

Sherece West-Scantlebury Interview Summary
First Person Plural Project
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Intro - First Person Plural Project

MR Early life, family, where grew up?

SW Lived while in Brooklyn, moved to Baltimore
Parents—divorced early
Father in Vietnam, did not meet till 28
Knew step-father as father—broke up too
Mother had at 17, sister soon after
Lived in public housing, on public assistance till 13
Moved Baltimore, grew up in Murphy Homes [now torn down]
Challenges of public housing, substance abuse, violence, negativity
Negativity in own home
Experience necessary to who am today

MR Substance abuse in home? Affected you and sister?

SW Danger, lot of stress
Can say now, not as six year old

5 min

Learn how to live within it, how to cope, how to manage—normal
Wasn't until had choice to be different, that was different
People feed, clothe, and do love you
Made the best of what was
Suffered depression and low self-esteem
Behavior needed to unlearn—wanted to be different person, have another life
Taught about people in life

MR Helped through education? What schools?

SW Clear early on pretty smart
Pretty self-motivated, did well in school
School was sanctuary—dreaded going home
By 13, moved, met 1st white people

10 min

Could not send to private school
Moved to Owings Mills, Maryland: schools good, rent high
Couldn't make ends meet
Made financial sacrifice where could not afford to live
Carried unaffordability wherever went
Pikesville Jr. High—had good grades, Iowa Tests always scored well
White people said it wasn't possible
Put into 7E with other black kids

Did not know structural racism, looking back is realization
Soon clear did not belong, moved classes
Black folk became friends, good grounding for community
1st time met black kid with both parents
High School excelled
Graduated still maybe 12 out of 100, Just mainly white area
Mother still experiencing depression & substance abuse
Inside home still negative
We had moved, behaviors hadn't changed
School again sanctuary, felt capable & competent, unlike at home

15 min

Still stuck, behaviors moved with
Years later, mother got help—changed
Liked Jr. High and High School---is where good people are

MR Mother support any better? Job?

SW Still did not live within means
Grandmother supplemented household

MR Grandmother family support? Back-up mother?

SW Mother got on nerves
Lived with grandmother quite a few years
Experienced sexual abuse within home, was removed, lived with grandmother most of Jr. High into High School
Took us before that, mother kind of out there
Just took charge---blessed with best nana

MR Women in life were positive influences?

SW Mostly Women, just what it was
Grandfather around, but alcoholic and very abusive
In last 20 years of life made a change, learned---people can change
Was mother, grandmother, aunt, sister, and cousin

MR Idea of Hopelessness? Mother's relationship with father?

SW Father was substance abuser and abusive
Mother just didn't stay
Father still substance abuser when we met, when I was 28'

20 min

Good thing---if had been part of it, would have been catastrophe
Glad father wasn't around
Just parted ways

MR Move to new community? Notice changes? Segregation?

SW Couple thousand people living at lowest; now with work I do now, seeing so many people in so much pain living together was not good idea
Hard to make change there
Owings Mills---all different, a different life
Showed there was a different way to live
Very wealthy community, didn't envy wealth
Recognized different way of living
People smiled, were happy, behavior a little foreign
Still had same challenges---handled differently

25 min

Motivations different, boredom, not hopelessness
Troubled or challenged---able to change in way did not have visible devastation on everything
Money to hire lawyers, pay for abortions
Remained within home, had means to deal differently
On Baltimore and Owings Mills: "Like night and day"---did not create mass hopelessness, did not affect entire community adversely like other ones

MR School as escape? Led to college?

SW Did not know what college was – 11th or 12th grade
Thought army maybe
One black teacher, Señor Smith took all black students on
College---not refrain or expectation within home
Took for college visit to Bowie State, just applied and got in
Found out what was, peers doing it---nothing deeper than that

30 min

MR Back with mother? Sister relationship?

SW Sister stayed back mostly
Three years is big deal, close but challenge
Always had to bring to movies, had to stay with, too young

MR Religion? Was important in home? Grandmother's home?

SW Definitely grandmother, went to church every Sunday
Relationship with God did not occur till graduate school
No one sat down and taught salvation, did not pick it up in church
More adult experience, can relate back to childhood
Knew being protected and looked after
Every man for himself at home

35 min

MR Mother passionate, better education?

SW Knew being there was right thing
Mother---just hoped for the best, was not a good parent, won't pretend; was not bad person, just

lacked capacity

Late high school/College---mother came to determine wanted to break cycle – we were pretty old by then, well into our teens

MR Teachers inspired? College pursuits?

SW Lists several teachers
Had great support in teachers
Did not know what was happening in home
Learnt to separate from the other
Suffering low self-esteem, same patterns & behaviors

40 min

For most part, tried to segregate
School where encouraged, positive reinforcement
One or two times, teachers tried to intervene---things had gotten extreme at home
Mother master of “Mind your business.”
Still had to make sure was okay—describes astute guidance counselor in connection

MR Went on to Bowie State? Path through college? Influenced to move toward?

SW Describes upperclassmen who helped direct her toward Public administration degree, brought to meet head of department, became P.A. major through conversation.

Was really interested in history
Mother asked “Oh what can you do with a history degree?”—had not vision

Explains how path relates to work today, went back to public housing all the time growing up, to visit family, still part of life, driven by question: Why are people poor?

45 min

People had dreams could not manifest—wanted to know why
Structurally realizing how segregated community was by race
“How did all people of that race get into that income?”
Wanted to change through housing, later learnt had to be more comprehensive change
Graduated in small recession late 1980s, continued working in History department
Applied to Sloane Fellowship—enabled spend two summers at Michigan and UCLA respectively
Passed and got full fellowship
Went to Michigan to get MBA in public policy
Left school with no debt
Lived and worked on campus and at Social Security Administration

50 min

MR Incidental dollars came from jobs
Transition to Michigan?

SW Worst thing ever, first semester—cried every day, called mother, who had healed by then
Rigor was different, what was expected, people were smarter---was just trauma
Content no difficult, rigor, volume, expectations were overwhelming

Could master it and did
Did fine---enough for graduate school
Just wanted to get a degree

MR Able to work?

SW Did not have to with \$200 monthly stipend
Worked last semester, to start applying for jobs

55 min

Mother could not help by sending money—could just manage on her own
Got job to buy clothes to interview in and make resumes with

Describes telemarketing job, surprised by the amount alumni were willing to give, regularly getting \$5,000/\$1,000, experience showed how people could live and why Michigan was the way it was.

MR After graduating, where did work?

SW Worked at Community Service Society of NY—housing advocate, researcher, lobbyist

60 min

Had like 5 jobs, paid nothing, learnt and experienced much
Background came into with advocacy work with Section 8 housing, where originally came from
Learn and understand what that was, learnt about structure and federal policy
Provides in depth explanation of duties and involvement with subsidized housing, went to Albany [New York] advocate for, worked specific to New York City. One issue: Incentivize land-lords to build housing, New York—good million people, serious policy problem, serious housing problem, land now prime real estate, thus issue was keeping landlords in the program to provide low-income housing

Places like Murphy Homes, built intentionally in worst parts of town, white flight to suburbs left urban areas undesirable—90s urbanization became the thing

65 min

By 2000s, places became prime real estate, even Harlem
Organize residents, educate them, make the change—coached them
Worked there little less than 5 years
Boss nuttier and nuttier
God turned up the heat, knew it was time to move on
Went to work for Annie E. Casey Foundation, stayed there for about 12 years

MR Why left?

SW Boss going through divorce and health issues, brought to work
Made not a good guy to work with
People thought I ran department
No patience for the wallowing
Wanted to save department, got tricky and negative

Had no choice, but to move on

70 min

MR Work at Annie Casey?

SW Hired to be program associate for Rebuilding Communities Initiative

Describes Annie E. Casey Foundations functions as a system change foundation, roles within the and the addition of community to the overreaching goal of the foundation---Worked in five cities to help communities repair themselves and provide solutions, learned every aspect of running the initiative.

Also, program officer for housing and housing development
Started conversation at foundation on structural and institutional racism
Ended with working youth organizing

MR Work with housing and Annie E. Casey Foundation connect with childhood?

SW Was already implanted in my DNA to do and look at aspects of how do transform community that isn't productive for children and families into one that is
Very clear about my mission, very clear about my purpose

75 min

Now I do it in a rural context
Same skills, same questions I need to know: structural racism, systems change, community behavior—same sets of things, another context
Frame now in philanthropy, frame before around public policy

MR When start doctorate?

SW Was only going to stay at Annie Casey 5 years
5 to 6 years in, Rebuilding Communities Project was supposed to have finished, needed to reinvent, do something new

Describes motivation for getting PHD, education was something good at, worked to get the gold medal of education, and ready for change. Casey paid full tuition reimbursement at time. Degree out of pocket might have cost me \$2,000.

“God, you are wonderful.” I recognize prep now, you don't see it while it's happening
Finished nearly everything for school as well as initiative
Got a call from someone who found me on the Annie Casey Foundation website
From New Iberia, Louisiana which was a devastated, poor, rural part of Louisiana---began a phone coaching arrangement on community building with Bethel family—person communicating with Robbie or Roberta Bethel

80 min

My experience had been urban
Describes attempts to get Casey Foundation to extend to rural grant-making, problems there in, not serving every kid. “You done left out a whole bunch of people.”

Did not know they were the richest black family in Louisiana [the Bethel family]
After four or five months of working with these people, asked to head up family foundation—told me they approaching a billion dollars in assets in their family
How I got to Louisiana & helped run Carrier Foundation
Moved there June 2005, Katrina [Hurricane] struck in August
Governor of Louisiana at time wanted to create foundation, respond to Katrina [Hurricane] related issues
In October, Rita [Hurricane] hit
The Louisiana Disaster Recovery Foundation, became founding CEO
Carrier folk supported with transition

85 min

Hardest, most difficult thing I'd ever done
4 or 5 months of overwhelming difficulty, took turnabout--we were able to do great work
Working on dissertation in the midst of all of that
Worked on dissertation while being a single parent of two nieces
Did not finish till 2007

MR Nieces came to live with you?

SW Sister in the army and got assignments
Had nieces living with several times, both Destiny and Simone
Stationed in Kuwait for two years while in Louisiana
In total, had them for about 8 years

MR How old? Cause a lot of problems for you?

SW Single parenting was its own challenge
Varying ages, Destiny just starting middle school, Simone was 2
Last time, Destiny 15, Simone transitioned to elementary school

MR Turning to rural work? Transition, moving into the south? Culture shock?

90 min

SW Describes associations with God, adaptability with moving, and ability to take care of self.
Simple needs.

Discuss difference in rural attitude from urban communities, shock around how folk were not organized, people stuck in different ways than urban people. Had to re-think, re-assess everything about community building to function within bounds.

Continues to outline differences and similarities of urban v rural communities—elites that structurally had power that can easily disregard entire group of people, people feel useless, do not feel they have means to retaliate.

95 min

Still need collective action, need to come together, education, be empowered, and give voice to change
All want everybody to be well educated, how go about it falls short

Have to have allies on other side
Had skills and ability, but had to re-apply them in new context
Even coming to AR, it's the same thing
Had people say "If I do what you're describing, I'll lose my job."—legit concern
Problems must be address
Public policy still approach, deal with inequities in a large-scale
Towns and rural communities, things get personal

Discusses issues of retaliation within rural communities and difficulties navigating change in context.

100 min