

Oral History Interview / November 9, 2022 / Miss Betty Davis, Queens University

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Nolan Dahm: Alright, so I'm here with Miss Betty Davis at Queens University. We are sitting inside of Dr. Hadley's reading room in the Everett Library. Before we start, would you mind just saying your name, your position, anything about yourself that you want people to know.

Betty Davis: My name is Miss Betty Davis. I work at Queens University. I'm a cashier in the dining service. I've been here for 60 years. Love my job. Love the people that work with.

ND: Awesome. And so should I call you Miss Betty? Should I call you Betty? What should I call you?

BD: You can call me anything you want. It's up to you, but really my official name is Dr. Betty, because I did get a doctor's degree from here.

Right. You got the honorary doctorate, right?

Yeah.

When was that? Or like how long ago-ish?

Might have been five years or something like that.

Okay. So you got the doctorate. I hope I can do one someday, too. We'll see how it goes... So, if you don't mind, I think a lot of the interviews you've done in the past, people talked about your work here, right? So how do you feel if we start back all the way before you worked here?

All right.

Yeah. So basically, my first question is just, what are some memories that you have before your time at Queens? What was Charlotte like in the 50s and 60s? What was your life like, before you stumbled upon this job?

Okay. Well my life was like a homegirl. You didn't go out.

What do you mean by that?

I mean I didn't like go out. I just like to stay at home read books and stuff like that.

Is that what you still do today?

I still do books but I do crossword puzzle books. And I'm into a book called "Jesus is Calling." And I like that, but my crossword puzzle book, I can do them all day long.

And I saw it in other interview too that you've never drank? Never smoked?

No. Never drank. Never smoked. Never been sick.

Wow. And so, what do you attribute that too? Have you just always known that wasn't for you or...?

Right. I've just known that wasn't for me. I just felt like it was something and I'm still searching with it. It was a calling card that God had for me, but I didn't know how to proceed or what it really meant. And I'm

still searching. I say when God gave me that calling card, then I'll know what to do: set down or keep going.

Okay so what are you searching for?

I'm not sure!

I get what you're saying.

I'm not sure. Because I dream a lot about a calling card and I don't know what really that means. Cuz I wake up in the night and it seems like there's something saying, "Oh, I have a purpose for you. You have this calling card." But then it don't be nobody's there but me, cuz I live alone. But here lately, I don't get scared anymore. I used to get scared because I thought somebody was in the house with me. But I don't get scared anymore. I'm just waiting to see what that calling card is.

Great. So, you've worked here for 60 years and you think that that calling card is something outside of work, it's outside of your home?

It's... I just don't know what it is. I just want to make sure that I know what it is, and I'm doing the right thing with it, and I get it.

I get what you're saying, yeah. So you talked about in some other interviews that I read... you were about 17 years old when you took your first job here, right? And that was during your junior year of high school?

Yes.

So how was high school for you? What was that experience like?

It was nice. I loved it. I started and little school, Fairview school. From there, I went to Northwest Junior High. And from there, I went to West Charlotte Senior High.

And you liked school?

Yeah.

So was it a tough decision for you to have to leave?

No... Well I did... I met a friend that was working here. So, she invited me to come and have lunch. And I guess the lady just kept seeing me out here, and so she asked me, "How about doing a job?" But I told her I was too small. Because you had to reach in the garbage can to pull the trash out. I was scared I was going to fall in because I was really small, cuz I'm still small. And so I told 'em: "Nah, y'all have to get me out of the garbage can." So I met this president was here named Dr. Billy Weinman. So he told me don't never say no. Just say you'll try. So I say, I'll try. So I did try and I've been here ever since.

So how do you think your life might have been different if you would have spent like one more year in high school?

I'm not sure. I'm not sure.

Okay. I just asked because you said so much about how education is something that is so important--

Yeah, it's important to me. Education is really important to me.

So, is that something that...where does that come from? Why do you feel that way?

I don't know, but I just feel like education take you a long way in life. If you just sit back and do nothing, that make you think you're lazy.

Sure. I get what you're saying. Definitely.

Education is really important to me.

And you felt that your whole life.

I felt that my whole life education is important.

So, you just said that your first job here was almost a coincidence?

Yeah it was almost a coincidence because I only come to eat the food.

Okay, so that's what you knew about Queens was pretty good food, pretty good people?

Pretty good food, pretty good people. And I just came here... I came here about twice a week. First started twice a week. Then it was three times a week. And then just kept on, kept on, kept on, kept on. And so, I just stayed, the lady just kept on and I just came up.

Awesome. So, did you have any other jobs before this?

Never worked in my life. This is my first job.

Amazing. And so, what was that first position?

My first position, I worked out of the health center. I used to take care of the sick girls. I would come in in the morning, and let the night nurse out, and I would be there like 'til the next nurse come. Kept on kept on, kept on, and I did that. And then I used to work as the den mother. Like if you wanted to be off that weekend, they would trust me to stay in the dorm with the kids. Cuz they know they wouldn't mind me. And I didn't have no problem, so it kept on then. I say, "well, I'm gonna go to the dining room." So, I went to dining room and I've been there ever since.

Okay. So why do you think that you were so good at that job? People have said in the past, you've said in the past "students respected, you, you respected them." What made you a unique person?

I don't know. You know, I always... I'm trying to figure. I always thought of myself as the little old lady with so many kids and didn't know what to do, because I never had no kids. But I'm obsessed with baby dolls.

So, even when you were young, you thought of yourself as a little old lady?

Didn't have no kids, but I was obsessed with other people's kids. I just want a lot of kids but none of my own. I just want other people's kids that I could coach 'em, tell 'em what to do, them send 'em home.

And so how did they receive that? Did all of the students respect that? Did some students not like it so much?

I have no... Nope. I've been here 60 years. I had no problem with my students. None whatsoever.

Never? Wow. That's amazing.

I just call 'em aside, tell them what I got to tell them, and then I say, "Okay. Think about it. Come back and tell me how you feel about it." They never come back and say no I don't like it.

One of those students in another interview was Debbie Butler. Do you remember her?

Oh yes.

What's what do you remember about her before I even ask anything?

Oh my gosh she was one of my bright students, Debbie Butler. And also, I had another pick. I had the mayor too!

Mayor Lyles?

Yeah, she was my first black student. She didn't want to stay here. And I told her: "No. Your mother sent you here." I said, "I give you two weeks to decide whether you're going to stay or you're not." I said, "I'm not gonna bother you no more. I'm gonna just say, 'good morning.' 'How was your night?'" And all of the sudden, she just said, "Okay, Miss Betty, I'm gonna stay."

So obviously being the first black student would be a pretty difficult thing.

It was difficult, but she made it.

And so, can you talk a little bit about that? What was the culture at Queen's like at that point and why might have mayor Lyles have felt a little bit uncomfortable here?

Because she didn't see any blacks. Cuz when I first come here, it wasn't any blacks. It was an all girls school. Presbyterian school. No.

And so that culture... Mayor Lyles - or she wasn't mayor at the time - felt like she didn't fit in?

She felt like she didn't fit in. But you chose that. You didn't give it time. You just came and you looked and you said, "Oh, Miss Betty. I don't want to be here." [I said] "Oh yes, you do."

And so was that something that was difficult for you as well? Coming to an all-white school?

No. Nah. Cuz I don't see no color. Honestly, if you're nice to me, I'm gonna be nice to you.

Makes sense to me.

And I'll tell 'em in a minute: "I'll whoop you too." She can tell you some episodes [referencing Karla Barksdale-Weaver, also in the room]. She runs from me. That lady right there. She runs. Cuz I get her too. But she loves me.

I know. Going back to Debbie, she said at one point that you had this amazing sense of humor. She said you hadn't changed one bit in that interview.

Well, I try to not change because I'm getting older now.

So do you think you haven't changed at all?

I think I ain't changed because I still like to dance. I still love to mess with people. Look at her over there shaking [referencing Karla Barksdale-Weaver]. I mess with her constantly!

What does that mean? How do you mess with people? You don't have to say it if you don't want to.

[Betty shakes her head no]. Mmm-mm.

No? I get that. So you say you haven't changed? What do you like to dance to? What type of dancing?

I do it on Friday.

Friday's your dancing day?

Yeah. Friday is my dancing day, 'cause Friday is what I call a slow day. Friday is my slow day. They don't get too much work out of me on Friday.

Same here... So you say you've mostly been the same. How do you think you've changed? It's been 60 years, right?

I don't think I've really changed.

No? All right, all right. So, we've talked about this already, you call the students at Queens your children and have you always called them your children?

[Betty nods]

That was from the moment you got here, right? And so, how do you think that makes you better at your job?

Well, if they didn't listen, that would make me get confused. But, I mean, here so far so good. Because I always... when their parents come I tell them: "After you leave them here they are mines." And if I don't see them like two or three days, I go find see what's going on. You sick or what? Why you ain't coming to the dining room? They might say something real funny and I say, "Huh?" or something like that. I say, "Okay, it'll come up" then they'll start coming back. But so far, no problem. You know.

But through all these years I'm sure your staff has come and go. You've been one of the consistent folks here. What have you noticed about other staff. Do you see that other staff feel that same way about the students here? Do you think you're unique?

Yeah. My staff is great. No, I don't have no problem. Okay.

And so, just an estimate - I have no idea if you'll know this - how many different people do you think you worked with directly over the years?

Could you help me? [referencing Karla Barksdale-Weaver] Because I really don't know. She said hundreds. Yeah.

So with all of those students, you said you haven't changed very much, but Queens probably has changed a lot...

Yeah, they have changed, but not really. Not really bad that you can, you know, pinpoint.

But what are some of those major milestones that you remember? What are some of those big moments where things here changed, if it's a new building, a new leadership, new programs, anything like that?

Well they have new programs, but we don't... We don't have beanies. You know, we used to have little beanie hats and stuff like that. Little beanie hats.

Like for you or for the students?

For the students. They had little beanie hats that they would put on the heads and stuff like that. And it used to be that you could not go in the dormitory. You had to really like, go through somebody to get in the dormitory. Now you just... And then what I liked was when I got my own boys.

How did that change the culture here?

It changed it better because every morning, praise to God, when I come in I was always having to run Davidson College boys out of my dorm. So, I went to the president and I asked him to think about letting me have my own boys.

And what do you mean by having your own boys?

I wanted it to not be an all-girls school. I wanted boys to come here too. See if I had boys, then I wouldn't have to run other people's boys out of here. And so he said, "let me think about it." So he thought about it and he went to the board of trustees. So they said yes. So I got my boys and I was so happy. Oh, I was so happy because I could do what I wanted with them. They was in an all-boy dormitory. And they're shoes stayed in the lobby longer than I want them to stay. I had a trash can; put them in the trash can [and] had them. You had to ask for them. Then I find out them was your shoes. So, I have a good, fine memory of this school. I really do.

So, one of the more recent changes they made is the new dining hall. Can you say a little bit about that?

It's super. But the dining room, let me tell you, the dining room is precious to me.

And why?

It's the atmosphere. The atmosphere. I mean, I can go there. I can say stuff. They won't get mad. They get mad, they walk off. You might not see 'em til about 10 or 15 minutes, but they okay. They fine. But the dining room is pleasant.

Like a good gathering space?

Yeah, really good gathering space. And then they'll come to me and they'll say, Ms. Betty I want such and such thing. Like we finna have this big Thanksgiving dinner. They say they want that so I pass it on to her [referencing Karla Barksdale-Weaver]. And then she'll pass it to them. And then we'll see whether or not we can do it. But we always doing something exciting in the dining room.

So what are some of the things that students come to you with? You're talking about food options and things like that...

Oh they might say, "does this got allergies?" We got somebody that you can talk to about allergy. Or, "what's in this chicken for today?," then you got somebody you can have them to go to and they'll tell you what's in that chicken for today. So it's really cool. It's not nothing that you don't ask that you don't get out the dining room. Might take you a little bit, but you'll get it.

Good. And so, going back to the boys coming on campus, that was a good moment for you it sounds like. How do you think it affected learning and education? Do you, did you see changes?

I didn't see any changes because the young ladies here, some of them know how to use their life and they know what the purpose is for when they mother send them here. This is education. And they know I really

believe in education. I believe in getting your education. Because if I hear telling them not doing what they supposed to do, I get on 'em and I say, "okay, what would your mother say if she was here? And they all say, "all right, Ms. Betty, you right." So I'm a firm believer in education.

Let's talk a little bit more about that. Your niece's son, Maurice, you've talked about him before. He became the first black student to be student body president. What was that moment like for you? What do you remember about that?

Well you know what? I was told when he came to school here - because he went - I kind of like pushed him. Not really pushed him. I wanted him to get that education. Because he went to Davidson, like a program with Miss Bernadette Taffey (sp?) called Love of Learning. And he went out through all the program. So, when he came here, I said, "Okay. You're not my son. You my friend. You got to get a job. I only give you \$10 a week. That's for washing clothes. You wash your own clothes." So, what I would do: I'd get \$10 worth of quarters, put them in the post office, - cuz they had post office boxes - put them in his mailbox. That was it. Nobody really didn't know he was my son until he got ready to graduate.

Wow. So Maurice is your son, but you're treated him like a friend and all the other students you're saying you treat them like family.

Yeah, he had he had to learn his way too. He didn't get no free privilege. Mmm-mm. And when I first... I really panicked one time. Really bad. They had what you call a "sit down" here where all the kids wore black. First thing I see, I look out the dining room, there he sat out there. I said, "Oh, my God, am I gonna make him move? Or what am I gonna do?" So, I goes to the president's office. And I say, "Look out the window" cuz there was a window that could look out from the top of Burwell Hall down there. I said, "look out there!" I said, "that's my son out there." He said, "well I'll tell you what you need to do. You need to go back and down and work." I still was scared. I said "Lord, should I make him move?" And he, doing something, said, "But do what they to do. Leave 'em alone." So I left 'em alone. They just sit around the pond. Then when they get through sitting around the pond, they went off and went on about their business.

So what was the sit down?

I don't know what they were doing, but they was all sitting around that pond out there. And I remember my first. My first dip in that pawn was with... what was the dean's name? We was trying to raise money and he said, "Miss Betty, would you get in the pond with me?" I'd do anything. What was his name? He was upstairs. You remember [referencing Karla Barksdale-Weaver]? I jumped right in that pond.

And it worked out? Did you raise the money?

It worked out! We raised the money.

Well, there you go. Good stuff.

What's his name, Miss Karla? You know I'm talking about. Dean Downey! Yes. But anything they would ask me to do, if I could do it I would help them. It wasn't no problem. But I remember my first experience. We were trying to learn how to do the switchboard. It was so... it wasn't bad and it wasn't confusing. [pauses] It was confusing to me. Had to pull out, put in. You ever heard of them kind of cords?

Mm-hmm. That's before my time...

But this child would learn me how to do the switchboard. I came in that morning, she said, "Miss Betty, I was told to learn you how to do switchboard." I said, "okay." She say "pull out and put in." And guess

who the first person I shot up they line? Dr. Weinmann. Shot up the whole switch. Went "ploop!" I pull out, put in and I didn't know where I was pulling in but I shot up the whole switch board! Then he would say, "I'm on the line. What happened? What happened?" I done shot up the switch board. And it was about three days 'fore I decided to get back on it. But I did get back on And I did learn how to do it though. Yeah. But I had good students. They would teach me stuff. Which they really... I should have did it, but I didn't really. I thought I was too old. They had wanted me to go back to school. But I thought I was too old and I said, "Okay, I'm gonna learn on my own." So what I learned, I learned it on my own and I would ask her stuff. She would tell me, too [referencing Karla Barksdale-Weaver]. That's my inspiration.

That's amazing. So let's keep talking about that. You've taught people here so much. What have you learned from your students? From your colleagues over all your time here?

I would learn how to be patient.

Okay, so you don't think you were patient when you started the job?

Mmm-mm. Because I didn't care what you did.

So what does patience look like?

Well, right now I'm patient. Like, if I would talk to you and me and you be talking, and we wasn't doing eye-to-eye contact, I say, "oh she's not paying me no attention." And then I wait to the next day. And I might go back and talk to her again and then I would see she would be a little better and then I keep talking and she get a little better, a little better, a little better. Then I say, "okay, I got that one."

Okay. Good. And so, just going back to all of these family members, friends who have come through this university. You've talked about mayor Lyles, you've talked about Maurice, talked about Debbie. Are there any other people from your time here that really stand out to you?

Okay. Adelaide(?) Davis. She was here, she came to see me the other day because they decided that they would give me a bench. My own personal bench. So she came back and took pictures with me. The new president. Me and him. He put me in the mind of my old president that I had. And...It's...you know...it's just a lot of different stuff that's...I mean it's a lot of different people that did it. Because the students raised money and they made me a place called my own market.

Miss Betty's Market that's in the new dining hall, right?

Yes, right. Yes.

So, so we're getting messages back here [referencing Karla Barksdale-Weaver]. Darryl White?

Yeah. Darryl White was my first black student. Black boy, male student. And he's still here.

Wow. Was he after Vi Lyles?

[Nods] She was my first black lady. Darryl was my first black guy.

And what do you remember about him when he got here? How is he now?

Oh I would whoop him into shape. Every day he wanted cookies. He like cookies. He likes sweets. He's tall. He's real tall. And he just likes for me to stand up under him. He still do it, he haven't changed. He haven't changed and I hope he never change. He's still my Darryl.

That's great. And so, besides the students, today who else do you consider your family?

The whole... I don't... I don't do one. The school is my whole family. It's my family away from home. When I'm away from home, this is my home right here.

So what about when you are at home?

I just read me and my books.

You and your books. That's kind of how I am too.

Me and my books. And this is my life here. Charlotte, I was born and raised here.

And how has that home changed? What do you think about Charlotte today?

It's growing and it's growing more where I live at. Because everything is like changing. Because like now, I live where it wasn't... It's now a historic district. You got to ask if you can put a window pane in. You got to ask if you can do this, you got to ask if you can do that. But I tell them: "That's my street. From South Mint to South Tryon, that's my street."

Mm-hmm. So how do you feel about that? That your street is now considered historic and protected?

I just like it. Like I got up this morning and there was a sign out here and a thing on my porch. It was a sign out there said, "Marathon run Saturday." So, I had a marathon that come down my road. So I make sure that it's no cars on the street, they put them in their driveway. So that's why they call it my street.

And I'm gonna really sounds like it is your street, then, yeah?

But it's getting pretty big 'cause they call it South End now.

Oh yeah, I go there a lot. It's definitely changing.

Yeah it's changing because I've been there since 1963.

In the same house?

Same house. I have a house.

That's amazing.

She [referencing Karla Barksdale-Weaver] used to come and we'd go to the Chicken Coop. I hated when they closed it. That was my favorite place, the Chicken Coop.

What was the chicken coop?

The chicken coop was where you buy chicken. It was on... what was that street? Camden Street. Everybody went there.

Like it was a restaurant? Or you would buy chicken to cook at home?

No, they would cook it for us, yeah. Nice, nice, nice. So, I'm just sitting waiting to see what they're gonna put there.

Did that close pretty recently?

Yes.

Okay. Dang, I think I heard about that.

Yeah, that's where I live at. I live how far away from Bank of America Stadium? 'Bout 10 minutes.

Yeah that definitely is an area that's changing.

Oh you better believe it's changing.

So, how do you feel about all the new people and all the new stuff happening in that area?

It don't even bother me. Cuz like I said, when they have games around there they are coming and saying, "Miss Betty, we're gonna park our car in front your house and we gonna catch an Uber." Who cares? Park it! They are parking and they'll catch an Uber over because if you park around there, some places cost you 60 dollars. Some to cost you 50, some cost you 40. If you park around there, you might just ride an Uber for \$10. They know ain't nobody gonna bother their cars. Not round there. And I sit on my porch on Saturdays and Sunday, when it's pretty, and I look at the people riding the scooters up and down the road. We have those scooters. That's what I do on the weekend.

You don't ride them?

I'm not tall enough. Just I was gonna try. But I was scared that if I would hit a bump, I would go over the top of it. So I say: "leave that number that's not for you."

I understand that. So, just to wrap up here, I got a few last questions. A little more lighthearted, I guess. In one of these interviews, your coworker Sophia Blackman...She called you the "Queen of Queens University." How do you respond to that?

Tell her she crazy.

She's crazy? You're not the queen?

Yes I am, but I tell you she's crazy. Because she want to be like me. But it's too... Uh-uh. I tell her, "No, you can't be me. I've warned her too. When she come, and she'll say... might be a young guy from playing basketball might be there talking to me. And then she'll look at me and she'll say, "What is he doing talking to you?" i say, "move away, move away." So she... and both of us is short but she's a little bit stockier than I am. Because I had to lose a little weight because my height. And my legs was kind of like... So I said, okay. No way. So I just started being careful. Yes. But Sophie is craaaazy. But she's still my friend, but you crazy.

So you are the queen, [but] only, you can say it?

Mmm-hm.

Makes sense to me. So we talked about this a little bit before, but Miss Betty's marketplace... Can you say a little bit more about what that means to you and just about that dining hall?

Well the kids came to me one day and they say, "Miss Betty, what can we do for you?" And I say, "just be good!" I didn't know what they was... you know, what they thought. I said, "y'all just be good. That's all. I just want y'all to just be good." And they said, "Nah, we want to do something else." And I said, "what?" And so then it was another director there. His name was Shawn. And Shawn said, "Miss Betty. They want to do a market." And I say to myself... I went home that night and I said, "Lord can these kids raise enough money to do me a market? And then the Lord said, "let them do what they want to do." And so, then I say "all right. Y'all do what y'all want to do." And then the next day, the lady came to me. She said, "man, you getting money money money." I think, "What kind of money? I wasn't seeing none!" She said, "you're getting money money money." Then the next three or four days, she come say, "oh, you got

enough money to do your market." Oh, I was so excited. Which I'm really like a kid. When I get something, [or] somebody give me something, I talk about it for days and days. Cuz it really excites me. It was exciting for me to get the market. And it was really exciting to me... She [referencing Karla Barksdale-Weaver] tricked me, though. She told me one day, she said, "Come dressed." She say, "come dressed tomorrow." So, I did. And I thought it was just gonna be something like in the dining room between my co-workers. It was something between my co-workers. She gave me a big old party. And then she say, "You got to go with me." [I said] "But with you? Where am I going with you to?" She pinned a big corsage on me. Me and her and Greg, we left. We goes... "What am I going over here for?" She surprised me again and they gave me that big day in the fine arts center. They classed a day of my day. Oh my god. I went home and cried like a baby. I couldn't believe it. And for her to surprise me? I mean, she's always doing something but I usually can get it out of her. But here lately, she's so secret. If I ask her anything she'll say, "I don't know, you just be ready."

That's awesome. So you got Miss Betty's marketplace. You got Miss Betty's day now..

And I have Miss Betty's bench. They gave me a bench called my bench.

And where is that bench?

Right in front of the dining room.

Okay. And so you've got these actual things that are for you. So what do you think you're gonna leave behind in terms of...your personality? Like what do you think your legacy is here? You got 60 years.

Oh, I hope the next person comes, they can be just like me. They can be just like me.

And what does that mean?

Good, nice. And when you walk in the dining room just smile, say "good morning," "may I help you?" If you can help, get up and help. Don't look like you don't want to help. That's not a good thing. That throws you off if you don't want to come there. And I have the senior scholars on Friday. They come and eat lunch too on Friday. They real good.

And so, I gotta say, there's been a lot of smiles today. I've appreciated it.

Thank you!

Yeah, definitely. So just to conclude is there anything else you want to mention today? Anything that we haven't talked about that you...?

I just hope and pray that I can just live on.

I think we all do. All right, Miss Betty, thanks so much for your time.

[Nolan and Betty hug]