Vermelle Diamond Ely: Do that.

Leslie Brown: To carry—I'm sorry, to carry what?

Vermelle Diamond Ely: To carry. Mm-hmm. To carry—I'm not sure. I'll let you see that. See, I'm not sure what the drug was. But anyway, you had to have a permit to carry, from the drugstore, when he was driving a hack, like a taxi.

Leslie Brown: Well, how were decisions made in your family?

Vermelle Diamond Ely: Oh, by everybody. Grownups. My grandmother and grandfather, and my mother and father. There was a close relationship between all of them. Her mother's mother died in childbirth, and her father raised her, and her grandmother. She lived in—grew up in Tarboro. She moved here, we were more or less, like I said, like the children. My grandmother and grandfather did everything but there was a real closeness between them, because even when we moved here, my dad's mother chose to come and stay with us, with a daughter-in-law. And she stayed here with us instead of—So they made decisions together. So I think that made it important 'cause of the good relationship between all of them.

Leslie Brown: Did anyone in the family have particular responsibilities in decision making? Someone take the family budget and someone else housekeeping?

Vermelle Diamond Ely: I guess maybe, they may have. My daddy did the grocery shopping. And plus we had our chores to do, so far as cleaning the house. My grandmother did most of the cooking. And well, when I was real young, I can even remember my great-grandmother too, that lived there with us. I'll tell you a story about it. You asked about early years. I remember my great-grandmother was still living. My brother did not decide to talk until he was about two years old, I believe. He wouldn't say anything. They named him Henry. You know Henry in the funny paper they never said anything. But anyway, my great-grandmother had somehow, somewhere along the line, I don't know when it was, but the first time he decided to say something, they always said he told a lie the first time he opened his mouth. But the first things that came out of his mouth was, we called great-grandmother, Dawn.

Vermelle Diamond Ely: So he said, "Dawn hit me." Those were the first three words that he ever said. And my great-grandmother was very old, had gotten very old at that time and it had just upset her. She cried and cried and went on and she said, "I didn't hit that boy." But somewhere along the line, I don't know whether it was that year, the year before or when, she had probably hit him and he finally decided to say it. The first thing he said was, "Dawn hit me." And of course she never forgot that. She said, "I didn't hit that boy." But we all lived there at the same house. And of course I don't remember my great-grandfather, but my great-grandmother was one of the lantern holders. Her picture's in the archives over at our church, one of the lantern holders for when they built the old church, which was on Church Street in 3rd Ward, on South

Church Street.

Vermelle Diamond Ely: And of course my grandfather was one of the builders. And my grandmother, I remember hearing her talk about how they would fix dinner for the men that were building, doing the work. And at night, and my great-grandmother was a lantern holder, they would hold the lantern so the men could see how to work. They were working after hours too. So—

Speaker 3: Do you know when she was born?

Vermelle Diamond Ely: My great-grandmother? No, I really don't. Uh-uh. I don't even think I have a picture of her. And you don't think about writing things down when somebody can tell you until it's too late. You don't realize. You look back now, I've gotten into doing some things now and there's things that I wish I had asked, of things I wish I had saved. All that kind of—I really don't. I really can't remember.

Leslie Brown: Did your great-grandmother or your grandparents tell you any stories about their lives?

Vermelle Diamond Ely: Yes. My grandmother used to tell stories that she had heard from her mother about slavery time. And when they built these houses, there were two White men and one of them still comes here. They installed the furnaces and everything in all these houses. They were built by Spangler's Construction Company. And they would come here all the time to hear her tell stories about slavery time. Now they heard more of the stories, I believe, than I have heard. But I have one in particular that I remember was how they were fed. They cooked for the big house, and of course they had a board.

Vermelle Diamond Ely: She said there was a board in the floor that they had taken loose, so when they would slice meat for the family, they'd slice off enough for them and put it under the board in the floor. And that's how they fed their children, off some of the same food that they were eating, but they had to hide it. And that's how they were able to eat well, as well as some of the others, the people in the big house were eating the same things. But I just remember that particular story.

Speaker 3: And your grand grandmother was from Tarboro, you said?

Vermelle Diamond Ely: My mother's family was from Tarboro. My grandfather on my mother's side. In fact, she still has the farm that's located in Tarboro, thinking maybe about 160 something acres of farm land still there and owned by—I think there were seven brothers and maybe one sister. But the farm is still there and she rents her part out to somebody else who's doing some farming there now. But my great-grandfather on her side was from England, and his wife, of course the constable when we went down there, he was telling us, he knew he them. And of course he said, "I look just like—" His wife was Indian and said, "I look just like her." So they were kind of mixed. Some of them were born—Most of them were born real fair. And of course some decided to go one way and some decided to go another. Of course, her father decided to go join the Elks and be Black even though some of the others didn't choose to.

Vermelle Diamond Ely: And of course I remember hearing her tell the story about how they buried her

grandmother. And they had two cemeteries, one for the Whites and one for the Blacks. And how after so many years they dug up her grandmother and put her in the other cemetery, and put the two of them together, because the grandmother was Indian and Black. And plus the grandfather was buried, all the others were buried in the White cemetery. This is within the family. And course they said her father should be tarred and feather to be marching out in the street with the Elks. The Elks were all Black. So that was on my mother's side. And plus she grew up, her father, I can't remember what year he died, but we were all grown when he died, the two of us.

Leslie Brown: How has the history in your family been passed down?

Vermelle Diamond Ely: Well I guess a lot of it from memory, from talking to them and telling us stories, things about what happened. Another instance, what I was telling you about, see a lot of these things we remember from hearing them laugh and talk about it and telling us about it. When we were born, I think, my daddy used to kid my mother, I can remember that, about not taking the two kids down there, taking them over 'cause we were both Black. But she said that wasn't so, that wasn't why she didn't take us. But you remember stories like that from hearing them talk. And of course they kept a lot of pictures and my daddy took pictures. I have a camera too, I can't put my hands on it right now, things scattered one place or another.

Vermelle Diamond Ely: But a box camera, old box camera, that took real good pictures because those pictures are still—I can show you some of the pictures that were taken with that camera. And of course they kept family albums. And this was another way of passing the history on. I remember when my nephew was in school, he had to try to go back and try to do some of his family history. And of course he started this book backwards and we never did change it, but these were some of the things that we might be interested in looking at. Those were my grandparents. And he tried to bring them up to today's time.

Leslie Brown: Were there certain settings where your family would tell its history?

Vermelle Diamond Ely: Just to sit down and talk? No, not necessarily. Just a general conversation. Wasn't a time where we sat down and told stories or anything like that.

Speaker 3: So in your household when you were growing up, at various times, was your great-grandparents or at least your great-grandmother and your grandparents and your parents and your brother and you?

Vermelle Diamond Ely: And me.

Speaker 3: Were there other people who lived?

Vermelle Diamond Ely: No, that was all.

Leslie Brown: Who was responsible for child-rearing?

Vermelle Diamond Ely: Excuse me. Well my grandmother took care of us most of the time because my mother and father both were working. And like I said, she did the cooking and she took care of the children while they went out to work.

Leslie Brown: And who was the disciplinarian in the family?

Vermelle Diamond Ely: Everybody. Next door neighbors, up across the street. Anybody. Just anybody that wanted wanted discipline you could. But I guess, my grandmother, I would say equally, because we didn't get any special treatment from anybody that I can remember. You did something wrong, anybody. You'd get two or three whippings, you might get two or three whippings about the same thing. So I don't think one disciplined us anymore than the other. I will tell you these funny stories about my brother, but he stayed into something all the time. And I can remember another childhood memory, him on a little tricycle and my dad was try trying to get—He had gotten into something up the street. Well he had gone up the street on the tricycle first of all and that's when he caught him at the corner. And he got after him. And I told you about the fence around the house, and it had a little swing gate. And of course the driveway area had a high gate that you could open up and go down.

Vermelle Diamond Ely: I guess that's where they used to take the horses in or whatever, but it had a high gate. But had one of those little tiny tricycles where you pedal, and I could see him pedaling there. My daddy was running at him. He pedaled that tricycle and he got to the gate. He was going so fast he couldn't stop. So he jumped off, the tricycle went on down the street. My daddy was right behind him. He jumped the little fence and in the house and around the dining room table, daddy was right behind him, never be able to catch him. By the time my daddy got to the back door, Kevin was coming over the high gate, up the driveway side 'cause he didn't get away. Because you had to go to bed at night anyway, and I can remember staying underneath the house. We had a, house was real high on the back, but it got lower as you went toward the front porch.

Vermelle Diamond Ely: And I remember doing something. I had gotten into something, I can't remember what I had done that time, but I stayed underneath the house until everybody had had dinner, was sitting out there. They'd go out and sit on the porch every evening. And my dad would go up the street sometimes and everybody would settle for the evening, I thought. So then I decided to slip in the house and go to bed, go sneak upstairs and go to bed. Did the wrong thing, because I took off my clothes to get ready to go to bed. I probably would've done better if I had gotten a whipping when I had my clothes on. But anyway, I still got that whipping. I guess you'd say we were bad kids, but not really. But kids nowadays get away with things like that, little things that we would get into. We were just mischievous, that's all.

Leslie Brown: Do you think there was a point when people stopped treating you like a child or started treat treating you more like an adult?

Vermelle Diamond Ely: You mean in the family or just people in general?

Leslie Brown: Both.

Vermelle Diamond Ely: Not really, because even all the way through elementary school you were still a child, and even through high school. And you went away to college, you still had to answer to some of these same people. In fact, some of these people right now, the lady I mentioned that I used to go visit, I'm still a child to her. She still tells me what I need to do and what I need not to do. But I think that's just something that was a part of them that we would just still children to them. That's some of the neighbors, people that live with us. And the same thing with family members. But you're still their children, regardless of how old you get.

Leslie Brown: Who are the people who are most important to you?

Vermelle Diamond Ely: Growing up, I think I may have shared this story with you when we talked before, I had a problem, an eye problem that I still have, and I grew up with this problem. And I would say all my family and friends, I have to thank for what I accomplished. And it's something that, and I think more kids now growing up, need to not look at things as being handicaps because they don't necessarily have to be. I had partial sight, there were some people that didn't have sight at all and they were doing well in society and I felt that I could too. Of course, I had to depend on all my teachers, and like I said, and all my friends to help, because I did a lot of my work orally, all my tests orally. Of course, somebody had to read some things to me, but I couldn't start to name.

Vermelle Diamond Ely: I would say all along the way I've had many, many friends that I have to thank for what I have accomplished. Even when I went away to school, I went away to—Because going to 2nd Ward, of course my father working there 'cause they said I would never graduate. And the only reason I did was because my father was teaching there at the school. And of course, I was determined to prove that that was not the reason, that I had the grades. In fact, if anybody had realized, my dad taught French. The only C that I got in high school was the C that I got under him, in French. So he didn't give me anything. He was harder on me, I think, than any of the others. But I did go away to school, I went to Raleigh, went to Shaw University and that's where I graduated.

Vermelle Diamond Ely: And I came back here to work in 1953 and I taught school for 32 years. Then retired in 1985. But I think if it had not been for some of the little—You know how children can be mean and cruel to one another and that's something we should not pay attention to, we need to let children not pay attention to the little unkind things that can be said, that you won't do this, you won't do that. And I think that made me even more determined to go away and do what I did. And I feel real good about it. And I wish others would not consider things as a handicap. Sometimes they not always handicapped.

Leslie Brown: I want to ask you about going away to Shaw, but before I do, what was it like to be May Queen? What did it mean to be elected May Queen?

Vermelle Diamond Ely: Okay, it was not a May Queen, it was Queen City Classic, which was a football game. Well the year before that I was Miss 2nd Ward, which was in 1947. It was a real good feeling because the students, it gave you the feeling that the students liked you for who you really were and not for who your parents were. And a few of them had those little feelings, but the majority of them did not, because

otherwise I would not have been chosen as Ms. Homecoming to represent the student body. It was real good feeling to be. And then when we had the Queen City Classic, we were chosen, some of us were chosen to run against some of the ones from West Charlotte. And of course, we had a veterans school, there was a young lady that represented the veterans school. I guess they call it night school because they weren't all veterans. They had had other students, but the school was held right there at 2nd Ward.

Vermelle Diamond Ely: It was an exciting thing, especially the Queen City Classic, because I got flower arrangements, I mean, a bouquet from the mayor. I received, there was a dress shop here called Lucielle's, still now Lucielle Vogue. But at one time they were two separate stores. One was Lucielle's and the other one was Vogue. But from Lucielle's I got my dress and crown, which I still have. I don't know where the dress is. I knew I couldn't do anything with it if I had it. But I had a hair-do from one of the White beauty shops that I couldn't do anything with either. But it was really, really a good feeling to be recognized and to receive all the recognition and the support that I got from not only the students, but your family friends and from the community.

Leslie Brown: Did you also feel you had a certain responsibility?

Vermelle Diamond Ely: To live up to being—Yes, I did. You would end up feeling like people, other kids would still say, "Well this is something that I'd like to do. I'd like to be." And you have to do certain things in order to be. We had an honor society that we would tap to be in an honor society, 'cause coming along to our parents. Now being presented to society with a debutante ball, they had organizations that would do that for the White girls when they were presented to society. Of course, our parents did this for us. There were about 12 or 13 of us that were debutantes and we did all the other things. We even had Ebony Magazine to come to Charlotte and do a story. And that was really an exciting thing to be featured in Ebony Magazine. They did a feature, featured each one of us with a picture and a short story about the event which was held at the YMCA.

Vermelle Diamond Ely: That was the new YMCA that was built on Caldwell Street in—I can't think what year now. It might've been 1950, I believe. I still have my debutante dress that I look at occasionally. And we had a bracelet that had a cotillion, had the cotillion and the date on it. I still have that too. Lots of things. I just end up keeping a lot of things, and because you can see why I can't find anything now. But those were exciting times, and times that you look back at on and be proud. Make you proud and things that you'd like to show. Young girls come along now and you don't have to. Even down to our graduation, I had a classmate that was married before she graduated from high school, but it still does not mean that you can't go on to school and make something of yourself, even though you get married or make mistakes and have babies before. But it's still something that you don't have to continue doing, you can better yourself and be proud to be who you are regardless.

Leslie Brown: And how did you choose to go to Shaw?

Vermelle Diamond Ely: I guess that was kind of a personal thing too. My dad had finished. My dad finished Shaw. My mother went to Shaw, she didn't finish there, but that's where they met, at Shaw University. And

he was a graduate. When he graduated though, when he graduated from grade school, what they call grade school here at Myers Street. And Myers Street only went—They went so far. His last four years of high school, he had to go to Shaw University in order to finish high school. So he stayed there those four years. And then he started the college at Shaw. Of course, the two of them met there. And my mother actually finished after we were born from Johnston's East [indistinct 00:27:09]. But I guess that was my main reason for choosing Shaw. It was one of the Black schools that a lot of our family friends had attended, so not just my father, but a lot of them had gone to Shaw.

Vermelle Diamond Ely: And another one of the main reasons that I went to Shaw too, during that time, back in 1947, we had several football players to go there from 2nd Ward and basketball players. And they were CIAA champions that year. So kids back during those times used to follow the teams. They were winning, you want to go to school that had a winning team. So that was another thing that encouraged me. I had a girlfriend that had gone to Shaw the year before. She finished in '48 and I followed her too, I guess. So I had a lot of reasons maybe to why I decided on Shaw.

Leslie Brown: What was student life like at Shaw when you were there?

Vermelle Diamond Ely: Very different from today. We had to be in a dorm at a certain time. When we left campus, you had to sign out. And you'd travel in groups of—I think when I first went there as a freshman, we'd travel in groups of at least four, four or five. It dwindled down as you got older, had stayed there longer. Seniors, I think, could go out alone, go downtown or wherever alone. But most of the time you had to travel in twos, threes, or fours, even to the ball games. We had to walk to the football games and of course we had to go in groups. It was a fun time. But you were never walking any place or leaving campus by yourself. But campus life itself was great. They had a lot of dances in the gym and of course the sports activities and—Oh, let's see.

Vermelle Diamond Ely: Some of the things that we used to do. There again, we ran into a rivalry kind of thing with Shaw University and Saint Augustine's College. They'd fight every time they would play too. And sometimes we'd get to go to other cities to see the teams play, but we had our proms and dances and things on campus. We had a canteen that we could go down at night and get snacks. We didn't have a whole lot to do. Like, kids can leave campus and go. We could go to the movies and the movies in Raleigh were like the one in Concord where we had to go upstairs and sit. But we were able to see the late movies, ones that were most recently out.

Leslie Brown: And what—

Vermelle Diamond Ely: So—

Leslie Brown: —I'm sorry.

Vermelle Diamond Ely: It's okay.

Leslie Brown: What did you dislike about Shaw? Did you dislike anything?

Vermelle Diamond Ely: Oh, well you always sometimes want to go off somewhere by yourself, so that was one thing that I guess maybe we complained about more than others, especially if you were courting. You always had caller nights on the weekend, freshman caller night was on Fridays. And we had this huge living room area, and you can imagine having your date come over and sit with 10 other couples sitting around, everybody's visiting at the same time. And then Saturday night, I think, where sophomores and juniors were able to entertain on Saturday night. So Sunday night was senior night, and you had a little more privacy when you got to be a senior. You could go sit out on the porch, sit out in the yard. But those first couple, two or three years, it was something, sitting around with everybody else courting.

Speaker 3: Were there clubs or organizations that you were part of while you were there or extracurricular activities that you participated in?

Vermelle Diamond Ely: When I first went there, they always have what they call rush parties with the sororities. We'll rush the girls and try to get you to join their sorority. They would have parties and entertain you and have picnics and things like that, trying to say this is the sorority that you need to join. And of course I chose AKA, which Alpha Kappa Alpha, that I joined in 19—Excuse me, must have been 1951, somewhere. And I became dean of pledges where I took in other girls. And that was a lot of fun. But I tried to protect my girls, I wasn't as hard on them as some of them were on us. But that was mostly what we did. The sororities were mainly, sororities and fraternities, fraternities would have dances and we would get to go to those. And they were all on campus, we never went anywhere off campus, except to maybe—I think some of our initiation meetings might have been off campus and we got a chance to go to some of the older ones houses in the city.

Vermelle Diamond Ely: I had a girlfriend, a couple girlfriends, one father ran on the railroad and worked in a presidential car. And the train would come to Raleigh and would be there for a couple days. And they would always, two or three of the workers on the train were from Charlotte and they would come on campus, because we had to sign out to go with them and everything, have permission from our parents to go, but they were friends of our family. And they would take us on the train and have this fabulous dinner with us. We got a chance to see the president's car with all the red velvet spreads and all the finery. And of course sit at the fine dining room table with the fine china and crystal and everything, and have strawberries and watermelon out of season. And just all kinds of things.

Vermelle Diamond Ely: But they've been running to Florida, wherever, to bring food. But that was always fun to do. And another one of my friends, you just had to make it. We made all the fun, the same as as here, before I went away to school. But another friend was married, her husband was in service. And of course when she get her check each month we'd go to the grocery store, the Piggly Wiggly, and we'd have a party. We'd have our own parties in the dorm. Some of them were legitimate, some of them were not. We put up a hot plate, and we were not supposed to have a hot plate to cook in dormitory, but we did. And we sneaked it in there. We even had fried chicken and had potato salad, and so everything you could think of at a party. Now, Dean Matron would come around and she would always smell food cooking. Anytime she smelled—

Vermelle Diamond Ely: I was always the one she'd come looking for. So, "Vermelle, where are you?" Anyway, she would come and join the party. She'd sit down and eat some of everything we had, except for what we had to drink. We didn't let us see that part. But anyway, she would eat, just enjoy the food and everything. And when she would leave, she'd take the hot plate with her. But she ate first. And one of the other things we didn't like, I guess we said we didn't like it, but we enjoyed it too because the lights had to be out at what, 11 o'clock? I think. Anyway, we liked to play cards and you had those beds, the double-deck beds, top and bottom. Some of the rooms, anyway.

Vermelle Diamond Ely: We would put a blanket up over the [indistinct 00:36:16], so you couldn't see in. And if some of us had a study lamp or something, we'd put it underneath the bed, we'd play cards. And then we'd get caught doing that sometimes. But we'd play cards sometimes all night or wait until she comes around. And she had been around and checked the halls and gone to bed, and then we'd get back up. But we had fun, doing a whole lot of things we shouldn't have been doing.

Leslie Brown: How did you decide to join AKA?

Vermelle Diamond Ely: I think maybe they didn't pressure me as much as some of the others. I had joined the interest group for Deltas and we wore red and white at the TID club: 'Til I Do. And every Wednesday we dress in the red and white. And it got to a place where they just kind of worried you to death. And I think the AKAs did not pressure you as much. And I liked some of the things that they did. They were not as rowdy a group as some of the others were. I guess maybe that's why I ended up. And then I had friends that had gone AKA before me, so that probably had a lot of influence on my decision.

Leslie Brown: What kind of contact did college AKAs have with older members?

Vermelle Diamond Ely: While we were in school? They were very close, because I think I mentioned earlier, we would get a chance to go off campus and go to some of their homes. And that was mainly during initiation time or celebration time when you came off-line. But they would entertain us. And we had a good relationship. And they were on campus, the graduates were on campus when we had functions going on. And we got the guidance from them that we really needed. And we didn't do a lot of hazing that sororities were blamed for doing along the way. AKAs didn't do as much. They weren't as rough, I don't think, as some of the others.

Speaker 3: How did you decide what you wanted to study at Shaw and what you wanted to major in?

Vermelle Diamond Ely: I think maybe I had probably made up my mind before. There wasn't too many things you could decide to do when I was coming along, because they didn't have job openings like they do now, so many different areas kids can go into and still make a decent living. Either you went to school to be a preacher, a teacher, or doctor, a nurse. And I knew I never would've made it nursing. I never wanted to do that, but I always enjoyed working with children. Even in the neighborhood when I was growing up, I always had little children. I'd play games with them and teach them how to do little things. I always had children

around, so I taught Bible school in the summer when I was in high school. And even after I finished college, I had Bible school classes and worked with children in that way. So I think that was mainly the reason. I just enjoyed working with children.

Vermelle Diamond Ely: And I still do, when they're not too bad. Kids nowadays, we were on the train going to Maryland last week, and this is how you know it's still in you. A parent, one lady had two little boys, one was four and the other one was six. And they got on the train here in Charlotte and she had to go all the way to Boston. She could not do anything with those two little boys. She kept asking them, kept begging them to sit down, be quiet. They had worried everybody on the train, the conductors and everybody else, but she said, "I'm not going to talk to you anymore. I don't want to hear another word from you, another word from you for the next half hour, not another word." And one of them looked up at her and said "Mm-mm-mm." In other words, not a word, but just noise. And I can remember, I said, "I know what would've happened to me if I had done that. I'd have had one of those backhand licks from my grandmother if I tried that."

Vermelle Diamond Ely: But she had gotten to a place, I think she was about in tears. She couldn't do anything with them. And I was almost tempted to ask her, "Lady, do you want me to make them sit down for you?" I will show you how to make them sit down and be quiet. But I did that in the doctor's office one day and I did it before I thought. Kids cutting up in the dentist's office and they were just running and jumping. And I grabbed one, sat him back up in the seat before I thought where I was. I wasn't at school. But children nowadays, they know right from wrong, they just need somebody to just enforce some of the things. Some of the things that they know they're not supposed to do, they know better before they do them. Just need somebody say no to them.