downstairs sometime off either having dinner, watching TV, we always little rumbling and noise upstairs, dropping stuff and this, that and other. I said, Bill, who's upstairs? One of the kids, I guess. We didn't pay no attention to it. But before then, Crystal used to come in my room every night because Bill worked at night and Crystal be shuffling across the floor, coming, mommy, mommy, there's a little girl in my room.

Myrtle Davis Downing: I said, what? She says, a little girl standing at the foot of my bed. Well, I mean little three, four year old girl. I said, oh she's—no, no Crystal was first grade, about six years old. She's imagining things. She don't know what she's talking about. I said, honey, go back to bed. I said, there's nobody in there. Nobody in there. I said, you got a light shining in your room. And she had a canopy, right? She did that for about two weeks or more. There's a little girl standing foot of my bed. I would move all the clothes, anything was hanging on the bed post anything was hanging on the door knob and make sure nothing was hanging up that looked like a figure person.

Myrtle Davis Downing: She kept on saying that and she'd come in my bed and climb my bed with me. And in the meantime, we continued to listen to and hear the noise and whatnot on the floor. I told one of my children one day, I said, go upstairs and see who it is. And they said, mom, you go look. I said [indistinct 00:39:34] I said well go upstairs and see who was upstairs. And we looked for all the kids downstairs. One night I was in the bed and Crystal, I said Crystal ain't come to my room tonight. I locked my door. Well in middle of the night I felt this little feel laying behind me. I said, oh Crystal come here and got in my bed with me right. I just stayed there. And that next morning when I woke up, I went to go out in my bedroom and bedroom door still locked.

Myrtle Davis Downing: And I asked Crystal, I said, Crystal, did you come in my room last night? She said, no ma'am, you told me not to come in there. I said, okay so I don't pay no attention. After a while, another night I was home and this huge figure got in the bed with me and it was a body of a man and threw his arms around my waist and held onto me and scared me to death. And now Bill wasn't home. And I said, oh my God. Oh my God, what is it? And the bathroom door was right here and the light was on, and I was scared to turn around, look over my shoulder. And I said, oh Lord, if I had to go to bathroom, let me go to bathroom myself, get up. And honey, he held onto me all night long. And when Bill came home that morning at seven o'clock, I heard him coming in, I ran downstairs. I said, tell me you came home last night. Tell me you came home.

Myrtle Davis Downing: He said, no, I didn't come home last night. You know I didn't get home until seven. I said, Bill, yes you did come. I said, you came home. You went to bed didn't you? He said, no. Why? I said, somebody got in the bed with me last night. He said, oh my God. I said, it was a man. I said, because it's whole about the bed just sunk. Just sunk right in. And you can feel somebody getting in the bed behind you. Well, we went through those changes. We went through those changes. And one night we were sitting downstairs and Edward in the sixth grade was going upstairs. And all of a sudden he come barreling back down, said screaming, hollering, mommy, mommy. I said, what? He said that little girl, I saw a little girl. I

said, well who expect it's Crystal. No it's not. No it's not. She got on a White dress.

Myrtle Davis Downing: I said, what? He says, little White girl, she got on the White dress. I said, oh my God. I said, that little girl that Crystal been saying, she been seeing every night. Sure enough, my next door neighbor, now we the only Black ones in this circle. My next door neighbor had company to come and we went outside and they introduced us to their company. They used to live next door to them. And so they said, I hear you live next door apart. I said, yeah. They said, how you like your new house? I said, oh, we like it fine. They said, any strange happiness over there? I said, like what? They said like things fall or footsteps. I said, why you asked? He said—I said, well yeah, we had some occurrences over there. They said, that's why we moved. I said, what do you mean? He said, the house is haunted.

Myrtle Davis Downing: I said, what? He said the house is haunted. I said, oh God. Well we had seen the little girl, had experience with the husband. But before all this happened, the man held my husband down by the shoulders on the sofa in the dining room. That's how it all started. Bill came in late one night and he didn't come upstairs and he laid down and watched television and fell asleep. And the guy got him by the shoulders and pinned him down to the chair. And Bill felt the force on the shoulders and he couldn't move. And he kept saying God. And when he finally turned him loose, he ran upstairs and said, and he cussed and carried on stair. I'm not going to ever sit downstairs. I said what you talking about, he said, somebody held me down to the sofa and I couldn't get up.

Myrtle Davis Downing: I said, oh Bill, you stink, you been drinking. He said, no, I have not. No I have not. And so anyway, when the people told us the house was haunted I said, yeah. I said, we've had experience with the husband, had experience with the daughter. I said, now all we got to do is see the wife. Sure enough, one afternoon when I was cooking in the kitchen, the kitchen was designed that there was a big open window here. And the door is right there and the stove was here. And I happened to turn around. I went to the dryer and I happened to turn around and got ready to come back to the kitchen to the stove and look and saw her going down the hallway.

Myrtle Davis Downing: And that was the end of it. And we never had any more experiences. When they realized that we weren't afraid of them, it didn't bother us anymore. I tell you honey, it was an experience to behold. I said, my goodness. And folks, oh, you lying. No such thing as ghost. I said let me tell you something. I said, when your husband and your children experience it and you got more than three people in the house, they experience the same thing. Don't tell me there no such thing as ghost. Because North Carolina is known for his ghost. Now you go to the library and get some books. You will find out that North Carolina is full of stories about real live ghosts. Especially the woman. No. Is it a woman or a man? Lason is a man that walks around. Lason? Is it a man that walks around down by the railroad track looking for his head once a year, every year. It's a man, not a woman, right?

Speaker 1: It ain't no woman.

Myrtle Davis Downing: It's a man. Looking for his head.

Speaker 1: When you went to the library.

Myrtle Davis Downing: Looking for his head, he walks down that railroad track a certain time of year every year.

Chris Stewart: White man or Black man?

Myrtle Davis Downing: A White man looking for his head.

Chris Stewart: What is the story there?

Myrtle Davis Downing: I don't know. I don't remember because I haven't read the story. But it's in the book. It's in the one that, what's it called? I don't know. It's a real thin book, to the library. If you get a chance, go get it. And he looked for his head. I think he lost his head. They said how the man lose his head?

Speaker 1: [indistinct 00:44:25].

Myrtle Davis Downing: Train cut his head off. I said, God—

Chris Stewart: You stayed in that house? They didn't—

Myrtle Davis Downing: Oh yeah, they didn't bother us anymore. We stayed right there.

Chris Stewart: Wow.

Myrtle Davis Downing: Because see, I'm not, and I'm not afraid of dead people anyway. Because I experienced my first death touching a dead body with my grandfather. My grandfather died in the night and we didn't know it. And my mother and father sent me upstairs to give him his breakfast. I said, my mother's in a wheelchair at the time because she had broken her ankle. She had broken it twice. And I took the tray upstairs to feed my granddaddy. I didn't like him, no I thought he was mean and crazy. But he wasn't. And I said, Papa, wake up. Eat your breakfast. He didn't wake up. And I shook him and shook him. I said, wake up, eat your breakfast. I stuck the straw in and I said, drink your milk. He laid up there sleeping. I said, shoot. I was tired messing with him so I took the tray and I touched him on his hand and everything and went back downstairs.

Myrtle Davis Downing: That was an old homesteads. And took the tray back and my dad said, your grandfather didn't eat the breakfast. I said, he won't wake up. He said, what? I said, go up to talk to your grandma. Talk to your mom. If I wouldn't [indistinct 00:45:31], I said, mother Papa wouldn't wake up so I couldn't give him his breakfast. She said he wouldn't wake up? I said, no. I said, he's cold as ice. Lord, when I say he was cold as ice, she knew that he had died. Boy she [indistinct 00:45:41] the hallway, screaming and hollering, carrying on. I said, what? I said, oh Lord, he's dead. The man's dead. And I had been touching and carrying on, so I hadn't been afraid of death folks since. And I went up to bed about in a minute. My dad

came back here after he died. He came back—