

Speaker 1: I am, too. I thought surely, we're getting kind of—

Camille Gantt Alexander: I don't think we're going to have any this year.

Speaker 1: We might have a few. We won't have near as much as we had last year.

Speaker 2: Yeah, if the squirrels don't get them.

Speaker 2: [INTERRUPTION 00:00:16]

Camille Gantt Alexander: Better think of something else that will put more food in your mouth because no one was choosing Black dancers, even though you wanted to. In fact, I even enrolled with Katherine Dunham.

Sonya Ramsey: Oh, okay.

Camille Gantt Alexander: But my aunt talked me out of that because no one was giving them that much work, and you had to have another job to earn enough to live on.

Sonya Ramsey: Did you ever get to meet her?

Camille Gantt Alexander: I met her, yeah.

Sonya Ramsey: What was she like?

Camille Gantt Alexander: Great person. Great, great, great person. Yeah. Great person. I admired her a lot. I really did. Beautiful woman.

Sonya Ramsey: Did you ever perform with her or?

Camille Gantt Alexander: No, I didn't stay in long enough—

Sonya Ramsey: Long enough. Okay.

Camille Gantt Alexander: —because my aunt pushed me right out. I wasn't bringing any money into the house. Her husband got a little ATE about that. So this is why I went to work in the factory.

Sonya Ramsey: What did you do in the factory?

Camille Gantt Alexander: Clothes.

Sonya Ramsey: Okay.

Camille Gantt Alexander: I worked in the factory that we made clothes for Lord & Taylor. Behind my taking sewing at school, clothes is my thing. It still is.

Sonya Ramsey: Oh, okay.

Camille Gantt Alexander: As a matter of fact, I have a sewing unit out there to show you later. I still sew a lot.

Sonya Ramsey: Oh, okay. Do you ever design clothes?

Camille Gantt Alexander: I made my own headcloth. I learned that. I started in high school here. They taught us the basics. I don't know if they do that for kids now.

Sonya Ramsey: No.

Camille Gantt Alexander: They had sewing classes and cooking classes. In fact, in high school at the end of the school year, we modeled the clothes that we made.

Sonya Ramsey: Oh, okay.

Camille Gantt Alexander: I could sew a garment before I even left here. I always enjoyed sewing.

Sonya Ramsey: Okay. What was the name of the nursing school?

Camille Gantt Alexander: Central.

Sonya Ramsey: Okay. Was it a—

Camille Gantt Alexander: On Welfare Island for practical nursing.

Sonya Ramsey: Was it an integrated school?

Camille Gantt Alexander: Yeah.

Sonya Ramsey: Was that your first time attending school with Whites?

Camille Gantt Alexander: Yes.

Sonya Ramsey: What was that like?

Camille Gantt Alexander: I had no problem because the teachers were White and Black. The school, of course, had White and Black teachers. So I had no problem. So I had that freedom. You know what I mean?

Sonya Ramsey: Mm-hmm.

Camille Gantt Alexander: You know, that freedom.

Sonya Ramsey: Then you later on became, did you become an LPN?

Camille Gantt Alexander: Yeah.

Sonya Ramsey: Okay. Then you started working in a hospital or where did you go?

Camille Gantt Alexander: Yeah.

Sonya Ramsey: Did you work at a Black hospital?

Camille Gantt Alexander: No, no. I worked in the city hospital in Kings County, and I started going to Brooklyn College to get my RN license. But life, different things had to stop for a while—

Sonya Ramsey: Okay, that's fine. Go on.

Camille Gantt Alexander: —because I had to stop because of life circumstances. I just continued to work on.

Sonya Ramsey: Did you have White patients that you worked with?

Camille Gantt Alexander: Yeah.

Sonya Ramsey: Did you ever have any problems with that?

Camille Gantt Alexander: The only problem I had is when I worked, and most of the time I worked in mental observation.

Sonya Ramsey: Okay.

Camille Gantt Alexander: So that wasn't a big problem really, because I knew their state of mind when they called me names. That didn't bother me because I had already been pushing to that growing up. So that wasn't a big thing. I knew their state of mind.

Sonya Ramsey: What was your relationship with the doctors there?

Camille Gantt Alexander: I got along well with the doctors, except the ones who tried to sexually harass me—

Sonya Ramsey: Really?

Camille Gantt Alexander: —at that time. But I threatened to report them.

Sonya Ramsey: What kind of things would they try to do?

Camille Gantt Alexander: They would verbally burst. I never had them, only maybe one or two would—

Sonya Ramsey: Touch you?

Camille Gantt Alexander: Yeah.

Sonya Ramsey: Touch your shoulders?

Camille Gantt Alexander: I would draw back on them and threaten to knock them out if they did it again. But sexual harassment didn't just start, the whole thing. But on the whole, most of them were cool, and we didn't have a problem.

Sonya Ramsey: Okay. I wanted to shift gears again and ask, when did you marry or when did that fit in? Have I gotten up to that or have I passed that? Okay.

Camille Gantt Alexander: No, no, no. You just about up to at. I married in 1954.

Sonya Ramsey: How did you meet your husband?

Camille Gantt Alexander: Through a relative.

Sonya Ramsey: Was he from the South also?

Camille Gantt Alexander: No, New York. He's from Harlem.

Sonya Ramsey: Oh, okay.

Camille Gantt Alexander: He'd just come back from Korea.

Sonya Ramsey: Okay.

Camille Gantt Alexander: He was postal worker. We courted for about six months. Then we got engaged. We were engaged about six months or more, I think, before we finally got married.

Camille Gantt Alexander: And woe is me, he was a mama's boy. (Ramsey laughs) God. A true mama's boy in the word. I finally had to give him back to her.

Camille Gantt Alexander: Dana is a product of that marriage, which I had difficulty having her because they had told me I couldn't have children.

Sonya Ramsey: Really?

Camille Gantt Alexander: I told the doctors, "You're a liar."

Sonya Ramsey: Really?

Camille Gantt Alexander: "I'm going to have me a baby." Yes. So I went to sterility clinic for a year and I finally, finally had her, which my mother wanted, mother-in-law wanted to name. She didn't have that right. Not the changes I've been through to get her. She really didn't, because she only had one child, and my daughter was born. she wanted to name her because she had wanted a girl.

Camille Gantt Alexander: But we didn't get along at all. In fact, it was until I had enough of him and her that she decided that I was a good person, which I always was. She couldn't see her son putting me in front of her and couldn't cut loose.

Sonya Ramsey: Did she live nearby y'all?

Camille Gantt Alexander: At first, she stayed in Harlem because he moved to Brooklyn. I had an apartment with my girlfriend, and my girlfriend got married and moved to Massachusetts with her husband. So we just moved right into that three room apartment that I had when I got married. My mom came up for the wedding. Got married in New York. I had a great honeymoon with my girlfriend that shared the apartment because she had gotten married a month before that.

Sonya Ramsey: Oh!

Camille Gantt Alexander: So the two of us went on a double honeymoons together in Cape Cod.

Sonya Ramsey: Oh, wow. That's interesting.

Camille Gantt Alexander: We had a great time together.

Sonya Ramsey: I wanted to ask you, what were some of the social activities you went to in New York on your time off?

Camille Gantt Alexander: Well, I went to the Savoy.

Sonya Ramsey: Wow.

Camille Gantt Alexander: Heard all the old big bands.

Sonya Ramsey: Wow.

Camille Gantt Alexander: Count Basie, Erskine Hawkins, Buddy Johnson. All of them, all of them. Then I used to go to the Palladium. That's Spanish dances. I learned to do the Spanish dances. I went to the movies, of course, I went to the ballet. I went to the opera a wide variety of nights because that was one of the things they had taught us in school here, to appreciate the arts of all kinds.

Camille Gantt Alexander: In fact, I taught my daughter that. I used to take her to the opera on Sunday afternoons. In fact, my girlfriend and I used to take our kids to listen to classical music on Sundays. We used to go to Central Park to listen to jazz, to go to the Village to listen to jazz. I love jazz. I used to take my daughter because I wanted her to enjoy the better things in life. I used to take her to the ballet on Wednesdays, and she would go to sleep. I'd spend so much money at the ballet, and the movies, of course. Museums because you know New York has everything. So she got a chance to see all of that, the zoo, zoos, museums.

Sonya Ramsey: I wanted to ask, did you ever encounter any prejudice in New York when you went to certain places and things like that?

Camille Gantt Alexander: No. The prejudice that I encountered in New York was subdued. It wasn't blatant like down South.

Sonya Ramsey: For example, what kind of things?

Camille Gantt Alexander: Let's see if I can remember some of these things, because that was one of the things a lot of us used to discuss. At least down South, you know they're prejudiced. But up here, would hide it like advancement on jobs or being picked. Like the hospital I worked in, they would send people that had good records working in the hospital to college, and they would pay for it if you wanted to be an RN. I eventually got in that program, but sadly, I couldn't stay in it.

Camille Gantt Alexander: But they would pick the Whites first. Even, say, I had been there for five years and had a good working record because my evaluation with that. But a White person would come in, been missing for a year or a year and a half, and she got picked to go to school. A thing like that.

Sonya Ramsey: Was there such thing as a nurses union? Did they have anything like that?

Camille Gantt Alexander: Not during that time. That didn't come up until—Those union didn't occur. In fact, I was a union rep before I left New York. That didn't come up until, oh, I would say the union came about in

the late '50s, I think.

Sonya Ramsey: Did you always live in Brooklyn back then?

Camille Gantt Alexander: I lived 20 years in Brooklyn.

Sonya Ramsey: Okay. Did you work at the hospital, city hospital for a long time? Or did you move from different hospitals?

Camille Gantt Alexander: Yeah, I worked in Kings County Hospital. That's one of the larger hospital. I don't know if you've heard of Bellevue?

Sonya Ramsey: Yeah.

Camille Gantt Alexander: Well, it's on that scale.

Sonya Ramsey: Okay.

Camille Gantt Alexander: But in Brooklyn. I started out working in mental observation because they paid the most money at that time. I got in trouble. They sent me over to the main building. So I managed to work in medicine. I worked in GYN, aseptic surgery, abdominal surgery, ENT.

Sonya Ramsey: What is your most pleasant nursing experience?

Camille Gantt Alexander: Most pleasant?

Sonya Ramsey: That you liked working with department, that you like working in the most?

Camille Gantt Alexander: I enjoyed working in mental because I got to work with the children that be mostly disturbed. I worked in research, sleep research and medicine research, in Kings County. All this was in Kings County Hospital. I worked in the prison ward. I got to work with Son of Sam. I did that.

Sonya Ramsey: Whoa!

Camille Gantt Alexander: What was this other dude that ran this woman down and killed her and the neighbors? No one helped her. I worked on the prison ward and they tried to get me to go to Rikers Island to work. But I wouldn't, because I worked with the female prisoners and I worked with the male prisoners. I didn't have any problems. I really didn't. I got along with the correctional officers. Of course, I got along with the prisoners.

Sonya Ramsey: Did they ever a flirt with you and things?

Camille Gantt Alexander: Oh, always, always, always. The officers would stop them, of course, by verbally stopping them. But they never came up to me to touch me or touched me. I gave out medication to them, and I never had any problems. In fact, when the male nurses were off, this was my thing. I was the only one that they would call to come up there and work because I got along with them.

Sonya Ramsey: Did you ever feel sympathetic for any of the prisoners?

Camille Gantt Alexander: No.

Sonya Ramsey: No?

Camille Gantt Alexander: They used to call me the rough nurse.

Sonya Ramsey: I wanted to ask you, how did you manage childcare while you were working and raising a daughter, too?

Camille Gantt Alexander: Let's see. Until she was about three, I put her with different people to take care of. I used to take her out the morning. When she was three and toilet trained I put her in—wasn't a daycare. Forgot what they called it. Anyway, it was a school that took them from three through the eighth grade, I believe it was. That's where I actually put on a bus in the mornings when I went to work. If they changed shift, had a shift change, then she would still go to this nursing care. But the people that kept her would sleep with her.

Camille Gantt Alexander: If I went on 12:00 to 8:00 shift, I couldn't find anyone to keep overnight unless I board her out. I only brought her home on the days that I was off. That was very hard. That was one of the reasons why I had to leave the hospital because I didn't like boarding my child out like that. I really didn't. She didn't either. So from the hospital, I went to the health department. I went as a provision.

Sonya Ramsey: Okay.

Sonya Ramsey: What? As a provision? What's that?

Camille Gantt Alexander: Waiting for the city test to come up.

Sonya Ramsey: Oh, okay.

Camille Gantt Alexander: I worked there about six months before the test came up. I had the travel an hour and a half to get there. That was way on the other side of Brooklyn. So when the test came up, I took that and I passed. The supervisor there at that time suggested that they were starting a new federal program in the health department, in the main health department that was closer to home. That federal program was called MIC.



Sonya Ramsey: Okay.

Camille Gantt Alexander: Maternal Infant Care.

Sonya Ramsey: What time period? What decade was this? Was this the '60s or '50s?

Camille Gantt Alexander: Let's see. I left the hospital in '66.

Sonya Ramsey: Okay.

Camille Gantt Alexander: This was like later, '68 or so.

Sonya Ramsey: Okay.

Camille Gantt Alexander: So yeah, I went to work at the—But anyway, she gave my name to this federal program to start infant care because so many babies were dying from not having prenatal care. So I went to work in the main office of the health department in Brooklyn, downtown Brooklyn. They added, it was prenatal and family planning. So after they had the babies, they came back to family planning. But we carried them through the pregnancy. It was during that time that they got lots of Mexicans and Haitians.

Sonya Ramsey: Do you think, all of a sudden they were immigrated?

Camille Gantt Alexander: Yes.

Camille Gantt Alexander: They were immigrating. Right. If one Haitian came in, she brought her friend. Then if one Mexican came in, they brought their friends. We had to tell the, and they were all immigrants. So one of the things we used to do was to tell the Black patients to bring your friends in because it started for the Americans.

Sonya Ramsey: Yeah, Black Africans.

Camille Gantt Alexander: But the immigrants were taking it over, but made it so—I didn't mind doing that, but our taxes was paying for this and yet the Americans weren't enjoying it because of the immigrants. Way back then, we had that immigrant problem.

Sonya Ramsey: Did you have to learn of Spanish and French?

Camille Gantt Alexander: Yes. Yes. It was during that time, I had started back to school again. I went to Brooklyn College and I had taken up Spanish, plus other subjects toward to getting my RN license degree. But again, I had to stop. I went to community, Brooklyn Community College, first. Then I went to Brooklyn College. I had gotten to a special program at Brooklyn College to work on my RN license. But life stopped me again because I was trying to do too much. I really was, trying to raise my daughter, keep up with her, and

work. Many nights I woke up with my head in the books, studying.

Camille Gantt Alexander: So I just had to give it up. I couldn't keep it up. I really couldn't. I was just wasting my money and their money, too.

Sonya Ramsey: I need to ask, were you active in any of the civil rights organizations or the NAACP or things like that?

Camille Gantt Alexander: I became active in the Rainbow Coalition.

Sonya Ramsey: That's later than this, the '80s?

Camille Gantt Alexander: Yeah.

Sonya Ramsey: Okay.

Camille Gantt Alexander: Prior to that, I had joined the NAACP. Then in the '60s, I came here.

Sonya Ramsey: Yeah, that's what. Okay.

Camille Gantt Alexander: Yeah, in the '60s, I came here, too, because during that time, Martin Luther King had sent representatives here to open up Woolworth's Theater, the restaurant.

Sonya Ramsey: Was it 1963 or the late '60s?

Camille Gantt Alexander: It was the late '60s.

Sonya Ramsey: Okay, okay.

Camille Gantt Alexander: I brought some of my friends down here and we stood in line to buy tickets to go to the Bay Theater for the mezzanine. Of course, we get up to the head of the line and, "We're not serving now. Can't buy a ticket." Okay. So we went to the back of the line and consequently we came in. They were sick of us. Then we dressed up and we sat down at Woolworth, and we dressed up and we went to the Henrietta, the restaurant.

Sonya Ramsey: That's a restaurant?

Camille Gantt Alexander: Yeah, a floating restaurant downtown.

Sonya Ramsey: Oh.

Camille Gantt Alexander: Have you heard of the Henrietta II?

Sonya Ramsey: No. Okay.

Camille Gantt Alexander: It's the Henrietta II now. But during that time, it was just a restaurant dock.

Sonya Ramsey: Was it an exclusive restaurant?

Camille Gantt Alexander: Yeah, just Whites only. We went down there. We were here for about two weeks doing that. I enjoyed it.

Sonya Ramsey: How did it make you feel to do that?

Camille Gantt Alexander: I enjoyed it because we weren't allowed to indulge in these things when I lived here. So this is why when I heard that Martin Luther King had sent representatives here, and I got some of my friends together and we came down here and jumped right in. Really, they enjoyed it, too, because they knew about segregation in the South because these friends were born and reared in New York. So I didn't have to worry about them being chicken.

Sonya Ramsey: Did you ever face any danger from doing that?

Camille Gantt Alexander: No. No. No. I didn't. No, because as I said, I enjoyed it.

Sonya Ramsey: What did your mom think about that? Was she worried about you?

Camille Gantt Alexander: Yes. Yes. Oh, yes. She was indeed very worried. Very worried. But we did it anyway. Once I made up my mind, she couldn't stop us.

Sonya Ramsey: Okay. Why did you decide to move back to Wilmington?

Camille Gantt Alexander: Because all the relatives died, and my mom was left alone. In fact, my daughter had problems with her mate. So I sent her down here first to give her a way because he was abusive. So I sent her here as long as normal, here you can. Then while I was here visiting in '87, a crackhead broke into my apartment co-op I had in New York. Never know what it's like to be violated. That took something out of me because my husband and I had separated by that time. I had worked two jobs to get this co-op and I had furnished it all by myself. To have a crackhead break in, the guard wasn't on duty because the place was supposed to be security. That's why I moved in there. I moved in there when Dana was six.

Sonya Ramsey: Oh, okay.

Camille Gantt Alexander: Yeah, because I sent her down here for a year while I worked the two jobs to get that place. So after I moved in, I sent for Dana. My mom sent her back to New York and she started the second grade because the particular co-op that I moved into, the school was right behind it. So that meant

she didn't have to cross any streets to get to school because they had built up this area. It's an old area. So anyway, when I got back to New York in '87, after the Easter visit here, this is when I found my apartment ravaged, totally ravaged. Everything was taken, everything inside was taken. My house was totally upside down. So I never felt safe after that because I used to go to sleep with a machete at night.

Sonya Ramsey: Goodness.

Camille Gantt Alexander: If you've ever been wronged, you can understand what happened. Anyway, my aunt died in '84, '85, somewhere, from cancer. My grandma had died prior to that. So what the hell? I don't have to pay rent. I sold that apartment to a Chinese couple and I came home.

Sonya Ramsey: What did you do after? Did you work here or did you?

Camille Gantt Alexander: Yeah.

Sonya Ramsey: Okay.

Camille Gantt Alexander: Yeah. First, I worked in a nursing home and then I went to work for a doctor and we fell out. I just stopped working. I had worked since the only work I've done was movie extra. They trying to get me to work now.

Sonya Ramsey: Wow.

Camille Gantt Alexander: But I think I was burned out when I left New York, doing nursing work. I really was burned out. I really was. My daughter keeps saying, "Mom, you can always get a job. You can always get a job." I keep my license up, of course. I came down and got North Carolina license without a problem because I had fit this in a New York school.

Sonya Ramsey: Okay.

Camille Gantt Alexander: I haven't done any work since '90, yeah, or '91 when I left the doctor.

Sonya Ramsey: Okay. I think I've asked all of my questions. Did I leave out anything I should've asked or is there something else that you want to add?

Camille Gantt Alexander: No. Came home and restored this house.

Sonya Ramsey: Okay.

Camille Gantt Alexander: I live comfortably because it's old. As I said, my mom grew up in it. I grew up in the house. Pretty sound house. It's still standing.

Sonya Ramsey: Okay.