

Preuitt.Velvet1

Tape 1

Mon, 4/18 2:37PM • 17:14

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

work, played, Shipyard, cavalia, portsmouth, met, part, willard, concerts, hopscotch, love, remember, guess, day, norfolk state, kenny lattimore, oral history project, awards, great, breaks

Interview Particulars

Date:	March 9, 2022, Wednesday
Time:	10:57-11:32 AM
Location:	IC Norcom High School TV Production Set
Interviewee:	Velvet Preuitt
Interviewer:	Savian Rowe
Camera/Tech:	Robert Edwards
Instructor:	Jasmine Painter

00:02

Interviewer: Good morning. Thank you for participating in the oral history project. I'm Savian Rowe and today I'll be interviewing you about your life story from childhood to adulthood, your Shipyard career, and lastly, life after retirement. So let's start.

00:18

Interviewer: Could you please tell us when and where you were born?

I was born in Portsmouth, Virginia.

00:24

Interviewer: What was it like in Portsmouth at the time?

Um, I've always loved living in Portsmouth. Actually, I've never lived anywhere else. It's my hometown. I'm comfortable in it. I love it.

00:38

Interviewer: How was it being a preacher's kid?

Oh, it was special. We stayed at church a lot. My dad was the Pastor and my mom played the organ. So we were a little, little sheltered.

00:55

Off Camera: We'll tuck your cord in there. Alright, fair enough. (Microphone cord is re-aligned.)

01:14

Interviewer: So I read that you had six siblings. What was that like being in a big family?

01:18

Well, it wasn't so bad because by the time I was born, most of my siblings have moved on. They were a lot older. So it was really just me and my little sister.

01:32

Interviewer: Which part of town did you grow up in?

01:34

Cavalier Manor. (Unintelligible off stage) Yes.

01:39

Interviewer: What was the neighborhood like during this time?

Well, I like I said, I loved it. Cavalier Manor was a big community where everybody on the street knew everybody where everybody took care of each other. Back in the day, we didn't know it, but it had some gang activity, but the gang was there, I guess to protect us. Big, but there wasn't a lot of violence or anything like that. But I heard there was a protective shield around us. So we didn't venture out a lot. You know, but, like I said, everybody took pride in their homes and their yards. And everybody helped each other and knew each other.

02:26

Interviewer: What were some places you liked to visit as a kid in town?

02:31

I guess we, my mom loves shopping so we'd go to Mid-City a lot. That was the name of the area now where Kroger and the Walmart are, um. So other than that, we'd go to the movies downtown, the Capitol. We'd go to the city parks. We'd go to, well, we'd have to go to Virginia Beach, but in Portsmouth, we just go to the movies and shopping, things like that.

03:00

Interviewer: Who were some of your childhood friends?

03:04

Let's see. Well, like we play with everybody on the block. And so Lisa Cameron and Tony Coles and Iris Stevenson. Let's see. There were just a lot of kids. We played, everybody played with each other, Kevin Garrett. We all just played kickball, softball, basketball, hopscotch. Back then people you know kids played outside.

03:36

Interviewer: Was that everyday?

03:38

Yes, we played outside every day until the light came on. Then everybody knew, when street light came on, it was time to go home.

03:44

Interviewer: Where were the places you all meet at, that you chose everyday. Where did you meet at, like everyday?

03:50

Well sometimes we would meet at the Cavalier Manor field. Because, sometimes at the pool. Sometimes just in front of the houses. We played a lot of games just right in front of the houses.

04:04

Interviewer: Can you tell us a memorable event that happened in elementary school or middle school?

04:10

I see. Well, elementary school we went to Cavalier Manor School, uh elementary, and

04:23

[Off camera noises interrupt taping; Interviewer asks Interviewee to start over again]

04:29

Interviewer: I never heard that before. Um, yeah

04:32

Okay, so at Cavalier Manor Elementary they had the best food. I hear it's not like the food that's served these days. We had homemade food and the best peanut butter homemade cookies in the world. So I guess in, in middle school, that's what you all call it now, we called it junior high. We had this ice cream lady who, yeah, she was such a sweetheart. If we didn't have money, she'd give us ice cream anyway. But I loved playing softball and hopscotch and just so many memories of just jumping in the water with after it rain. You would be surprised how we weren't afraid of anything. So if it flooded in front of our house that meant everybody was gonna be outside playing in the water.

05:23

Interviewer: What was high school like for you?

05:25

It was good. It was good. I went to Manor High School. So it was the first integrated school in Portsmouth. And it was it was modern. All the classes were open. So that we didn't have, really, doors on our classes. Some of the classes did, I think science class did or something like that. But for the most part, we hung out on the Square. And everybody just chilled and talked and we would eat our lunches there sometime. We, people would be all in different corners, doing whatever dancing, singing and practicing. It was fun. It was fun.

06:08

Interviewer: Can you remember attending any local events?

06:11

Well, lots of concerts, parades. You know, we always went to the parades. Anytime there was a concert, oh, play. I love the plays at Willett Hall. My favorite. I miss that. I do. I miss that a lot.

06:31

Interviewer: As far as concerts what was one of your favorites. Okay, great.

06:36

Let me see. I'm trying to remember way back in the day. That's. Luther Vandross. I think he came here one time. So that was one of my favorites. We've had Stephanie Mills to come here. The free concerts that they have had over at the Pavilion. Well, back in the day, of course, the Pavilion wasn't here, so we will go to Willett Hall.

07:06

Interviewer: What about the plays?

07:09

The plays were awesome. As I actually met Kenny Lattimore and his wife, as they were leaving out of Willett Hall, that was probably one of my favorite moments, is meeting the two of them.

07:28

Interviewer: What's one of your favorite memories about your time living in Portsmouth?

07:33

Portsmouth is a small town, you know, I guess because everywhere I go, somebody either knows me or I know them. My pharmacy, they know me, even with my mask on, they know. "Hi Miss Perutt". You know? I guess I like the small town camrad, comradery, that, yeah, that feeling? I know where everything is. So I don't know. I like living in Portsmouth. I do.

08:02

Interviewer: Where did you go to college? What was the original plan for your future?

08:07

Well, I started out at Norfolk State. But I went there probably about two and a half, three years. But my plan was to always worked for the government. That was always my plan. Don't ask me why. Just maybe because my father worked for the government. My older sisters worked for the government. We all worked for the government. So, I was going to work for the government. So once they called me that was it. I left Norfolk State, probably wasn't the best idea. But I'm still glad I did it to this day.

08:45

Interviewer: What was the NSU campus like?

08:48

Oh it was awesome. Oh, wow. We had such a good time. Because there was always something going on. You know, so we would go through the student hall area and there will be somebody dancing or somebody singing, or there would be a card game. It was just a lot of activities, actually to do. So. Parties. We got our education too, in fact I was an honor, honor student. So we had a lot of fun. But at the same time, we got our education. We got our work done. Lot's of group work.

09:31

Interviewer: Did you ever play in the card games? Did you ever participate in them?

09:34

No, actually I just watched. I was a little shy.

09:41

Interviewer: What were some of your best college memories?

09:45

I think it was watching the step shows. That was probably my favorite thing to do was go see it.

09:51

Interviewer: Where did you meet your husband?

My husband and I met because he lived down the street. He was the guy down the street and he was driving by in that little red Corvette. Then one day, one day, he just, you know, he stopped and asked me would I like to go on a date. I said, Sure. So that's kind of how we met.

10:14

Interviewer: Did you hear about Shipyard opportunities while enrolled at NSU?

10:19

No. I think I was always, I'm trying to remember how back in the day I heard about Shipyard opportunities. I just remember just yes, yesterday, I was out with my grandkids, and we were downtown Norfolk. And we walked past the Federal Building. And I said, this is where your nana went, probably every month, for 12 months to take the test so I could get into Federal government. So I'm not sure where I hear about the opportunities. But I know back then you had to take a test. You had to pass that test.

11:03

Interviewer: Before getting hired by the Shipyard, what was your impression? How did you feel about it?

11:07

I thought it was great. My, my, my husband, he was an Apprentice there when we met. So I knew, well at least I thought he made good money. I thought anybody that worked for the government made good money. So. you know, I just thought it was the place to be for good opportunity. And for benefits and retirement. I thought it had everything that I was looking for that I would need in this life.

11:38

Interviewer: How much were they paying at the time and did that encourage you to apply?

11:44

That was so long ago, but I'm thinking it was probably around \$12 an hour or something like that.

11:56

Interviewer: That wasn't bad money.

It was, it was enough back there. To start, you know, that was to start. Because we would, we got raises, pay raises, I think it was every year and we guess they were called step increases.

12:12

Interviewer: Kinda like incentives?

12:13

But no, they were automatic. They were automatic. And so the longer you stay, the more money you make. And then there was always potential for promotion. Or put in for other jobs, because once you got your foot in the door, which was the main thing to do, get your foot in the door, so you could work. And then you can move up from there. And that's what we did.

12:40

Interviewer: What made you apply?

12:42

Cuz everybody else worked there, the Government, because my family. And my, you know, in my family, everybody worked for the government, and they seem to have, you know, good jobs.

12:55

Interviewer: How did you get hired as a secretary?

12:57

Let's see. Uh, I had started off actually as a mail and file clerk and I applied as a secretary at the Shipyard. And I must have done well at the interview.

13:16

Interviewer: How long did it take to start?

13:19

The process? Wasn't that long. I mean, you had to get a physical and do all your paperwork, get a background check. So, maybe I would say about three weeks to one month.

13:39

Interviewer: What was a day like in the engineering, engineering department in the Shipyard?

13:44

It was great. I mean, it was it was fast paced, sometimes. I did a lot of typing. I wasn't that good of a typist, so might have taken me a little bit longer. But I had, ah, I made some good friends. And I specifically had one really great supervisor. His name was Don Stanley. And he was very sympathetic to women who worked and had children. So you know, you always run into some obstacles and some people that are difficult to work with. But for the most part, if you had just a couple of people, you know, that you knew you could go to talk to and be with much time, you know, breaks. That was the good part. We always celebrated birthdays. We always, you know, had Christmas parties, things like that. So it was a good place to work. For the most part.

14:47

Interviewer: What was the best and the worst part of your job?

14:52

I guess it was, ah, I can't say there was a worst part. You know, we worked, I worked for engineers so, you know, sometimes you just had to make sure you were communicating with them, ah, on their, on their level. And but for the most part, it was just a regular work experience. It wasn't any bad, per se experiences. You run into obstacles on any job. So, like I say we would, (comment off camera) no, not as a secretary No, no.

15:35

Interviewer: Were you given an award for your work at the Shipyard?

15:38

Yes, I got lots of awards. Let me see, I would get monetary award. Sometimes they would just appreciation awards.

15:50

Interviewer: Can I ask you which ones you liked most?

15:51

The monetary ones, of course.

15:57

Interviewer: Who was your favorite co-worker?

15:59

Oh, wow. Back then. That is, I worked with a young lady named Diane. And I don't know, we just had a lot in common. We were two black females that had kids. So a lot of times we had lunch together.

16:19

Interviewer: What was your most memorable day, memorable day at the Shipyard?

16:26

I can't say they're ... the days were basically alike it for the most part. They were just repetitious. If we were having something special, like a party, a birthday party, a baby shower for someone, you know, you got a break from the work and, and everything but um, most days, were just pretty much the same. You know, you go in and you do your job and you have your breaks and you go to lunch

17:01

Interviewer: Do you remember any difficulties at the Shipyard and how you overcame them?

17:05

Well, every sometimes personalities clash but I like I said I had a great supervisor when I was there.

Preuitt.Velvet2

Tape 2

Mon, 4/18 2:41PM • 10:01

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

retired, shipyard, glad, people, assisted, opportunities, great, bowled, children, build, neighborhoods, working, eeo, place, different ethnicities, city, restaurants, met, portsmouth, depend

00:02

Um, and we just talk things out, you know, if there was, I never had a situation that I had to report anyone, per se. But we knew we had EEO if we needed it, you know, but like, I was just fortunate enough to have a great supervisor.

00:28

Interviewer: What kept you at the shipyard when things got tough?

Oh, the fact that I had kids depend on, I had a home, I had bills to pay. Uh, I can say the shipyard wasn't a bad place. And I knew the longer I stayed there, the more my wages would increase. So I was just trying to build my future.

00:53

Interviewer: How was your life during your shipyard career?

It was good. I mean, you got used to everything. Parking was horrible. Parking it's always been horrible. But there were instances in my last job I had at the shipyard where I did have a parking space. So it depended on, you know, where you were in your career if you had a parking space.

01:20

Interviewer: I love the partying at the shipyard and baby shower. What was like the best one, the most memorable?

01:29

Well, they were all great. The thing I liked about the parties is they really gave away good prizes. So they raffled off televisions and game systems and everybody's just really had a good time and you were able to forget about work and just enjoy yourself with the people that you probably wouldn't normally hang out with.

01:53

Interviewer: What made you decide to retire from the shipyard?

01:56

Well, actually, I retired from the government but not the shipyard. I worked at the shipyard, but I've worked at a lot of different places. Last place I retire was from was military Sealift Command and that was located in Norfolk, Virginia. But after 35 years, it was time to retire.

02:20

Interviewer: What do you miss most about working at the shipyard?

02:23

I guess I miss the people. Uh we, uh we did lots of things together. And I still get together with some of them. When in fact, I'm supposed to meet someone tomorrow for lunch. A couple of my co workers so most of the people who started out with me are retired now.

02:45

Interviewer: So are you still working at the shipyard?

02:47

No, I'm not working with the shipyard. I just kind of get with the retirees and we may go to lunch. We were looking forward to taking some trips together. But now I don't work anymore.

03:06

Interviewer: What are you doing since your retirement? At home? What do you do to keep yourself active?

03:14

So many things. I bowl on a senior league. I love that every Tuesday I bowl and I'm not that great. But you know, it's just the fun of getting with people, senior citizens my age and older most of the ones older than me are a lot better than me as well because they've been bowling for longer. I'm assisted to my husband whenever he needs me up at the church school. I'm assistant to all my grandchildren. All 10 of them. I'm assisted to all my children. In fact, my daughter called me right before I got here and said Mom, I got a splinter on my finger. And I think if I didn't come here I was supposed to go to the school and help her out with that. So I basically assist everybody my family, but I have great time as well. Just meeting up with friends. I hang out with my sisters. I have four sisters, so. Oh, got a beautiful church family. We get together just got together this week. We do a lot of things. So I enjoy my retirement. I really do.

04:23

Interviewer: What are your hopes and dreams for the future of the shipyard?

04:28

Um, I just hope they keep on hiring. You know, keep on helping people, especially people of color. It's a great foundation, stepping stool, you know, for people to get in and get that, you know, through their apprenticeship program. In fact, I was just trying to find the ad the other

day to send to somebody. But um, I think it I think is serves to give people great opportunities to start their lives with a good job, good paying position. I think it has great promotion capability for people who are just doing, really some of them don't even know what they want to do. But I've met, I think the first train engineer there, I met her female, a female black lady. I can't think of her name right now. But um, she was one of the first black engineers to be in charge of the trains there. And I just think it's, it's a great stepping stone. And that's why I started off, you know, there in St. Julian's Creek. And I'm glad I did it. I later went back to college while I was working for the government and did get my degree. But I have no regrets. Because it provided me so many opportunities to get experience. So I gather experience, every position that I was in, and that's how I was up to able to move up the ladder to be a security manager retired as a security manager GS 13.

06:19

Interviewer: Do you think Portsmouth has evolved over the years?

06:22

I think Portsmouth has, um, you know, I can see a change in the neighborhoods here as definitely the neighborhoods have become more integrated than they ever were before. So I think Portsmouth needs to attract more businesses, especially restaurants, places to shop, things like that, because I think we spend way too much money outside of our city.

06:51

Interviewer: We need more things to do, more attractions, things for teenagers to do.

Yes, yes. Yes.

06:59

Interviewer: Things like that.

07:04

Yes. Yes. All that is so true. We do need places for our children. We used to have a skating rink. We don't even have that anymore. It's just not much for families to do. You know, I'm glad they're building up downtown. I'm glad the casinos come in, you know, for the job opportunities. And for the people who like to gamble. I'm glad, that I'm glad that's gonna happen. But at the same time, I wish there were way more things like you were speaking about for children for, you know, and some communities are doing better at building centers. We're still trying to keep the one going in Cavalier Manor. So I think we'll get there eventually.

07:55

Interviewer: Where do you see Portsmouth and the Shipyard 20 years from now?

08:01

Wow, I think the shipyard is gonna always be around. I do. I think it's always going to be here to provide job opportunities. And I think that's a good thing. I think that's because, you know, college isn't for everybody. Some people need to get a trade. Some people just, you know, need to start off as a secretary or mail or file clerk and move up, you know, so I think it'll be here. And that's a good thing. That's one of Portsmouth's really good things.

08:34

Interviewer: Anything else you'd like to share with us that you feel like is important?

08:39

Well, I just think, um, I think Portsmouth is a great city to live in. I'm glad we have the Children's Museum. I'm glad we have the mom and pop restaurants. I'm glad the casino is common. I'm glad our neighborhoods are revolving and, and more people are coming in of different ethnicities. And I'm proud of my city. I you know, other people may talk, you know, down about Portsmouth, but I think those are the ones that never lived here. I think it's a great place to live. We do need to get our crime rate under control. There are way too many shootings in different areas. And that saddens me, it really, really does. And I just hope we get it together. But for the most part, I believe Portsmouth's a great city, just as good as any other city. We just got to build it up. We just have to build it up with more opportunities for entertainment, shopping, for our children, things of that nature.

09:58

Interviewer: Thank you.

09:59

You're welcome.

10:00

Interviewer: I just had

Preuitt.Velvet3

Tape 3

Mon, 4/18 2:21PM • 8:08

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Shipyard, work, cafeteria, secretary, class reunions, cavalia, kids, hajus, relationships, greasy spoon, type, racial makeup, briefly, built, integrated, manor, community, victory, part, day

00:00

Interviewer: But just to go back to your secretary position at the Shipyard. So just briefly, could you just explain what some of those duties were? I guess your daily duties just as the secretary of the engineering department specifically.

00:20

Okay. Well, I was one of probably one of about three secretaries. We did the filing. We typed up all the notices. We had reports that we had to do. Basically, whatever our supervisor gave us to type up, actually, we, we did have computers. They were the big ones where the information scroll down. Long time ago, but for the most part, we did what any secretary does. I was, I did not take shorthand. So if I had to take notes, I had to take them in longhand. And like I said, we just did the typing, and the filing. And we answered phones. We answered questions. We went to meetings. We did regular secretarial work.

01:25

Interviewer: And lastly, what type of relationships were you able to build? I think you mentioned like your favorite coworker. But kind of like, more like, you know, as secretary, like how many, I feel like you probably got to interact with a whole bunch of different people that worked on the Shipyard. What was that like?

01:39

It was nice. I mean, for the most part, we built relationships. I had a great relationship with my supervisor and his wife. We even, she made curtains for my house that I have moved in. Coworkers we would meet sometime after work, we would go to the Shipyard cafeteria together. So you made, you did, you established quite a few relationships. And some of those relationships I still have to this day. And it was nice. I'm not saying that every now and then you didn't work with difficult people. But for the most part, I had a good support system. So ...

02:33

Interviewer: And what was that Shipyard cafeteria like? Is that the one you mentioned? Wasn't it somewhere you mentioned you'd go and eat? (several voices talking) That was just

another spot you mentioned. But yeah, how did you spend your lunch? What was the cafeteria like on the Shipyard?

02:50

I'm trying to remember is that the one that call the Greasy Spoon? I think they called it the Greasy Spoon or something like that. So you will get your food, you'd go through a line wait for your food to come out. And they would have tables. Also, the Shipyard had a lot of picnic tables as well. So you could eat outside or you could eat in the little cafeteria area.

03:19

Interviewer: And I think you might have mentioned this, as far as bringing your kids to work and like the Christmas party and things like that?

03:27

We did have a Shipyard day, what you call a Family Day, where you brought your kids and they, we would be able to take them through our workspaces and take them through the Shops and they would see how different things were done in the machinists Shop and the wood Shop. My building was, the building I worked in, building 1500, that was the engineering building. It's a huge, tall building with a lot of cubicles. So I would take my kids to see "this is where Mommy sits", you know. But it was just it was comfortable.

04:09

Interviewer: What did they think about it?

04:10

Um, my kids thought it was, they thought it was okay. You know how kids are. It was like "so you have to sit here all day". No, but they thought it was interesting. But the only one of my children now that works for the government is my youngest son and he is a merchant seaman. He loves being a merchant seaman. My oldest son he, he works in construction, and my daughter's a teacher. So I can't say that they all followed in our footsteps because just one did.

04:55

Interviewer: Could you, could you just briefly go over what the, the racial makeup was in Cavalier when you're growing up there and the experience of going to Manor, the first integrated school in Portsmouth, and how the kids got along.

05:09

So, Cavalier Manor was an all black community back in the day. It was built for middle class like people. It is, I'm told, if you even Google it, was the largest black community in the United States. And so when Manor was built, the intention was to bring together three communities:

Cavalier Manor, Victory Manor, and Hodges Manor. And so Hodges Manor was the white community. And the other two, I believe, I know Cavalier Manor was black. And I think Victory Manor was too. So it was to bring us all together and people thought it wouldn't work. But it did. To this day, most of them are Facebook friends, we still have friends. White friends who I talked to on Facebook, who we still get to gather at the class reunions. When we have our class reunion at Manor for Manor High School, totally integrated, totally integrated, and, ah, good people. They thought it wouldn't work. And it worked totally. Because people just need to be able to be around each other, to learn that we all the same, we all want the same thing. And if you just learn how, you know to be around other people and experience, you'll be so surprised what similarities we have. And so I love my class reunions, and I'm so glad we're about to get back to having them again. Because, like I said, you know, it, our experiences were, I sung in the chorus, we came together and we just did things together. And like when we, when we hung out we hung out together. You know, so. We built relationships. And I think it was because we went to an integrated school, the first integrated school in Portsmouth.

07:26

Interviewer: So how did you feel when they decided to rename it, bring Manor back? The name Manor back?

07:32

I'm ecstatic. It should never have been changed. In fact, it was done underhandedly. They never had changed it to Wilson. They didn't ask our opinion. They just did it, you know, and we were like what just happened? So I'm so glad we were able to get it changed back. It means so much to so many people.

08"04

Interviewer: Thank you so much.

08:06

All right. Thank you