

Laura Shepard Donaldson: The side's name was Jordan, J-O-R-D-A-N, Jordan Gray. And of course, he was a slave, but the family that he worked for, the spouse had died and he left a widow. Then as now, there were those people who did not think that a woman could do certain things or could have certain things, and with her husband having left her with the farm, they were not a wealthy family. So, granddaddy worked for them. And after the turn of slavery, she was still struggling with the husband died. So she told my grandfather, the men of course, wanted the land that she owned. These were other White farmers in the area. They wanted the land that she owned, but she was determined that she was going to keep it because this was something that she and her husband had in common. This was something that they had worked for.

Laura Shepard Donaldson: So when he died and left her a widow, she told my grandfather if he would stick with her, that upon her death she would give him his freedom. So granddaddy took her up on this. There was one other condition that should she die before she wanted him to take her home. She had told him, I don't remember the area for sure because there were so many places I heard my parents speak up during that time. Of course, this was before their time. But anyway, she had oxen instead of horse. She was one of the poor ones, and she did not have horses, but she had the oxen and cart. So when she died, my grandfather took her home. She promised him some land and his freedom. So he would drive by day and stop the wagon and build a bonfire at night to keep the animals away.

Laura Shepard Donaldson: There were no street lights during that time because there were no streets except the dirt roads. But anyway, she kept her promise in leaving him property. This is how the Grays came in possession of so much property.

Rhonda Mawhood: And she died before emancipation or after?

Laura Shepard Donaldson: After.

Rhonda Mawhood: Okay.

Laura Shepard Donaldson: But anyway, granddaddy, Jordan stayed with her. When I say stayed with her, he kept the farm going for her. Well, she freed him. So this therefore meant that he was still in slavery, but on her death, he was given his freedom and some property. But the sad part and the loyalty, maybe this is where some of my loyalty comes from, but he was loyal to her and he kept the promise to take her home, wherever home was, I don't remember because I was young, but I remember hearing my parents discuss it.

Laura Shepard Donaldson: So he was given this large track of land. I'm not sure how many acres, but she left him a large track of land. Grandfather married an Indian woman, a full-blooded Indian. I'm told that her name was Elithia.

Rhonda Mawhood: How would she spell that, ma'am?

Laura Shepard Donaldson: We spell it E-L-I-T-H-A, Elithia. Hence the high cheekbones. But I'm sorry I wasn't around to get more of the family history, but my grandfather had several children. A lot of them died before my time. But my mother, uncle Sam, uncle Tom, uncle Bob, also known as Uncle Robert aunt Hesta, aunt Fanny, which they called big sis. And one of the brothers was John was called Big Buddy. And Uncle George, I think my mother said, was called little buddy.

Laura Shepard Donaldson: But anyway, this is just a part of the family history. But the sense of loyalty in our family goes way back. And even though it was a life of servitude, the fact that he had the fortitude to keep a commitment has meant a lot to the family, down through the years. If you make a commitment, keep it. So I'm proud of that part of the heritage. Yes, I regret very much the fact that he lived his life or the greater part of his life in slavery, but I'm very proud of the fact that he had the fortitude to remain loyal to his promise to her.

Rhonda Mawhood: You were talking about your grandfather and about the mix in your family, and you had mentioned your mother's hair. What was your mother's hair like, Mrs. Donaldson?

Laura Shepard Donaldson: Long, jet black, coarse, the typical Indian hair that you would think of.

Rhonda Mawhood: Straight, wavy, curly. How was it?

Laura Shepard Donaldson: Very coarse and soft. The texture was coarse, but yet it was a soft coarseness. But it was long and in a lot of times she wore it in two braids, like you see the Indian hair.

Rhonda Mawhood: So you were aware of your family's background when you were a child growing up?

Laura Shepard Donaldson: Oh, yes, yes. They never held anything back to us. And these were the stepping stones that you crossed in order to know that you must be the best that you can possibly be. And this was a strong thing in our family. On my father's side, I did not see either of my grandparents, but my grandfather on my father's side died when he was quite small. I think I told you in the interview the other day about the fact that he was too little to work, but he was able, the landlord or the person for whom they were working would put him on the horse. He was too little, of course, to get on the horse, but he would put him on the horse and give him a note and tell him, "Go to such and such a house, stop at the first house or the second house, or whatever."

Laura Shepard Donaldson: I think this was a part of my father's desire to learn because as I see it from the things that they told me, it had to have been a lonely existence. There were two aunts, both of whom died young from what he told us. The oldest one must've been like about 12 when she died, and the other one was even younger. So we never saw the older children. Of course, I was way down the line, but none of my sisters or brothers saw either of my father's sisters. There were three children, he was the only boy, and there were two sisters. But with them having died so early, they never saw them. But the memories were

there. And I'm grateful to my parents that they shared so many memories with us. I'm very grateful to them.

Rhonda Mawhood: So am I.

Laura Shepard Donaldson: It's important to know from which you came. This way, one can appreciate where they are today, so I'm very grateful for that aspect of our lives.

Rhonda Mawhood: I'd like to ask you a couple of questions about hair and taking care of hair in your family. Did you and your sisters all have similar kinds of hair or was there a range in your family?

Laura Shepard Donaldson: Victoria, the sister who is still alive, hair was very soft. My mother's hair was very long and Indian coarse. She did nothing to her hair, but wash it and comb it with a little grease, but it was very thick and very long. My sister Mary's hair was mid shoulder length. I think she had the longest hair of any of the sisters. Victoria's hair, the sister who is still alive, her hair in contrast was very, very soft and it was shoulder length. Of course, now that she's growing older, it is shorter than it was when we were growing up. My sister Annie's hair was just shoulder length, about like mine when I let it down. To me, I like my hair up and I wear it that way a lot. I've always liked my hair up and I still wear it that way.

Laura Shepard Donaldson: Now, another thing, on Sundays, I wear it down because we were taught never to go to church without a hat. So in church I always wear a hat. So unless it's a beret or just a little skimpy hat that I can push on the back of my head, I always wear a hat to church. I never go to church without a hat. If it's just a business church meeting, I will go without a hat. But if it's a regular church service, I never go to church without a hat.

Rhonda Mawhood: So did any of your sisters straighten their hair? They did. Okay.

Laura Shepard Donaldson: Vicky, the sister who is still alive, in contrast to the coarseness, the Indian coarseness of the rest of our hair, her hair was quite soft, which was just the—and then I might add, in addition to the Indian mix, there was also the White mix. So we are a triumvirate. We are Black mixed with Indian and with the Whites. So it's just a mixture. And none in my family are very dark. There are no Black people in my family, per se, in my immediate family. Most of our skin has the tinge of the Indian redness in it or the trace of the White race. Our beings are very prominent, as you can see.

Laura Shepard Donaldson: And this was from one of those traits, I'm not sure which. But all of my family, we have the very prominent things and we are more or less direct people. We were not allowed to look down regardless of who it was. My daddy said, "If you can't look a man in the eye, you're not worthy to speak to him." So we were taught to be very direct and to focus on the person to whom we were speaking. You didn't bow your head, you held your head high. And the most important thing, we would be a shepherd. And if you are a shepherd, there are certain things that you will not do.

Laura Shepard Donaldson: So this was one of the yardsticks that we were reared by in my family, and I'm proud of that. If you can't look a person in the eye, then you aren't worthy of being the person that you

should be. So it has grown up. Even now, I often talk with my children because I want them to know as much of the family history as I can recall. And I have been blessed with a pretty good memory that I'm able to remember the things that we were taught and things that we did and the things that we did not, dare not, better not.

Rhonda Mawhood: I have one last question, which is, who did your hair when you were a little girl?

Laura Shepard Donaldson: For the most part, I wore braids, and it was longer than it is now. As time went by, father time has taken its toll, but in the country you did it yourself or the cousins got together and you do this ones and that one will do yours. And this is the way we did it. There were no beauticians in the country. You did your own or a relative did it for you, and you in turn did the relative's hair. And in families where there were several sisters, they got to do each other's hair. And if you were not fortunate enough to have a sister at home, you did your own. And if you were fortunate, you had a straightening comb, which you heated and you washed, you dried, you heated the comb and pulled the comb through your hair and you did your own hair.

Rhonda Mawhood: Did your family have such a thing, Mrs. Donaldson?

Laura Shepard Donaldson: Yes. And the best piece of furniture was an old Victrola. This was the talking machine. You might have heard of it as the talking Machine. Now you call it, what is it called today?

Rhonda Mawhood: The record player?

Laura Shepard Donaldson: Stereo.

Rhonda Mawhood: Stereo.

Laura Shepard Donaldson: Stereo or the record player. We had the old fashioned Victrola that had the dog with the megaphone on it, and His Master's Voice was—

Rhonda Mawhood: The RCA.

Laura Shepard Donaldson: But this was the most prominent piece of furniture in the average home. And there were many homes who did not even have such a device. And you had the old, old records. And you bought one every now and then, it wasn't often. But you guarded that collection of records like one guards the Mint.

Rhonda Mawhood: What kind of records did you buy?

Laura Shepard Donaldson: Oh, well, there was Bessie Smith. She was back during my day. She was one of the popular ones. And for the most part, the older folk, like the religious ones. But you have to remember, we are talking back, I'm 70 now, so we're talking about 65 years of memories because I can remember

distinctly back to when I was about four. And I was a sort of family pet because I was small, very opinionated, very active, also a tomboy. I could climb the trees with the best of them.

Laura Shepard Donaldson: So it was one of those things. Albeit, it was not what life is like today. But looking back, I think I'm grateful for the experience because I know what it's like not to have. I know what it's like to have the desire to have. I also know what it's like to have the fortitude and the determination that if someone else has it, I too can have. As one of my cousins used to say, "I want some of just as good as God's got." It wasn't the best grammatical form, but this was her expression. And I have sort of used that as a guide to the things that I want. If you want some of just as good as God's got, and you have the determination to work for it, it's yours.

Laura Shepard Donaldson: So I have used that as a part of my learning tree. And as my daddy used to say, "Whatever you are, be a shepherd. There are certain things that a shepherd will not do, and there are certain things that a shepherd will do, so be a shepherd." So by the same token, my mother could very well have said, "Be a Gray," because she was just as determined as he was. And they always put us first. And I guess that just about sums up the story of my life.

Rhonda Mawhood: Well, thank you so much. Mrs. Donaldson. Is it all right with you if I append this tape to the rest of the interview that you did with your husband?

Laura Shepard Donaldson: That's all right.

Rhonda Mawhood: That's all right, thank you.

Laura Shepard Donaldson: We have nothing to hide, fortunately.

Rhonda Mawhood: Well, thank you very much, ma'am. I appreciate it.

Laura Shepard Donaldson: Well, thanks for letting me share a little of my history with you. And I hope that perhaps if it does not inspire someone else to be the best that they possibly can be, at least they will know that there was somewhere someone who against all odds, tried and made it.

Rhonda Mawhood: Thank you.