

Andrea Smith: Can you tell me some about what Durham was like when you were growing up? Some of the stuff we read, we read it was a really progressive place, in terms of race and stuff. How would you describe the way it was when you were growing up?

Ruby Osborn: You heard that it was progressive?

Andrea Smith: Used to be heralded for having a Black middle class, and that kind of—

Ruby Osborn: Really?

Andrea Smith: Black middle class and that sort of thing.

Ruby Osborn: Yeah that probably—I guess that was kind of true. I guess that was kind of true if you thought of it in that way. I didn't really think of it in that way. I guess I was a kid. So you don't think about stuff like that because as I told you before, there wasn't a lot of prejudice discussions in my house. I never thought of it that way. So I just knew that there were a lot of prominent Blacks in Durham, if you will. People who maybe didn't have a whole lot of money, but had some money and owned a few businesses and what have you, and such as the Spauldings, the Scarboroughs that owned Scarborough and Hargett Funeral Home, the—I'm trying to think of the other family's name. I can't remember, but there were several very prominent people who owned businesses and were doing quite well and who were involved with the city of Durham and progress.

Ruby Osborn: And then of course, this used to be a place where a lot of famous people came like famous singers and entertainers and that kind of stuff. It was kind of a little New York at one time. So I guess I looked at it, this city, as just being a place where I lived. I didn't really think about prejudice. I didn't really have time to tell you the truth. I'll tell you what woke me up to prejudice. When I was in about, I can't even remember what grade let's see, they integrated—I wasn't even in school, I had graduated already and was, matter of fact, I was working in the school system when they integrated. That blew my mind. That was interesting. That was in the sixties, '68, I believe. And people were marching and all that kind of stuff. I truly did not understand that because of the way I had grown up myself. I was like, "What are they marching for? Why are they doing this?" I could not understand that.

Andrea Smith: Was that White folks?

Ruby Osborn: Blacks. I could not understand why they were marching. They were marching for seats on a bus, for places and restaurants, all that kind of stuff. And I guess I just never thought about. It just never crossed my mind that I was being treated differently. But when I saw the changes in the '60s, in the school system, that's when I realized that people were really, really prejudice. And I guess it happened through the

eyes of children because I worked in a school and the parents came. And it so happened, I was working in what was my old high school, and it used to be all Black. And these children came and were bused in from other communities. And the school became almost all White, and the personnel became almost all White because the Black teachers were sent to other places, into White schools that used to be all White.

Ruby Osborn: And that's what they call integration, and getting rid of segregation, and mixing people and all that kind of stuff, because I've never had a problem. I guess I'm not especially a good person to talk about prejudice because of my experiences. I haven't had real bad experiences as a child. I had none, but as an adult, I was because I was interracially married. I've been called a lot of things, but they weren't by White people they were by Black people. And I've been called been bitches as I've walked down the street, White—I mean, what they call me? They called me a—what did that man call me that time? I can't remember whether he said something about kissing-ass Black bitch or something, kiss-ass Black bitch or something like that. I was walking down the street with my husband one day and this Black man said something very similar to what I just said to me.

Ruby Osborn: And I thought that was just so funny. I laughed because I just thought he was nuts. I thought he's really crazy. Things like that just never really hurt my feelings because I've always known who I am. And so it was pretty easy for me. I have friends now on the other hand and had friends, then even, who were in the school system, who did not feel the way I do. And I still have some of those friends who are very prejudiced and I've told them so even up to this day, right here. I have one girlfriend who is a teacher. And I don't think you can be a good teacher if you're prejudiced. I don't think you can be a good anything if you're prejudiced, if you have those kinds of feelings and I've told her that many, many times we've had this conversation.

Andrea Smith: She doesn't think it's supposed to be like that over there?

Ruby Osborn: Oh, I don't think it's about that. It's about how people are treated. It's a joke to her. It's not real. It's not—Going to the restaurant isn't real. It's really a joke. She says that nothing has changed, and she's right about that. Nothing has changed. It hasn't changed. Because you can go and sit in a restaurant doesn't mean it changed something. The law changed. That's all that changed. The way people feel, and the way you're treated didn't change. And that's her whole point that she was trying to get across to me.

Ruby Osborn: But see, because I never thought about doing any of that, it just never crossed my mind because my mother had White friends and they came to our house and they ate at our table. So because of that, I never thought of it as being anybody's feeling that way toward me and in a way that's kind of sad because I guess there are people out there. Well, I know that now because of my experiences as an adult person, and also because of some of my children's experiences. I probably protected them quite a bit because of my own feelings, because they don't feel that way. The most prejudice they've ever seen was moving here as adults. Now I'm not saying that it is not prejudice in the North. It's very hidden though. It's not blatant in your face every day.

Andrea Smith: What was the difference when you left Durham and went to Princeton?

Ruby Osborn: Excuse me?

Andrea Smith: The difference when you left Durham and went to Princeton.

Ruby Osborn: The difference, I guess was, well, there really wasn't that much because you see it integrated in '68, there was integration here. And so everything that was all Black became all White, basically. So I had all these White friends, and I worked around almost all White people. And so, I mean, I had parties and almost everybody at my party would be White because I just loved people. Well, it would be half Black, half White. And a lot of my Black friends really couldn't handle that. They just thought, Jesus Christ, how do you stand these people? I've been asked that question before. They're just human beings like I am, and they have good traits and some have bad just like I do, and just like anybody else does. And that's the way I choose people, by who they are, not by the color of their skin. So I would have all these parties and I would get criticized. I've pretty much been criticized all my whole life for being the person that I am, but it doesn't seem to matter does it because I keep on being that same person.

Ruby Osborn: When I lived in Boston, I could remember a friend of mine came to visit me. And she said, you have so many friends, but you don't have any Black friends. I only had two Black friends, a lady that lived in my neighborhood and another lady who—and a guy who did my hair. He and I became very, the two of us became very close friends. But this lady lived in my neighborhood, and she was from Trinidad actually, and she just happened to pass by my house one day. I saw her and I said, hello. If I hadn't said hello, she wouldn't have said anything, but I initiated a conversation with her and she wasn't very talkative right away. But later I would see her and I would stop and make her talk to me. And then later we became very good friends and we're still friends to this day.

Ruby Osborn: Matter of fact, I'm going to Boston for the holiday and I will stay at her house. So I don't know, I don't see much difference because like I said, when I went to Princeton, it was an all White environment practically. And so there were Blacks at the campus, on the campus, but they were in kitchen jobs, a lot of them. And a lot of them worked in the university and had good jobs. So it was kind of like it wasn't half and half, but Princeton is a different kind of place too. It's just not your everyday place. You have the rich, the famous, the poor, the in-between, but they don't consider themselves having any poor. They think everybody has something in Princeton. They don't have a ghetto.

Ruby Osborn: They didn't then. I haven't been back in a while. So when I was there, there was no ghetto in Princeton. There's no such thing. So it is really ironic because I've lived places where I never really had a chance to experience that kind of stuff. I was in Seattle, Washington, where that's the next place I lived, where you had, it was an international city, just every kind of person you can imagine, from every kind of place you can imagine, married to anything you can imagine. Okay? And I just like people. So I had a whole lot of friends there too, and they weren't necessarily all Black. They were a mixture of all kinds of people.

Ruby Osborn: So I guess it wasn't really that different for me. And plus I never dwell—I didn't just sit and think on this, okay? I lived my life. I lived. And so I didn't sit around and try to scheme and go to meetings to

plan how I could get back at people like some people do. I just lived. The people who accepted me, I dealt with those people and I went on, and the people who didn't, I said, oh, well, they lost a good person and kept trucking. And I think that's what you have to do. You can't sit around, waiting for something good to happen. You have to make things happen for you. Simple as that.

Andrea Smith: How long were you in the school where you were working at before it integrated?

Ruby Osborn: Nine years.

Andrea Smith: After it integrated? What were the—

Ruby Osborn: I actually started there in '64 and it integrated in '68. So four years before integration and four years after. I had one funny experience there. There was a teacher by the name of Betty Boyarsky who worked there. And she came up to me, I had been there a couple days now, mind you, I went to this school. I graduated from high school there. So I knew this school, period, every crack in the wall, everywhere, you just know your school. I was there a long time. And she came up one day and she introduced herself. She said, "I'm Betty Boyarsky," and she's a Jewish lady. I said, "It's nice to meet you, Betty Boyarsky, and I'm Ruby"—I think I was Ruby—What was I? Ruby Rich at that time was my name. And so I told her my name and everything.

Ruby Osborn: And she said, "When you get some time, I'd like to show you around the school." And I said, "I don't think there's much you could show me, Betty Boyarsky." And she said, "Why is that?" And I said, "Because I went to school at this school, I think I can show you probably a few things." And she said, "Oh, excuse me." And she went on. We became pretty good friends after that. I think she just was being friendly actually. But there were people, when I would say that to other people, which the fact that she wanted to show me around, they were like, "Well, you know this school, this is your school! What did you tell her?" That kind of thing. And I said, well, I just told her that maybe I could show you a few things. I went to school here. It was no big deal. But other people that I talked to about it thought it was a big deal. Got to take a bite.

Andrea Smith: What do you think are the effects on the school during that era?

Ruby Osborn: My children were in that era. And they were fine. There were prejudiced acts toward them, but they didn't respond in that way. Like a little boy beat my son up on the—hit him with a baseball bat in his head. We don't know why. He was a little White boy. He hit him in the head with a baseball bat. Now, the fact that he hit him in the head and that he was White, are two different issues here. The fact that he hit him in the head is the issue. The fact that he's White, I don't care what color he is. If he hit him in the head, that's a problem for me. I don't care what color it is.

Ruby Osborn: Anybody who hits my kid in the head, I have a problem with you. But of course, people made it an issue. They thought it was a White, Black thing that maybe the kids just couldn't get along on the playground or something. And it just so happened they went to the same school where I was working. So

they sent for me to come and it was resolved. But not on that level of prejudice issue because I made it very clear that this is not the issue. This is a problem, I don't care who this kid is because he's White doesn't matter to me. He hit him in the head is what matters to me. I don't want him to grow up with an injury for the rest of his life. That's all that matters.

Andrea Smith: What were the differences you saw in the way that you were schooled, that your kids were schooled, and your grandkids?

Ruby Osborn: I feel sad for my grandchildren, today. I feel real sad for my grandchildren. It has nothing to do with necessarily prejudice. That's the way the world is. And I guess part of that is prejudice, I suppose, but I hate to think of it as being—it's almost back to where we were. What I remember, as being where we were, in terms of your schools are almost back to what they were years ago. You got schools with all Black children in it again. You have schools with almost all White children in them.

Ruby Osborn: All this stuff that people walked for, and fought for, and died for, has reversed. So why were they walking, and why did they die, for nothing? I don't know. I don't know what it was for. Why has it reversed? I don't know. I have no idea. People say it's because people are prejudiced, or people are angry, or people are whatever. I have no idea, but it has. I do know that it has. I see it. I hear about it. It's just happening. But then you know that the world is in an uproar right now. The whole world is crazy. People are dying. People are killing people for whatever reasons. It's crazy.

Ruby Osborn: But if you refer back to, I don't know whether you are a religious person or not, but if you think about the Bible and what, if you believe in the Bible, or if you use the Bible as a guide or some kind of thing in your life, it says that this kind of stuff would happen before the end would come. Mothers would be against daughters, and daughters against mothers, sons against fathers. There would be fighting among the people. All that stuff is in the Bible. So I believe in somebody, I don't know who it is or whether it's God or what it is, but I believe there is something there other than just us. And I've learned that as I've grown older, because we were taught that it was God, but as I get older and older, I don't know because I also, if you look in the Bible, a man wrote the Bible. Who was he? I have a concern for that, that we believe so much of all this stuff that's in a book that a man wrote, but people have to believe in something. Excuse her.

Andrea Smith: I have to ask you about your schooling stuff. When you were younger you lived out where you should've gone to school, but then your parents made you go to a new school because they were better schools?

Ruby Osborn: In their minds, and maybe they were, I don't know.

Andrea Smith: What are the differences?

Ruby Osborn: The level of education, county versus city. I don't think it had anything to do with anything, in particular. My mother knew a lot of the teachers that taught in the city. There were still Black teachers, all Black schools, but for some reason, a lot of the teacher's children went to this school.

Ruby Osborn: You kind of think, well, if I expose my kids to this particular environment, they will get more because these people are sending their kids there. You know how people think. Your father probably think if you come to Duke, you'll get a better education opposed to any other place because Duke is a renowned school, and I know that they do a good job over there. Okay? That's not always necessarily the case. You may not get a good education over here, for whatever reason. It could have something to do with you, or it could have something to do with the school, just not the right place for you, too big, too small, whatever. But, whatever their thoughts were, it had to do with us getting a better education. And I truly believe that I probably, because I won't ever know, because I've already been through that and done that. But I truly believe for my earlier years, it was better for me.

Ruby Osborn: I believe that. I mean, that's when you learn everything. Your basic elementary school is when you learn everything, basically, that you're going to know other than extra things. So I think that was the best route. We speak fairly well. We, I mean, my sisters and brothers. I have one sister. We call her the black sheep of our family because she chose not to do well, kind of like a rebellion type thing. She rebelled against everything that my parents believed in, and everything that my sister and I and my brother believed in college, everything. She went to about four different colleges. She would not stay in school.

Ruby Osborn: I mean, she just rebelled. She didn't want to be that same kind of person that we considered ourselves as being. Some education, good jobs, nice house, nice family life, she wasn't into that. She went the opposite way, and that isn't negative. It just is. It isn't positive, but it isn't negative. Just what she did. I'm not talking about her or against her or anything. And that's not my point. My point is that you can have the same or a certain number of children in the house, and there will be some who will do well and some who won't do well. And it has nothing to do with what your parents want or don't want for you.

Ruby Osborn: It happens to the rich, it happens to the poor, it happens to the in-between, happens to everybody. I feel that there's always, and always has been at least one person in the family. I don't care how far down the road it was or is, that doesn't do well. No matter where you send them, they just rebel against good things, nice things, bad things, whatever. So I hope that answered your question.

Andrea Smith: You talked a lot about that you were raised, that your parents raised you differently and you had a very different kind of family, and that's why you turned out to be the way you are?

Ruby Osborn: That's what I feel. That's what I believe. And when I say they were different is, my mother was very religious. She didn't drink, she didn't smoke. She was very strict. My father was even stricter. We were not allowed to date, even in college. I don't know that that was good or bad. I think I'm a better person for everything that they did for us. I don't think I would be a bad person, but I don't think that I would, the things that they did for us, and this is a tribute to them, to my parents, because they raised us just really different.

Ruby Osborn: I mean, the things that other kids did and said, we were not allowed. We wouldn't even dare. We wouldn't even think of it. Okay? Cursing, running around the streets with boys, we were not allowed to

do that. We were not allowed to go out. I went to the junior, senior prom with my high school typing teacher. That's correct. All dressed up in my blue prom dress. I'll never forget it. I didn't like it, but that's the way it was. If I wanted to go, that's what I had to do. And that's what I did. So wouldn't you say that was different?

Andrea Smith: You said that your father told you, you would go to college. That wasn't the norm for other kids?

Ruby Osborn: No, not really. I mean, think about the people in my age group, Black people, I don't know how many Black people you know, but if you think about it, there aren't that many Black people who went to college back then. You were just kind forced to go to school. Oh, switch that off. Where were we?

Andrea Smith: We were talking about different expectations from the kids in your neighborhood, and you had from your family.

Ruby Osborn: My parents just had real high expectations from us, for us. And my, believe it or not, my grandmother had the highest. She was an LPN years when, years and years ago, she went to school for that. So she had very high expectations of us or for us. And of course she had her two cents put in there all the time. She was willing to pay as well as talk. I mean, she would say to my parents, they don't need to do such and such. They need to do such and such. So she had a big influence on what we did also.

Ruby Osborn: Once I started going to the other school where we died to go because we didn't have any friends in our neighborhood, I was sorry that I had changed. I was really sorry that I had changed because, and this isn't bad, it isn't good, it just is. People were not into, a lot of the kids were not into learning. And that was unfortunate, but that's the way it was. A lot of people farmed, not in where I lived, but a lot of kids that you ran into in the county, they lived in the county, they farmed, they were out of school a lot. They missed days. They missed a lot of days.

Ruby Osborn: Their parents kept them home to do tobacco, cotton, all that kind of stuff. And so how can you be into learning if you're not exposed to that? In some ways I regret that we begged so hard to go to that school because there were so many distractions, in terms of kids doing other things. And I did very well, but still, if I had kept going to the schools, I think I would've even done much better. I don't think my parents ever expected any more than what I did because I made straight A's and Bs sometimes, but mostly A's. I guess that's all you can ask for in your kid.

Andrea Smith: They let you change schools because you wanted to so bad?

Ruby Osborn: We wanted to.

Andrea Smith: Did you resent them sending you to the other school?

Ruby Osborn: No, no, no, no, no. We weren't old enough to when we, we started first grade there. I was five years old when I started school. My mother told me, you go to the school and you tell the teacher you're six,

but you're really only five, but don't tell the teacher that. I walked right into the school, I said, "My name is Ruby Allen and I am six years old."

Ruby Osborn: My sister walked in behind me, to her teacher, and said, "My name is Mary Allen and I'm five years"—no, she said, I'm, let's see she started the next year. I start, yeah because there's a year difference between us. So the year she went, she walks into the school and she tells the teacher that she is six years old, but her mother told her to tell her that she was six, that she was really only five. And so it happened to be the same teacher that I had had and she knew our family. At that time, my daddy was involved with funeral business, funeral service business. And so he knew a lot of people and this lady, Ray family knew him. And so they just laughed and let her go on to school. So we graduated, both of us, a year ahead of ourselves.

Andrea Smith: You stayed at the county school until you graduated and then you said that your dad insisted that you go to North Carolina College. Why did he insist that you go there?

Ruby Osborn: It was at home. He didn't want to have to pay out-of-state fees. That's not really true. That's what I feel it was, but it probably wasn't true, but it was costly to them. It was costly. And even though my dad had made very good money, he still didn't want to pay for me to go out of state to college.

Ruby Osborn: So he said I had to go there. My sister went to Winston-Salem State in Winston-Salem, which she was still in state so it was okay. But mind you now, that was a year later. Surprisingly enough, people change within a year's time. So by that time he was tired fighting that battle, the college battle of where to go and where not to go. And see I was the eldest of the girls so he was trying to protect me, I guess. But then by the time she was ready to go a year later, it was okay.

Andrea Smith: When Black people graduate from County to go to college, where and when did you go to college?

Ruby Osborn: All Black colleges, basically. There weren't that many choices. Well, there were lots of choices, but they were Black schools. It never crossed my mind to do anything differently. Right, today, kids are—they just do an application to Duke, or Chapel Hill, or wherever. There was no, we're talking about in the '50s, Andrea, not in '68 when it was integrated. We're talking about the '50s. Where would, I mean, you had to fight if you were going to go someplace, probably. And because I didn't even know about that part.

Ruby Osborn: That was the college in my town that Black people went to. So why wouldn't I go there? Where else would I go? Never even crossed my mind that it was all Black to tell you the truth. I knew that Black people went there. But when I started reading about the history of that school and found out that it was an all Black college, I was like, oh, okay. But see that never crossed my mind. I think my father said one time that it was an all Black school. I can't remember why the subject came up. I don't remember a lot of things about conversations and stuff like that. I just know the basics. I remember the basics. The bottom line, is what I remember. But never thought about it really.



Andrea Smith: Did you not want to really be so close to home? Is that why—

Ruby Osborn: I wanted to go away to school. I always wanted to go away to school. I had so many things that I wanted to do. I didn't play with dolls. I hated dolls. I didn't want to have children. I didn't want to be married. All those things were things that I did not want to go, and I didn't want to go to school at home. I wanted to—my father was so strict and you just want to get away from that for a minute. And of course he knew that. Parents aren't crazy, you know? He knew. So he insisted. That's the way it is. So, that's what I did.

Andrea Smith: What happened after that?

Ruby Osborn: The next year, I didn't go back the next year there. I said, "I'm not going, I don't want to go there." "You're going to college, and you're going there, and you're going to finish there." And I said, "No, I'm not. I don't want to go there. I'm not happy there." "You're doing just fine. You're going back." "No, I'm not." It was a big discussion and stuff about that. Well, he said, "Well, if you go someplace else, you'll have to work and send yourself." And that's what I did. I got a job. I went to New Jersey in the summers and worked and earned the money to send myself to school. He helped. But I basically had to show that I was willing to do that.

Andrea Smith: But you didn't stay there.

Ruby Osborn: Went to DC. Well, there you go. And it wasn't a win or lose situation. It was just that, that's not what I wanted to do. Now my sister did the opposite, she stayed where she was. And I'm glad I didn't because I don't think I would have had the chance to do the things that I have done if I had stayed in that particular school. I think that if I had not just gone— if I had gone to that particular college, then I think that my opportunities would not have been what they have been in my life because I think I would've ended up here for the rest of my life, but I don't know that to be true.

Ruby Osborn: But that's what I believe because I got to see another part of the world. And that was fascinating for me. And as small as it was at that time, it made me want to, excuse me, do more of that traveling and seeing other parts of the country. So it was kind of like an eyeopener that there was something else other than Durham, North Carolina. And I love it. I love that part. I wouldn't take anything for that part. So I guess you could say that just going away to school and the travel all played a role in probably who I am also. Because I had very strong feelings about that, being able to go to school where you want to go.

Andrea Smith: You were talking about that you went to a dermatologist, and you said that no one knew anything about Black skin.

Ruby Osborn: Black skin.

Andrea Smith: So was it a White dermatologist?

Ruby Osborn: Yes.

Andrea Smith: What services were segregated and what wasn't? Because you could go to a White doctor?

Ruby Osborn: You could go to a White doctor.