

INTERVIEWEE: Donna Allen Harris
INTERVIEWER: Jessica Roseberry
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HARRIS INTERVIEW NO. 1

JESSICA ROSEBERRY: This is Jessica Roseberry, and I'm here with Donna Allen Harris. She's the first African-American to graduate from the Duke School of Nursing. She graduated with a BSN in 1971. Today is December 4, 2008, and we're here in the Duke Medical Center Archives. And I want to thank you so much for agreeing to be interviewed today. It's a real pleasure to talk with you.

DONNA ALLEN HARRIS: Thank you for asking me, really; I appreciate it. It's a privilege.

ROSEBERRY: And I should mention that for those who are interested in this interview, you also participated in the [2007] Tea with Trailblazers that the [Duke University Medical Center] Library and Archives put on. So there's more information that you have given us before. and we're very pleased to have that information and this as well.

HARRIS: Good.

ROSEBERRY: I wanted to ask you a little bit about your background. Did you grow up here in North Carolina?

HARRIS: I did. I was born in Elizabeth City, which is the northeast corner of North Carolina near the Nags Head area. My father was in the service, so even though I was born in North Carolina, we did travel some, depending on where he was stationed. He was in the navy. But still it was primarily between North and South Carolina for many

years until we ended up overseas—I think I was about nine—in France for about three years before we came back here and then I pretty much have been here in North Carolina ever since.

ROSEBERRY: Did you feel connected to that Elizabeth City community?

HARRIS: I did. The early years I don't remember as much about, but when we got back from overseas, I was there until I left to go to college. So that was maybe age twelve until I left to go to school. And both of my parents' families were pretty much entrenched there. So it was home.

ROSEBERRY: I know that you integrated—you were part of integrating your high school in Elizabeth City.

HARRIS: Um-hm.

ROSEBERRY: Can you talk about kind of why—first of all what was the impetus for that to happen at that time and your group of friends to go and do that, and what was the—was that an intentional action?

HARRIS: Um-hm. I don't know a lot of the history behind it, but I do know that it was—it was just the timing. I was there, I believe, from '64 maybe to '67, something like that—because I graduated from college in '71 so I had to go in '67 to have graduated. That was after the start of national movement for the Civil Rights Movement. So, there were—from what I remember, a group of preachers primarily that were—in the African-American community that started the action—whatever was needed to be taken in order for the schools to be integrated. That's what I remember about that part. There were a lot of us that were supposed to have been attending all grade levels. I don't know exactly what the number was, but I had nine or ten friends of my own that were all

supposed to be going. And I was in the tenth grade at that time. So there were supposed to be students in elementary, junior high and high school. And it ended up with about five to seven of us going, three of them from my family. So it was my sister, who was two years younger than me in the junior high. I had an older cousin that was a senior—he was there, and myself. So it was only about five or seven of us that eventually ended up going. There was a lot of community support, that part I remember, in terms of getting us there. Even the first day of school walking us to school. I don't have a good recollection day-to-day support. I don't know if we attended meetings or if there was just someone checking on us on a regular basis. There may have been, but I don't remember that part. I just remember there being involved that first day of school. The expectation was that we would make it and that we could show people that we were not as they thought negroes were—because we were *negroes* at that time. So it was showing them that we were smart, you know, intelligent, well-groomed, that kind of thing. So there was a lot of support and encouragement to make it, and we just felt like we could, you know.

ROSEBERRY: Why were there—your family was kind of three out of five of—?

HARRIS: Um-hm.

ROSEBERRY: Why did your family stay and everyone else kind of—?

HARRIS: You know what, I think it was in part because my mother was a schoolteacher and was vested in education and what the benefits could be. I remember her years ago talking about someone had to sign for us to go to school. She didn't sign it because she was afraid she might lose her job. But since my father was in the navy and was working for the government, so to speak, then the feeling was that they could not hurt him or touch him, so he signed the papers. The community was looking for students that could

make it, and so we were—my sister and I, A students as was my cousin, from what I remember. So it was like, Oh, you're going. You know, it was like, You're going.

(laughs) Even though my friends had all pulled back, I was going. So it was out of obedience in part. But I really think that the bigger picture was that they could see what it could do. So we were targeted to go.

ROSEBERRY: How did you feel about it?

HARRIS: I didn't want to go once my friends backed out. What do you think?

(laughter) No; I didn't want to go, and I tried—I remember trying to talk at least one or two of my girlfriends into going, because I was going to be separated from them. I mean, I was fourteen, so I didn't see any big picture. I just wanted to be with my friends because I had had—I remember having had such a fantastic year the year before at the black high school, you know, with some great accomplishments that the family still talks about. And so being separated from my friends, then, was not something I wanted to do. But we really, you know, didn't have—didn't feel like we really had a choice. It was—someone had to go, and we were just encouraged to go, and we just did it.

ROSEBERRY: Was there a sense maybe that you would get better education at the primarily white high school?

HARRIS: Well, the adults may have thought that, but as a fourteen-year-old I wasn't thinking that, and I know my sister wasn't thinking that. I don't think we had any of those lofty more general ideas. It was just, This is where we're going to be day to day, and I won't see my friends, and I've got to do this work and don't know what to expect when we get there. Ours was just, I think, a fourteen-year-old world, you know. But I

think the adults probably thought that and could see where it might end up. But it wasn't—it wasn't fun for a fourteen-year-old.

ROSEBERRY: So was it a difficult four year—or three years, I guess?

HARRIS: Yeah, it was. The whole three years, from what I remember. The initial day—and I think I may have mentioned this in the tea, but the first day, I should say, it seemed as if the whole school was out on the front lawn. And we were walking to school. It wasn't that far away. But I do remember community folk around us. But we heard the word—the *N-word* from a block or so away. It was like, “Here they come, here they come.” That was the introduction that I remember from the student body. There was a time, my sister told me about, where we were actually brought into the school before it was open to get the tour and everything—but I don't remember a lot about that—maybe by a principal or someone. But the introduction to the student body was just that. And it stayed like that for many months. It wasn't as overt as time went on, but it stayed that way for many months, probably most of that first year. I remember mentioning at the Tea, people running out of the bathroom, holding noses, turning desks around when I walked into the room. It was pretty overt for a long time. I don't remember being a part of any extracurricular activities. We weren't allowed. I had just learned how to play the clarinet and wasn't allowed in the band. So that was what we were hit with. But I was by senior year able to become a part of what was like senior follies, just the senior class entertainment presentation to the student body. But I wasn't allowed to dance in the chorus line. You see what I mean? So there were definitely inroads made, but there were certain things that were just kept out of our reach all the way through. Does that help? Does that kind of answer your question? All right. There

were—there was at least one friend that I had who had a cross burned in her yard. That’s the only repercussions I can think of for other students who did befriend us. I don’t remember any others for myself. I remember my sister saying she ate alone at her table for months. I mean, just—no one would eat at her table at lunchtime. And then eventually she had one or two that did come and befriend her. But that’s the only negative incident I can think of. There may have been others, but that was all I remember. I did develop some friendships over time, but I don’t remember them. I started getting reunion letters from maybe one or two people for the twenty-fifth reunion or something like that from high school, and I thought, I don’t know these people. One guy wrote me a letter after tracking me down and talked about the inspiration that all the students were to him that he still shared with his children. And I thought that was good, and then I thought, I don’t know if I’m ready still, so I still didn’t go. But maybe in time. But it was rough for all of us; it really was for a while. And that was the reason I didn’t want to go to Duke.

ROSEBERRY: So you had to make it through that experience.

HARRIS: Um-hm.

ROSEBERRY: Just kind of make it through.

HARRIS: Yeah, it was just a matter of doing—I just remember doing what we had to do, and what we had to do was do well academically. I mean, we knew that we were—it was expected that we would make it, hoped that we would make it to prove something to the community, so there was a little bit of that. And so that’s basically what we did. Other than church activities, that was what I did was just go to school, um-hm. The church activities were a good balance to that, because at least in that setting I could see some of

my friends, but it wasn't a day-to-day attending each other's school activities and stuff like that. It was nothing like that. The circle of friends was definitely broken by that, it was. So—but we did make it through.

ROSEBERRY: Is your sister older or younger?

HARRIS: Younger. She was two years younger. So she was in junior high, and I was in high school. I don't remember there being anyone in the elementary school, but I know it was the plan. But I don't remember if they got anyone to go. So it may have been just junior high and high school.

ROSEBERRY: So she wasn't even with you in the same—you were—?

HARRIS: Um-um, we weren't together.

ROSEBERRY: You were *alone* alone.

HARRIS: I think they were across the street, so she was by herself across the street. I was a sophomore. My cousin and one other friend of his were either juniors or seniors. We were in the same building, but our paths didn't cross. So I knew they were there, but I don't think we saw each other that much, don't remember.

ROSEBERRY: That sounds fairly isolating.

HARRIS: It was. It was. It was an isolating experience. And I think it had repercussions on me as a person. I can be someone who is fine by themselves, you know what I mean? I can—and I think some of that is just kind of a result of that and the sense of—the sense of being—a feeling of being rejected by friends and that circle of friends being broken. I think those things kind of carried over as undercurrents throughout life. And I've often wondered if some of the people that made national headlines, like James Meredith, experienced some of those same things. I haven't read a lot about their

experiences, but I wondered if they did, too, experience a sense of rejection or isolation or that kind of thing and if it carried over. I hear all the good things and the good accomplishments that people have aspired to and accomplished from other schools, but I often wonder about isolation and rejection issue, because it was pretty traumatic, and I'm sure the experience was not just ours. But you don't hear a lot about that part; at least I haven't.

HARRIS: How did you know that you wanted to become a nurse?

HARRIS: I always wanted to help people. And I guess you hear that all the time, but I really wanted to help people. I did not want to be a schoolteacher. My mother was a schoolteacher and worked herself and us ragged back in the day. She brought her work home a lot. I didn't want to do that. And my mom was among those that believed that African-American women should be teachers or nurses in order to make it independently on their own at that time. I remember wanting to major in music, and I remember it being squashed in terms of my not getting a lot of support for that, which may have been legitimate. But we were kind of steered toward becoming nurses or teachers. And I knew I didn't want to teach, so I took it to nursing. I don't remember professions being opened up to us or presented to us like physical therapists or occupational therapists or respiratory therapists, other ways that you could help, so to speak. It was nursing, so that's why I went into nursing. Sounds real simple, doesn't it? (*laughs*) But that was why. And then I think even at Duke I began to think about occupational therapy or physical therapy but didn't really pursue it at that time. My older sister, who's four years older, was a nurse. She had gone to A&T and graduated, maybe '67, by the time I was

going to Duke and loved nursing. So that was incentive, too, that it would fit me well.

So that's why I did it.

ROSEBERRY: Well, I'll go back to your going into Duke, but has it fit you well?

HARRIS: Being a nurse?

ROSEBERRY: Uh-huh.

HARRIS: It has. It really has. I've been—I only have the one degree from Duke, a BSN, but I've been able to do a variety of things in nursing without having to have a master's degree or going even higher than that. For me it fit because I wanted nursing as a job, you know, that I could do different things in, but I didn't want it as a career in the sense of aspiring to rise to "the top" in even the administrative level on a unit, much less beyond that. I didn't want to do that because I also had strongly in the back of my mind wanting a family. So I didn't want to be heavily invested in a career where I wouldn't be able to have time for the family. So it suited me fine, it did. I've done hospital nursing, public health nursing, I've done office nursing, I've done school nursing, now I'm in nursing research. I mean, so I've done a lot of different things in nursing with just that degree and it's fit me well in terms of family. However, there was a time period where I felt like I let the Duke program down. And that was because to me the Duke program assumed its graduates would aspire toward highest levels in administrative, research, high academia. And I never did want that. I always just wanted to be a hands-on nurse and not go any further. I do remember feeling guilty. But then I would think, Well, I opened the doors for other African-Americans to come through. One of the girls that came in behind me was the director of nurses at the health department here in Durham and is now

the assistant health director. You know what I mean? I may not have gone or wanted to go but so far, but the doors opened and others took it to another level.

ROSEBERRY: So there was very much a sense that you'd be geared toward administrative—?

HARRIS: Um-hm, and not just the hands on, as important and significant as that is, we know. But the aspiration was that I felt that the Duke nurses would go beyond that.

ROSEBERRY: How was that communicated?

HARRIS: To me, there was a lot of theory in our program, but little practice. One of our rivals was the Watts School of Nursing. Their nurses could out-function us on the unit. They could run the unit in terms of being in charge and whatever within the limitations that they had, whereas there were so many things that we had not experienced in terms of procedures even, you know what I mean? So it was just a sense of that they were excellent at hands-on stuff. But we were going to be—we were going to go beyond that. That's the only way I can think of it, and it may have been just from a student point of view, but when we were working alongside them or even working weekends to make extra money and working with them, they could outwork us, they really could. I ran into a nurse not too long ago at my hairdresser's that worked at Duke during that time. And she verbalized that we were not as well-skilled as some of the Watts nurses. That was kind of how it was perceived: true or not, that was the perception. That's why I think I had the sense of having let the program down. But then, I had to remind myself that I opened doors for others that went way beyond that. I remind myself that I served a purpose, now go back to work, (*laughs*) that kind of thing.

ROSEBERRY: Well, Dean Gillis was in your class? Is that right: Catherine Gillis?

HARRIS: Yeah, she was, and I have not met her yet as dean even though I've been there two years. I keep saying I have got to make an appointment to meet Cathy, but I haven't yet. And my PI [principal investigator], Dr. Davis, she was also at Duke—not in my class. I think she was a year or so behind me, but she was there for a higher level degree, I believe, at that time. But anyway, Cathy was in my class. And I remember her name, I remember that we were in the same circle of friends, not tight, but still.

ROSEBERRY: And I know that Brenda Nevidjon—do you know that name?

HARRIS: Um-hm.

ROSEBERRY: She—I think she was a year behind you as well.

HARRIS: Yeah, I think she was in the class with the other two African-Americans that came in. It was either that year or two years—. But I think it may have been that next year. But she was in that class. And she's on the faculty at Duke. And of course Cathy is dean. Examples like them are what I mean when I speak about guilt related to the program. Some of my coworkers and I in research that go out into the field to do the work, we've had conversations now and again about not having a job of course unless there was someone who was funded the money for the dreams they had or projects that they saw that would be of benefit, but then, someone has to put feet to those dreams—you know what I mean—and actually carry it out. So it just kind of comes together.

ROSEBERRY: Are you the feet?

HARRIS: I'm the feet.

ROSEBERRY: *(laughs)* Okay.

HARRIS: I'm definitely the feet with nursing research, yeah.

ROSEBERRY: Okay. Well, let's go back a little bit to your coming to Duke and what that was like. So you had graduated from your high school and were thinking about colleges and knew you wanted to become a nurse.

HARRIS: Um-hm.

ROSEBERRY: So tell me about some of the schools that you applied to.

HARRIS: I remember applying to just two: Fisk University, because they had an excellent reputation for a nursing school for African-Americans, and Duke. I had thought about applying to East Carolina [University] because it was near home. I didn't want to go out of state, per se, but Fisk had a good school, so I was willing to do that. There was a counselor at the high school who really did tell us not to apply because of the overt prejudiceness that was still at East Carolina at that time, and she's the one that steered us to Duke. So again it was out of obedience. It's like, Okay, I'll apply. I'll just—I'll apply to Duke, but Fisk is where I really want to go. There was that sense, I'm sure then to the community feeling that we did well with integration on a local level, take it to a higher level. You know what I mean? So I was encouraged to apply to Duke. And at that time, they were looking for African-Americans, that was known. That's why the counselor asked me to go ahead and apply. I just did it because of the pressure, not expecting to hear anything. And in fact, I did get accepted at Fisk first. I got the letter back first, Yay!, but no money. And, we were, you know, low to middle income with no money for college. And then the letter of acceptance came from Duke with an offer of all this money.

ROSEBERRY: So it was a scholarship?

HARRIS: Um-hm, it was a scholarship. It was a four-year scholarship. And that was hard for the adults to let me turn my back on. And I had enough sense to know that we couldn't afford for me to go, but that's why I was hoping for Fisk to come through. I thought, We've got time before I have to respond, maybe Fisk will come through. And they just didn't come through with the money for whatever the reason. And Duke was just sitting there, so you know, it was like how could you say no? But I didn't want to do it. All I could envision was more of the same. That's what I was looking at, that's what I could see, more of the same, and I didn't want to go through that type of environment and experience again. I wanted to go back to the black experience that I had missed from sophomore year of high school to senior year, so maybe I could get back into that kind of environment for college, but it just didn't happen.

ROSEBERRY: So you knew that you were going to be the first. Did you know that you were going to be the only?

HARRIS: I knew that I'd be the first and the only, um-hm. At some point, I don't even remember when, but at some point we did get word that I had a roommate. And my roommate was from New York. Their family and she knew that I was black, and it was no problem. Okay, I thought I'd give this a shot. But I knew there'd be no one else there, and on West Campus where there were no other girls. All the girls at Duke, you know, were on East Campus. I was on West Campus. So there wasn't even close proximity to just walk across the quad to a girlfriend's dorm room or anything like that. I was totally on another part of campus and that sense of isolation just rose up again. As we were talking earlier, I think it just kind of stayed with me, but there was that sense of isolation because I was nowhere near the other girls.

ROSEBERRY: So the nurses all were on East Campus or—?

HARRIS: The nurses were all on West Campus. We were at Hanes House near the hospital—all the other girls—except for grad students as such were on East Campus.

ROSEBERRY: So you were on East because you were getting a BSN?

HARRIS: No, I was on West Campus.

ROSEBERRY: You were living on West—

HARRIS: Living on West Campus. All of our classes were in the school of nursing so all of us—the nursing program was on West Campus. We were in Hanes House as underclassmen and Hanes Annex as upperclassmen, which put us right there at the VA and right there at Duke [Hospital] South, which was the main hospital at that time. So we could walk. So that's where we were. I think that my freshman year I did have some liberal arts classes, but for the most part after freshman year everything was concentrated at Hanes House.

ROSEBERRY: So the other African-American women might have been on East Campus, but the School of Nursing was West.

HARRIS: On West Campus.

ROSEBERRY: Okay. So did you get to know any of those girls in the school of nursing?

HARRIS: Oh, yeah. The thing that I think saved me was the friendships that were established with the students in Hanes House. I don't remember a lot of my immediate circle being from the South. There may have been one or two. But for the most part, they were from the North and West, but not so much from the South. Even after graduation, there was still a close-knit group in that we even circulated letters among us

maybe the first year or two; I'm not really sure how long it lasted. But there was a group of maybe ten, fifteen of us that just stayed pretty close—maybe about ten, but we stayed pretty close. And I really think that that is what saved me. It was that the social aspect of it was so much different from high school and that was my solace. And we were all of one aim. I mean, we all wanted to be nurses and with there not being a sense of overt prejudiceness and stuff it was—it worked well for me, especially after what I was coming out of. And it seemed genuine. Being in class, working on the unit that was one thing, but the inner circle was definitely different. And I really think that was my—that was my salvation, to get through the program. My roommate and I pledged a sorority. And I think it was Pi Beta Phi, I'm not sure. But anyway—

ROSEBERRY: I've got it written down. (*laughs*)

HARRIS: Oh, okay. But we pledged.

ROSEBERRY: Phi Beta Phi.

HARRIS: I don't remember a lot of the drama that can be associated with pledging, but I do remember that there was some event at Hanes House, and my roommate was salt and I was pepper. I look back, on it and think. I don't remember anything degrading.

ROSEBERRY: Those were the names that they gave you two?

HARRIS: Well, for that particular event, you know, she dressed up as salt and I dressed up as pepper. Whatever we did, I don't know, I just remember that. But I don't remember anything degrading, so I'm just leaving that alone. I'm not asking about it, nothing. We just did it and that was it.

ROSEBERRY: Now, you said that the school was looking for African-Americans.

HARRIS: Yeah, they were.

ROSEBERRY: Was there any kind of fuss made or big deal made where you—did you feel like you were in a spotlight or—?

HARRIS: You know what, I don't remember if there was anything special done or anything. I don't remember a mentor. I don't remember having anyone in particular to go to. If there was, I just don't remember. I remember the reliance on my friends, that's what I remember. In terms of the program, the only thing that I remember is shutting down in terms of looking to the faculty, I guess, as a whole for help. I remember writing a paper freshmen year, the one nursing course we did have. We had to go to one of the clinics and pick someone, a patient, to talk to, then come back and write about that interchange. And I picked an older black man. I don't remember if he was dark skinned or light skinned but that was one of the ways that we described ourselves: *dark skinned, light skinned, curly hair, coarse hair*. That's just what we did, no big deal. And, I remember writing either *light* or *dark skin*, in the paper, and that being circled and me being asked, Do you have problems with your race? And I just thought, Not again. That's what I remember thinking. And I remember just seeing—from what I remember just shutting down from looking to faculty and thinking, I'm just going to do my work and be with my friends and get out. I didn't—I don't remember trying to talk with that faculty member about what the comment meant. I don't remember reaching out in any way to ask what that was all about. And it may not have been anything heavy, but it was just that it came across as, Not the (*laughs*) race thing again. I just remember, I'm just going to go in class, do my work and be done. I do remember a time of depression where I remember talking about wanting to be out or wanting to hurt myself or something. There was someone that helped me. I remember going to a faculty member's house for

dinner or something. I remember having a little bit of counseling, but I don't know who set that up. I have no clue. I remember when I did get married between my junior and senior year one faculty member gave me a wedding present, just one that I remember. I ran into her years ago at UNC. It was probably coming up to the thirtieth reunion for my class. She was the one that had given me the wedding gift, so I went to see her just to see if she was the one and tell her that I remembered that part. About the reunion, she said, "You ought to go," and I said, "I don't think so." I just don't remember being mentored, brought under someone's wing, having someone to talk to on a regular basis about how things were going that was a member of the faculty or administration, I just don't. In my mind, Duke was looking, I was there, I was a token, that was it. So I relied on my friends.

ROSEBERRY: How did you meet your husband?

HARRIS: He was actually dating one of the girls that came (*laughter*) after me. His cousin was dating my cousin. So I actually saw him a few times and thought he was pretty good looking. I asked the girl dating his cousin to introduce us—the rest is history.

ROSEBERRY: He was over there on East Campus?

HARRIS: Well actually, he was working at Duke. He was a student at [North Carolina] Central. But he was working with a research program at the medical center. We've been married thirty-eight years. We got married in 1970. I graduated in '71. So that's how we met. I think I may have been a sophomore at the time. We dated for about a year before we got married. And then I came back to Duke to finish my senior year because he was in the service. So I came back to finish. And then we—then I joined him in Mississippi after I graduated.

ROSEBERRY: Okay. So that helped with the isolation, too.

HARRIS: That did help, because at that point I was dating him and then double dating with friends. And sometimes we would go out.

ROSEBERRY: So those peers, it sounds like, were pretty easygoing?

HARRIS: Um-hm, from what I remember. Because like I said, we kept up the communication even after we left school. So it was a pretty tight-knit group from what I remember. Once I left Duke, once the letters stopped, I didn't pursue trying to find out where everybody was. Some of that was just, I guess, even the natural part of just living your own life, starting your own family, friends where you are, where you work, every once in a while hearing about something that was going on with them but didn't really keep up with where people were. I just kind of—after a while just kind of let the ties fall. I looked my roommate up at the thirty-fifth reunion, I think, and actually met her and established contact with her again after that time. She had even written me a couple of times before that. I remember that, but I was going through some hard stuff with family and didn't want to reconnect with her with all the heavy stuff that was going on with me at that time. But we did get together and visited after that thirty-fifth reunion at least once or twice and wrote letters and talked a little bit, so that was good. And she caught me up on what was happening with quite a few of the kids that were in that original little circle, which was good. I'd like to get back in touch with her about some of that.

ROSEBERRY: So were you—how long have you worked at Duke or did you work at Duke?

HARRIS: I didn't after graduation other than working while I was in school and that was just to make money on the weekends. When I left Duke—no, actually I did work at Duke

a little bit. I had said I would never come back and never work at Duke, right? Never say never. I ended up working at Duke maybe for a couple of years as a part-time clinical instructor through the nursing program at NCCU. So I had a small group of nursing students that I took to pediatric units at Duke as a part of their program. But even so, I wasn't really working for Duke. I was just at Duke. But then after that, until two, three years ago when I started with this research project I was telling you about, I hadn't been at Duke. I've been at Duke now since 2006.

ROSEBERRY: So how is it being back?

HARRIS: You know, it's been so long since I'd been here. The building where I am is not the same, you know. The whole—all of Hanes House had been taken over by Duke Medical Center, so there are different offices in Hanes House, and of course the annex is the John Hope Franklin building. So walking back into it—into the front door of Hanes House initially was a bit anxiety producing. But, once I got in, with everything so different, I calmed down. I was just there working. But the building looks the same. It was a little traumatic, looking at the building. Because the experience was so good with peers, it was kind of bittersweet. It was okay. Plus I dated my husband there, and I would think, We made out in this lounge or maybe that lounge or something. So it was kind of bittersweet and it was okay, but flooded with a lot of negative stuff, that didn't happen because everything was so different. So it was all right.

ROSEBERRY: Yeah.

HARRIS: Now I am in the administrative building, which is the small building next door to Hanes House, so I'm not even in Hanes House and don't see it much except for coming and going to get into the building, so it's not bad. And I just have repressed

memories, I think, so I just don't think about it much. It's just for the day—working for the day, you know. But I don't make myself just kind of sit down and try to think of a lot of stuff that may have happened. So it's okay. When I first ended up at Duke, I had said *never*. I had to call my mom and my sisters and say, "Guess where I am?" They said where? I said, "I'm at Duke." They fell out laughing because I just declared I would never go back there.

ROSEBERRY: So it was a pretty negative experience, you never were going to go back?

HARRIS: Um-hm, I just wasn't going to go back. Except for the social part. I just remember shutting down and just doing what I needed to do. From the time I got that comment on that paper it was like, There's not going to be any help here, so I'm just going to do what I need to do to pass and get out of the program and then just go on. And that's kind of sad. I don't remember what kind of student I was, I don't remember interaction with peers in class, answering questions, doing projects. I don't remember any of that stuff. I remember studying with my peers. I remember us—we thought we were so serious: riding up and down in the elevator studying, you know, just commandeering the elevators and studying or commandeering bathtubs and just, you know, sitting in there studying. I just remember studying and preparing and making it through. But it—I hope I'm making sense, but I just don't remember that part.

ROSEBERRY: Well, it sounds like you felt like you couldn't trust, necessarily, the institution.

HARRIS: Um-hm. Oh, that's a good way to put it.

ROSEBERRY: But the people there—your peers, you could trust.

HARRIS: Yeah, because we were a close-knit group and it was a focus of nursing. I mean we were all in nursing, we all wanted to do well. But that's a good way to put it, the institution itself, because it was the academic part of it and all that that meant that I just kind of put over to the side and was just going to do my best through preparation with peers and studying and stuff, but that's as far as I let it come. I just didn't let it come any further, if that makes sense. But I like the way you put it, that's good.

ROSEBERRY: Well, I know that over on East Campus there was a lot of—there were protests going on. There were—there was takeover of the Allen Building during that time in the late 1960s, I guess. Were you aware of any of that? Was that any part of your experience or—?

HARRIS: By that point I hadn't been involved with what was going on in the day-to-day experience of the students on East Campus and because my experience with my peers was fine, you know, what I mean, I didn't get involved with why—the reasons behind why that was what they chose to do. The only time I remember getting in any kind of protests and being out on the quad with other students was—I don't know if it was when Robert Kennedy was shot, but there was something that—some traumatic event that happened with the civil rights movement or someone involved with the civil rights movement that we were all out there protesting. It may have been Martin Luther King's death in '68, that we were all out on the quad. But I think the Allen Building issue was after that, wasn't it, late sixties?

ROSEBERRY: I think it was sixty—yeah '69.

HARRIS: Yeah, I think it was after that. And so I don't know. I don't remember all that went into it. But I do remember being appalled about the tank. I don't know what happened with the tank, but there was a tank headed for Duke, a tank, a military tank—

ROSEBERRY: Army tank?

HARRIS: Yeah, headed for Duke that had something to do with that protest in the Allen Building. I don't remember what happened after that. But my husband even remembers the community outrage at a tank being headed to Duke for the ones that were in the building—overreaction, that kind of thing, but still racial overtones. But I wasn't as involved with that, and some of that I think was just the distance that was between me and them, especially after freshman year when I was pretty much on West Campus, period. So I don't know. I've listened to people that were involved talk since then, and it seemed that there was a greater connection to Duke the institution and wanting to make changes in the institution of Duke and not so much the day-to-day experience. There was this greater picture of what Duke could aspire to be if they were more inclusive kind of thing. And I've heard that from people who were a part of that after the fact. But back then, nope, I had no clue, you know, about that and if that's indeed what they were thinking. I remember the turmoil, I remember that it was—there were events or incidents on both sides—white students and black students—that were causing all the turmoil. I remembered even thinking that there should be some conversation talking, something. Because where I was, it wasn't so bad. So it's like, Okay, could that carry over to the other part of campus? But it didn't, so I wasn't really involved in that. To me, the takeover of the Allen Building was an overreaction, but again I don't know what all they went through. But for me, just looking at my experience, it was an overreaction, but for

them it may have been not enough, depending on what they were going through. So no, I wasn't involved, didn't get the details and just stayed over there on my side, that isolation stuff. (*laughs*)

ROSEBERRY: Well, there was an article that was written about you in the *Alumni Register* at that time.

HARRIS: I remember (*laughs*) some of that anyway. Yeah.

ROSEBERRY: And you said—that was kind of what you had said; you were interviewed. And you said you had started to become part of the Afro American Society but that because you were saying, Let's just talk, let's—that that didn't work as well for you to become a part of that group.

HARRIS: Yeah. I read that. I don't remember details of what that was about, but I do remember that I did feel like a middle-of-the-roader. I did feel like I was right there in the middle because my experiences from high school had been so bad but what I was going through with peers at the school of nursing was so much better, and it was genuine and real. But then there were other African-American students who seemed to be going through what I was going through back in high school. Because things were working out for me in terms of reaching out and reaching back, talking with folk, it was going well. And so that was what I brought to a meeting from what I remember and it just didn't go over that well because of the experiences they may have been having. And I don't know what I was thinking at that time. I don't know if it was like, I'm not going there because I just came out of that, which may have been a part of what I was thinking, but that would be in retrospect, and I'm not sure. But understanding some of what they were going through, wanting to deal with it a different way, I just may have not wanted to get

involved in all of that again having come out of that. Not to say that some of them didn't either, but it was like, I was looking for a break anyway. I hadn't wanted to go to another white institution. I wanted the black experience. And I might have responded differently if I had been on East Campus more, but I was physically isolated. Then it was like, Okay this is just where I am. I'm going back to Hanes House, (*laughs*) so I left that alone.

ROSEBERRY: And it sounds like you weren't about to reach out to the faculty members and—

HARRIS: Um-um—

ROSEBERRY: That was not—you were not going to do that.

HARRIS: It was not an option. In my mind, it just was not an option. Just wanted to do what I needed to do and not fail folk at home, just go ahead and finish. If things had not gone well with peers, I may not have stayed, you know. But because it did, I stayed. So it was like, Okay, I'm going to stay, I'm going to finish. My role will be done in terms of firsts, and I can go on with my life and that's it. So that's what I did. I don't know a lot about what all went into the Allen Building thing. Have not gone back even to see the positive changes that came out of it, I just haven't. But in talking with folk, like I said, that went through it, came out of it, there were some positive changes that happened.

And so it was good, just not for me at that time.

ROSEBERRY: Now, did you move to married housing your senior year or did you—?

HARRIS: No, because my husband was in Mississippi. I was at Hanes Annex with the rest of the seniors. And we saw each other, I'm sure, three or four times over the course of the year. But I just came back and just went through my senior year with him down there and then joined him when I finished. So I stayed with my group.

ROSEBERRY: Well, tell me about—I'm sorry, go ahead.

HARRIS: Oh no, go ahead.

ROSEBERRY: Tel me about your sorority.

HARRIS: I don't remember. (*laughs*) I don't remember anything. I don't even know who encouraged me to—I don't even remember who encouraged me to try out for it. It may have just been what was going on at the time. It may have been some of my peers trying out for sororities. I don't even know if there were some where I may have been told I couldn't try out for, and this may have been one of just a few that I may have been steered toward going for. I don't remember. I seem to remember having a big sister in the sorority at some point but I don't remember much about what happened. So I don't know if I was involved in a lot of their activities or projects after the fact or not, but I know that I didn't keep up with it after I graduated. It was just one of those firsts, but I didn't follow up with it, you know, in terms of staying with it. And that may have been as I just kind of finished Duke and just kind of weaned myself from all of it—you know what I mean—that I didn't really follow up. Because I don't have a lot of memories about it other than going out for it. And maybe it was because my roommate did and said, Come on, let's go out for this one. I don't know. But I was accepted. I do remember that. But I don't know about how—to what degree I was active with them after that. So next question. (*laughs*) No, I just don't remember. (*laughs*) I don't remember it, no. But did that answer your question? Okay.

ROSEBERRY: Well, I know that you said you had felt community support when you were in high school.

HARRIS: Um-hm—

ROSEBERRY: Did you feel that again when you were in college?

HARRIS: Not that I remember. The only thing I remember is my parents taking me to school and them leaving, which any freshman would go through in terms of being homesick. But again, I don't remember there being a venue where we were kind of brought in and, What's happening? and, How can we help? There may have been, but I just don't remember that part of it. I remember just feeling pretty much that it was me and my family, just us and me going through college like anybody else. But I'm sure they were watching, they had to have been. And behind the scenes, just like with high school, the support that was there, the prayers that were there, they had to have been behind the scenes, but I don't remember any ways in which it was expressed. But I'm just choosing to believe that that had to have been there because again, I was the only one there and who knows what may have happened. So I believe the support was there, I just don't remember it being an open type support.

ROSEBERRY: Did you have a lot of contact with your parents?

HARRIS: I did. From what I remember I did. And I think it was just a typical kid-away-from-school, coming to visit, going home, that kind of thing, probably no more than usual. But I don't remember feeling distant from family at all during that time. I had to take the bus home a lot. I think it took almost eight hours to get home, something like that. I don't remember being distant from them, so that kind of support was probably—you almost kind of take them for granted or you know they're there but there's not a lot of emphasis? You know, it's not highlighted, it's just a part of your everyday life. And that's how I'm thinking that it was, because I don't remember the flip

side of that, which would have been, Can't call anybody, nobody calls me, nobody writes me. I don't remember that at all. I remember getting letters and stuff, yeah.

ROSEBERRY: Were there any places that you weren't allowed to go or sit or—?

HARRIS: At Duke?

ROSEBERRY: Or just kind of in the community or at Duke, either one.

HARRIS: Not that I can remember. I don't think so.

ROSEBERRY: Okay.

HARRIS: I don't think so. Not until I graduated and got my first job do I remember being told that there were certain patients I could not work with. I don't remember that at Duke. It may have happened in terms of going through the head nurse or something that there were certain patients I couldn't have, which I wouldn't have known anything about in terms of assignment. And it very well could have been but I don't remember it being overtly said to me, but I do remember it being said after I left Duke.

ROSEBERRY: At other places?

HARRIS: Um-hm, the first hospital that I worked with in Mississippi. After I left Mississippi I worked in Elizabeth City for a while at a hospital but I don't remember it being said there. But at this one in Biloxi, it was definitely said.

ROSEBERRY: You needed to get out of the South. (*laughter*)

HARRIS: You said it! Talk about going from North Carolina to Biloxi, Mississippi, how much further south can you get? But yeah, that's where I went because he—my husband was in the service there—I don't remember how many hospitals I applied to, but that's the one where I got the job after I graduated. And I know it was the name Duke that opened that door. I know that's what it was, you know, that got me the job. So it's

not like I don't appreciate what that educational experience did in terms of opening doors for me. You know, you apply for a job, and it's seen that you are a Duke graduate, so you know. I know that it was a big part of it. But in the end, after getting my foot in the door it was still me having to prove myself and that my race could do it because there were no other black RNs there, just me.

ROSEBERRY: Just you. (*laughs*)

HARRIS: I wasn't the only black there, just the only black RN. So there were patients that I was told I could not have, because they did not want a black nurse.

ROSEBERRY: So there—at Duke, the clinical experience seemed to be fairly routine as far as you knew?

HARRIS: Yeah, as far as I could remember it was. I don't remember any negative stuff about patients. It may have been the care of folk who wanted to be sure that I got the patient experience that I did need to get but not any overt prejudiceness toward me. That could have been happening. I won't say it wasn't, but I wasn't aware if it. When I talk to people, I try to put out there that there may have been behind-the-scene things working. Even at the high school, there may have been faculty members looking out for us behind the scenes. You know what I mean? And at Duke there may have been. I don't know. But I don't want to give the total impression that it was all bad, because there may have been things going on behind the scenes, but I just wasn't aware of them. I do want to give way to that, because it could have been happening. But, in the day-to-day get up, go to class, do-what-you-had-to-do-kind of thing, it wasn't seen.

ROSEBERRY: And the hospital had integrated the wards in, I guess, early sixties, so there was—.

HARRIS: Um-hm. Yeah, I like to listen to the experiences of the LPNs even during that time because they were the floor workers, boy, I tell you.

ROSEBERRY: Were they helpful to you?

HARRIS: Yeah. See, I remember a couple. And even with this one that I met in the beauty shop just a few months ago, there was the sense of being looked out for on the ward with the nurses, because we did have to have what do they call them, preceptors, or someone that was responsible for us as well. So it was on that level. But there wasn't that sense at the school level, you know. The nurses talked about watching out for us when we were working on the unit, even if we weren't working as a part of the nursing program, just on our own once we were able to. So they were there. It was like they were little angels were back then. So I always want to give way to some of that.

ROSEBERRY: Do you feel like the education at Duke prepared you for what you went on to do?

HARRIS: Pretty much. I didn't feel as skilled as I thought I should have been in terms of certain procedures and the like. It seems to me that a lot of the skill I got was when I was working on my own on the weekends as opposed to working in the program, per se, even though you know we got some. Because when I went to the hospital in Biloxi I remember taking my textbook with me and having to go (*laughs*)—in the med room and read up on something, Okay, this is how you do it, step one, two, three. Then I'd go to work and act confidently, get the job done, thanking God. Not that I would have put anybody at risk, but it was like, Okay let's do this. I've had many varied experiences that I know were because of the Duke name because I only had my BSN. Now there are subjects that are included in BSN programs that prepare you to get a masters shortly after

you get your BSN and now you can do a combination of degrees. Yet over all of these years I've still been able to do much with just a BSN. That's amazing to me, and I do attribute that to the Duke name, being able to get that variety and then getting in there and then doing the job, doing the job well.

ROSEBERRY: Well, tell me about some of the things that you've done.

HARRIS: Well, I didn't last long as a hospital nurse. I thought that's what I wanted to do. My hospital experiences weren't bad, just not fulfilling for me. It was like, I cannot do this the rest of my life. I went back and forth, back and forth because I thought that's what nurses were supposed to be doing, working in the hospital. But I really didn't do well as a hospital nurse. It didn't afford me the time to spend with the patients doing what I wanted to do—patient care, talking with patients and families. It was more task oriented than it seemed people oriented, and I didn't do well with that at all. It was only after I had my first child and knew that I didn't want to be in the hospital working all these different shifts and all these weekends with no holidays off that I began looking for another area of nursing to work in, and that's when I got into public health. I got into public health because of family. It wasn't an aspiration to do something magnificent for the public, it was—this is eight-thirty to five Monday through Friday, no weekends, holidays off. That's why I went, because again I wanted the family—my family to take precedence over my job but have a job to help support my family. But after I got into it, I tell people it was like I was watered. It was like, Ah, this is where (*laughs*) I need to be. So, I stayed in public health for years, doing public health nursing. So I was visiting people in their homes, doing procedures, but it was more people oriented than it was the task oriented. So that was me. That's where I wanted to be anyway. I did that for a

while on a public level and a private level. Then I went into office nursing, because at some point I was looking for part-time work after having three kids. So it was again based on family, and I was looking for part-time work, so I was an office nurse for a while.

ROSEBERRY: What is that?

HARRIS: I worked in an HMO. I just worked as an office nurse. So I worked with a group of physicians, doing specific nursing procedures before patients saw the doctor, or just coordinating patient care. I worked in a nursing home, a rehab nursing home for a while, and then got a position at North Carolina Central as a clinical instructor, part-time clinical instructor. So I was one of those that took a group of students to a clinical area and supervised the nursing care that they gave as well as working in the laboratory where with mannequins they could prepare for working on the unit, that type of thing,. I went from there to doing school nursing, working with high schools primarily. And that was great. It was people oriented. I developed different programs to meet the needs of high school kids. Did that for a while and then went to nursing research. And, I've been in nursing research since then. So it's a pretty good variety, with the one degree, that still is people oriented. I think that I fight even now being task oriented, because I was so task oriented in high school. I was focused on the task of studying and taking tests. It was task oriented. When I went to Duke, it was *almost* the reverse because of my peers. And I think I fight task oriented versus people oriented even now. But I prefer the people oriented, I can easily slip back into task oriented where I just cut you off and just do the things that need to be done, I try to balance that. I've been able to accomplish a lot of firsts—it's just been good to be able to have that kind of experience. Getting back to my

work experience, I like the independence of the public health arena of having the control of, say, my own area of working the program in my own way. Even in working with the high school there was such latitude in what I could do. We had a team of nurses, but some of the ideas I had were like having a health fair for high school kids or having some type of fair for seniors where a lot of community people could come in and talk with them about job opportunities, having blood drives and establishing care plans on health conditions they may have. It's just a lot you can do within the parameters. I liked that. Some of that may have come from my experiences of just being in a situation and having to work on my own. I think that may have been a part of it. So—does that make sense, kind of? Yeah. So that's what I prefer doing. So even with what I'm doing now it's that same type of thing. And I hope to retire soon. (*laughs*)

ROSEBERRY: Was there any recognition then or later kind of—or celebration or just any kind of recognition of your having made it through those first experiences, any of them?

HARRIS: Recognition like—? I'm not sure—.

ROSEBERRY: Well, I guess I think of a couple things, for the community who asked you to do these things or from maybe Duke who asked you to come, or from the community who said, This is a first.

HARRIS: Not that I can remember; I really don't.

ROSEBERRY: Okay.

HARRIS: And I'm sure that I would have, but I don't remember anything from the community, from high school, and I don't remember anything from Duke at graduation, you know. I don't think so.

ROSEBERRY: Is this something that people tend to acknowledge? Do people ask you these—about these stories a lot or—?

HARRIS: Uhn-uh. No. When you asked me about the tea, I really—you were one of the first to ask me to focus on the experience at Duke or the experience leading up to Duke in I don't know when. And I really hesitated to do that because I hadn't focused on it in so long. There was only one other experience I can think of where a friend of my niece was writing a paper on that time period and wanted to interview someone who had integrated a school or integrated a company or something like that, and she came to ask me questions. And I think that was the first time where I realized there was so much I didn't remember. And it bothered me for a while, but I just went on with it. And then you asked me to focus on it and I thought, Oh it may not be good. I thought, I seem to be "normal" and if I go back and think about all this stuff, I may fall all to pieces. So I really hesitated to go back and think about it. I've just kind of done what I needed to do in life, you know, and just gone with it. And if someone says, I found out you were the first to do so-and-so, I just say yeah.

ROSEBERRY: It's quite an accomplishment, I think.

HARRIS: Yeah. Well, you know when you asked me about the tea is when I really realized it really is an accomplishment. It was an important thing to have been accomplished, whether by me or anybody, but it was by me. And I never just really stopped to think about it because it was just expected that we would do it and we wanted to do well. But having the experience of the Tea with Trailblazers made me realize that it really was a significant accomplishment, and it did open the doors for a lot of others who have accomplished a lot of things. And it's something to be proud of. I just kind of

accepted it because we did it. But it really is something to be proud of. And after I kind of got past what the memories would do, decided to do the tea because it really was an accomplishment, so I did it. Which is why I'm sitting here now, because it is—it is a—it's a privilege and it is an accomplishment. And really and truly to have this—my experience archived is as important as the other experiences and all of that coming together is what gives a better picture of what was going on. And so that was one of the main reasons I did it. My experience was different from East Campus or guys on West Campus, but by pulling it all together, you get a better feel for what that time period was like. So, here I am.

ROSEBERRY: Thank you.

HARRIS: You're welcome. (*laugh*) I appreciate it; thank you.

ROSEBERRY: Was there anything that I didn't ask you that I should have asked you, or anything that you want to say in closing?

HARRIS: Well, not really, Jessica. I really think that you touched on those major areas, and I really didn't come with anything that would be like a closing, just wanted to respond to your questions, so I can't think of anything right off the bat. Like I said, looking back on it because of the tea bringing it to the forefront of my mind, it was an accomplishment and it was an accomplishment that resulted in a lot of folk coming through and doing a lot of other things. There is also a sense honoring all those that were behind us and lifting us up and giving us the encouragement that we could do it. It's just as important to bring them into it as it is to look at what has happened since then. Hopefully that's some of what I've been able to do is go back and remember the ones on whose shoulders we rose and then kind of look and see where the others are going and

knowing that we were a part of the shoulders that people stood on . I'm in that group where people stood on my shoulders and went further, and that's really a privilege. And I can appreciate that. I might smile a little bit more when people say, Yeah, I heard you were the first. I might go, Yeah! But yeah, so I appreciate this I really do, because I'm not sure I would have done it otherwise. It would have just been a part of my everyday life. So thank you.

ROSEBERRY: You're welcome. Let me just scan my questions and make sure I've got everything that I thought of beforehand but—.

HARRIS: Okay.

ROSEBERRY: Thank you so much.

HARRIS: You're welcome.

ROSEBERRY: I really appreciate it.

HARRIS: Thank you.

(end of interview)