

Anita Davis Interview Summary
June 28, 2018
First Person Plural

Intro – Jo Blatti interviewing Anita Davis for the First Person Plural project, June 28, 2018 Esse Purse Museum in Little Rock

JB Beginning – where born

AD Murfreesboro, Arkansas - lived there until 1963, graduated high school
Parents - dad Clarence Anthony
Timberland Company, El Dorado area
Grandfather J. W. [John William] Anthony
Moved family to Murfreesboro to start a sawmill, my father managed it
Very deliberate, Aries, dynamic, community & family driven
Did not clear cut, selective about cutting [timber]
Mother [Bennie Sue Anthony] interested in things looking beautiful, she wanted things cleaned out

JB Early environmentalist?

AD Wouldn't go that far –

5 min in

[Both laugh]

AD Beautiful town, site of diamond mine
Tourist destination
Mother would go and sit with people at the site

JB Grandparents same community?

AD Only one set
Saw a lot of them, Assembly of God Church
Very churched
My parents Baptists, even as a child, prayer meetings, Sunday commitments, camps

JB Other commitments, Girl Scouts?

AD My family large – lot of cousins – always though favorite of grandfather. Turned out we all thought that

10 min in

Grandmother hosted Sunday brunch for all the families. I was an only child.
My parents 16 & 18 when married. They wanted children, expected boy, “David.”

JB What did that mean for you?

AD Whole lot of attention for one little person

Mother interested & curious. Threw herself into garden/church/Arkansas beautiful/choir
Not a card player, social
Got to travel later, never worked.

JB Dad take you to the mill?

AD Such freedom – off by myself
'Aunt' Buddy Mauney's house, baked cakes in the shape of a lamb. I would stop in
Loved nature

15 min in

Swinging bridge, crawdads
Watching other kids
Loved to read, went to tiny town library
A bit shy, comfortable in my own company

JB Family stress education?

AD Dad high school, my mother finally graduated high school after marriage
Went to college after I went
She would have liked for me to go to a finishing school
I went to Ouachita first year, parents very active there
Transferred to Baylor with roommate, had to return to Ouachita

20 min in

JB Certainly not alone in that experience

AD Home economics, loved cooking. Mother not that way, made divinity, sweets
Mother took me on first airplane trip when 12 years old
John Robert Powers modeling school, wrong plane
Wrong Barbizon Hotel
Dad could not get in touch with us

25 min in

Billy Graham in town

JB Madison Square Garden?

AD My Fair Lady show, my work for model – exercises, keep our knees together

JB Very typical, my dad made my sister & I go to charm school, deportment

AD Graduated high school – teacher, nurse, secretary, needed to get married
Married after college, older than I, 5 years
From service, wanted to go pharmacy school
I worked in Upward Bound school – make up for young black women – not yet available

30 min in

Opened my eyes
I asked Bea Chester, her husband [Joe] worked at the sawmill
I loved them both

JB Keep in touch?

AD Bea died when I was in Guatemala; Joe had a drinking problem, not comfortable

JB Back to Outward Bound

AD Followed the OB guidebook...
Moved to Little Rock, Dairy Council demos cooking \$500 a month 1968

35 min in

JB Don't think of that as a big Arkansas business

AD Very political, didn't have anything to do with that
Lots of small town, education
Moved to Nashville, Arkansas, Agee Street, New Century Club, women's club
1972, first daughter
Stayed there until 1976
Very trying situation with the marriage

40 min in

Rogers, Arkansas very secluded, had second baby, stuck at hospital baby by myself
Marriage not doing better
Beautiful place, old house, too far from people
Marriage lasted 19 years
Time when girls were young, very home-oriented
Describes fox on chicken nest

45 min in

1986 – I started mail order catalog – Pure and Simple – rural Arkansas
Husband and I collected early American antiques
Featured furniture, quilts, decoys
Nashville store – Robinson's – went out of business
Monetarily, not successful, but got considerable experience
Customers all over the U.S. – closed it & moved to Little Rock
Hannah hated to move
Vagabond's - business on Kavanaugh, kept learning

50 min in

Established business late 90's coffee. Sold furniture, clothing, contemporary mid-century things,
gifts in the Heights.
Successful with the kids heading off – for somewhere else

JB Sensibility just a little ahead of the curve?

AD Remember New York City, 12 years old?

When I graduated college, got to go to Holy Land & Europe – Lebanon, Beirut, loved Cairo too, Jerusalem, Athens, Italy, England. The group older than us – ‘parental.’

Very different

My mother loved international news, magazines, fashion news

JB Designer clothes?

55 min in

AD Magnolia store – part of life

JB Anthony Timber Co.– you are the principal now

AD I’ve been making decisions for a long time, since before my father died [2006], toward sustainability

My heritage – my daughters chosen not to have children

60 min in

JB Form a foundation?

AD Already a charitable foundation

JB Feminine side of Little Rock, how develop this frame of mind?

AD Unconsciously - two teenage daughters, sought the help of Susan Sims Smith, therapist, now Episcopal priest

1 hr. 5 min in

Coming from a religious background, tiptoe in the dreamworld

Omega [Institute], Rhinebeck, New York

Shambala Lodge [outside Fort Collins, Colorado]

Higher place, so many ways to be

As I was growing up, very patriarchal

JB A lot of church, but not a lot of input?

AD The feminine an important part –

Collecting purses, as this went on

Purse = container the feminine

Very afraid to talk

Brought up with competition

1 hr. 10 min in

Feminine the softer side
This is the question you asked, especially during the Central High time [1957 and following]
This area was an area of hurt, needs nurturing
There are people who are suffering, not enough help
Such a difficult situation, how to handle

JB Historically an area never racial covenants, not extreme poverty
Balance so far for SoMa [South on Main] – grocery, restaurants, drug store

1 hr. 15 min in

Rentals, high?

AD The thing people don't talk about, broken windows for 2 years, prostitution on weekends
People scared to get out of cars
Buildings kept up now
Laundromat gone now, would be nice to have one
I can't control what people do with their property
That's another feminine thing, keep successful
Controversial, what happens with development

1 hr. 20 min in

What people see since 2011, 2012
Much work that needs to done citywide – in my opinion

JB How do you think [model] could be used in other neighborhoods?

AD Of course it could, it's just so much easier to buy

JB It picked you?

AD One of the most interesting things I've ever done

JB Not done?

AD I'm not

JB More buildings?

AD No

JB Many collect on a small scale – how 2000 purses?

AD Daughter at University of Georgia, drove to visit, took days, a hunt, part of the joy
30 years ago

1 hr. 25 min in

I've not collected for 14 years as in the past
The thing about this collection, though, honoring women, telling a story from each decade

JB Although many objects are fabulous, onetime -
I've asked lots of questions
Anything you'd like to add?

We've not talked about SoMa, Downtown Council

AD Not involved at this point, serves part of Main Street well
Try to make it [SoMa] more neighborhood/community oriented
Joe Fox [Community Bakery] involved

1 hr. 30 min in

JB A final question - professorship at Ouachita University honors your parents

AD I was out of the house. They did participate in the community.

JB A possible model for yourself?

AD Not looking at it that way.

JB A book or movie influenced –

AD Difficult to describe - reading during an ice storm – *The Power of Now* [author Eckhart Tolle]
Anthony family worrying, not necessarily optimistic

JB Artistic mindset, present in the process –
Your work as assemblage artist –

AD Always loved outsider art, self-taught
Flea markets, pick up these things
Doesn't take a lot of skill

1 hr. 35 min in

When daughter in New Orleans, several pieces about people who were suffering there
I have not made a piece since 2006, active in other ways –
This work [SoMa, Esse] a different kind of work

Closes by describing her two treasured daughters' current situations:
Oldest daughter in Santa Fe, involved in archaeology and spirit work
Clean and sober, a challenge for her and me

My other, Hannah, a vagabond, involved in dog rescue, in Louisiana

Mutual thanks and off - 1 hr. 40 min