



Series 2: Activism & Civil Rights—Quotes

Welcome to the second in the series of "We Exist". In this section we have selected quotes that represent and explain how Black residents in Maine participate in activism. The quotes are taken from transcripts of the oral history project "'Home Is Where I Make It': African American Community and Activism in Greater Portland, Maine". The interview subjects are all native to Maine or are longtime residents of Maine. The original intent of the "Home Is Where I Make It" project was to highlight Black residents' history and struggle for community in southern Maine in both their formal organizational memberships and day-to-day activities. The interviews unearthed integral information related to the residents' activism in the formal and informal organizations.

The quotes center on Maine's Black residents' activism in the form of volunteer service to formal and informal committees (specifically the Portland chapter of the NAACP and civic committees and non-profit community-based committees), paid employment on formal committees, speaking up in community meetings, and being present and vigilant to young resident's community needs.

There is a brief biographical data description of each of the interviewees and a photo. The quotes that are attributed to the interviewees are arranged under the general theme, "Civil Rights/activism".

Additional audio recordings related to these themes are available [here](#).



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Mr. Edgar Anderson



"I grew up seeing that on television and not seeing it in my neighborhood and wondering 'wow, things look pretty bad,' you know, down in Mississippi and down South. It wasn't until 1975 when I actually lived in the South that I got an opportunity to see and have an experience where I was involved in something like that."

"Well, the community groups that I've been involved with, I've been involved with the NAACP here in Portland. I've been on the executive committee for about 4 years. I've been involved in moving the NAACP from an organization that wasn't very financially stable. I helped move them from that point to the point now where the NAACP can stand on its own financially. So I've done that with leadership in that group. I also have been a vice president of the NAACP for the New England area conference, which is the five states in New England. I'm a vice-president in that group. I'm not very religious. I don't go to church. My kids don't go to church; I don't make them go to church. Even though my father's mother was a preacher, like Reverend Lawson."

"When I was at West Point, some other Black cadets and I were the first people to bring a Black rock concert to West Point. That really opened some people's eyes up there to the fact that young officers were going to have to lead and be leaders of Black people, but they had never really known any Black people or knew how to deal with them. So the concert was one way to kick off the training that took place where we started the first racial awareness training program at West Point. It took a lot of leadership to get that through the whole system, and get everybody to accept it, and pull it off. So that was another point of leadership."

"I'm still involved in the Civil Rights Movement."

"Well, you see, I wasn't back there in the '60s carrying banners and holding flags, but I've been in the Civil Rights Movement since I've been an adult, in one way or another. I mean, I feel like I'm in the Civil Rights Movement here in Portland, Maine. Because whenever I see civil rights that are violated I want to, you know, have some part in trying to make it right."

Mr. Edgar Anderson (Male; age 51; born 1950 in Chicago suburb called Harvey)

Keywords: family demography, Black Families, Maine

Full Length Interview: [Home is Where I Make It: Anderson, Edgar](#)



Ms. Odessa Barret



"...When I came here, there weren't very many Blacks, so there was no real sense of community. There was no place where you can go and see yourself en masse. So my kids, being from the South, had already had their sense of identity so it was really hard for them because they either had to teach people who they were or struggle to maintain their own identity."

"I've been a part of the NAACP; I've been a part of the community planning group around HIV prevention; I've been a community mediator."

Ms. Odessa Barret (age 53; born 1948 in Port Arthur, Texas; born in a middle-class, blue collar family; moved to Maine in October 1979)

Keywords: family demography, Black Families, Maine

Full Length Interview: [Home is Where I Make It: Barret, Odessa](#)



Ms. Beverly Bowens



"Actually I didn't do too much. I mean, I went to church. I did a lot in my work as a nurse. I was involved in multiculturalism in terms of recruiting nurses. There was a terrible shortage of nurses at one point. In my position, I was a director of nursing. I had a lot to do with affirmative action in my work. I tend to be quite low key. I don't like to participate where people can see me. I'm a quiet type of person, and I feel that I can accomplish much more by actually staying out of the limelight."

"I had a lot to do with hiring, which did involve affirmative action. I had a lot to do with labor relations, an awful lot of arbitration negotiations. But, as I say, there are ways you can be an activist quietly, and I tend to do that."

"I don't know that I've made any contribution, per se, but in terms of my work, I think nurses make a great number of contributions to the community. We became very much involved. We had worked with gangs which was a very interesting thing because everybody would put the gangs down, and yet the gangs were the ones that saw that the children were fed for breakfast before they went to school. So you sort of have mixed emotions, and you have to evaluate what is going on. I have not been back in Portland that long, but most of the work we do as nurses, it encompasses a lot of community involvement."

Ms. Beverly Bowens (born in Maine; age 67; left at 21 years old for about 35 to 40 years and then returned to Maine)

Keywords: family demography, Black Families, Maine

Full Length Interview: [Home is Where I Make It: Bowens, Beverly](#)



Reverend Albert and Clemmie Jackson



"I was a member of the, ah -- of the, ah, ah -- of the, ah, um, NAACP. I guess it was for about six years and, ah -- and then -- then I, ah, ah, ah -- I, ah, um -- I was out of contact with them for awhile..."

"Yeah. Ah, about 12 years ago. Um, ah, ah, they had, um -- went down to the, um, -- the City Hall and -- and they were protesting because, ah, they had aired over the, ah, -- over the, ah, radio that the Klu Klux Klan would -- would be coming here so that, um, you -- and -- and as they were, ah, strong, ah, against the Klu Klux Klan coming here. And, ah, some of the people from Maine spoke up and said that, ah, ah, they wouldn't tolerate that here in -- in Lewiston and Auburn especially. And that was about, um, 12 or 13 years ago."

Keywords: childhood experiences, Black Families, Maine

Full Length Interview: [Home is Where I Make It: Jackson, Rev. Albert and Clemmie Jackson](#)



Mr. James Mathews



"I'm a life member of the NAACP. I was president of the local branch from 1973 to 1976. And, those are basically my activities. I have not been involved with the NAACP as much as I probably would have liked, lately, you know. I support the events that they have and so on."

"As far as the NAACP is concerned like I already stated, I've been a member for thirty-some years probably and I have been the president from 1973 to 1976. No, I beg your pardon that was 1971 to 1976. Correction. Correction. Five years."

"Well, my pastor, Reverend Margaret Lawson. Also Reverend Steve Coleman, here at Williams Temple. The president of the NAACP, of course, Neville Knowles. There are a number of people that are leaders that work in these churches and with the NAACP, you know. Other people that I have met that I probably couldn't give you a specific name, but there are many people that lead. It just depends on the capacity that they're involved with. I believe when you have the church, your organizations that you're involved with, and so on, there are a number of leaders that even if they're not in, say, a leadership role may be a leader, a de facto leader. Someone that has a lot of influence could possibly be a leader."

Keywords: childhood experiences, Black Families, Maine

Selected Audio: [Series 1: Family - Recordings](#)

Full Length Interview: [Home is Where I Make It: Mathews, James](#)



Mrs. June McKenzie



"And I work a lot with the NAACP and I try to tell parents that if your child is in school, even if you can't speak the language, go and let them know that you're interested in your child's future, you know. Like when my daughter was in the seventh grade and she was getting ready to figure out what she was gonna be and she applied. She was gonna go to college, and the teacher told her, 'You can take that off of there, because you're not college material.' And she came home and told me and I said, 'If she's willing enough to work hard to go to college, you have no right to tell her that she can't.' But otherwise if I hadn't been interested in what she was doing, then I would never know that that happened. And it happens today all the time, you know. They try to put kids of color in one group and so parents have to vigilant. I mean, they say even though the civil rights movement cleared up a lot of that stuff, you still have to be vigilant."

"I've been a member of the NAACP for 35-more than that-36 or 37 years."

"Well, mostly, you know, working with the NAACP. I don't know if you'd call them contributions, but I always man the phones at the NAACP office. Or mostly, before the last few years, we used to take the calls at home and then disseminate them to who they needed to go to. Now we have a new office which is being renovated. On 151 Federal Street. And we have the Martin Luther King breakfast. And I always coordinate the gospel extravaganza. We've done that; last year was our twentieth year. And I work sometimes with PeaceAction Maine. And, you know, a lot of the civil rights groups in town."

"Well, I don't think I'm a leader. I'm just a mother and a person that's interested in everybody's welfare. And I'm interested in my church. My pastor, Reverend Margaret Lawson, she's a good leader, too, in the community. She's active. And Reverend Jeffrey McIlwain, he's assistant pastor; he also works in the sheriff's department at the jail. He's the chaplain at the jail. We have a lot of senior citizens, like Mr. Talbot and Mr. Knowles-he's the president of the NAACP now. And Mrs. Johnson. And Mrs. Hershey. They're all active in doing things for youth, which is our most important product. If we can't get the youth going then-we need to because we're all getting older and we can't keep doing the things we're doing much longer. So we need to have young people in there to keep up the fight for us and for themselves. You know."



Mrs. June McKenzie (continued)



"I think it's important that I participate because a lot of people in middle age, like young adults. 30s and 35, they think that they just got their jobs because they were there, but the NAACP did a lot of work to try to make sure that the people with the right qualifications got the jobs that they were eligible for. And sometimes in job situations, there's a lot of discrimination. And we tried to work with the people and work with the employers and try to wipe that out. People in general think that there's not racism working today, but if you're Black you know every day of our life you face it somewhere. Maybe sometimes it's very subtle, and sometimes it's worse. That's the things that we do. And even though we work for the NAACP, we don't get paid. It's completely volunteer, but somebody has to do it. And it's hard to get young people to get out there and get interested because they figure they've got their jobs and they're doing fine and everything. But they don't realize that if it wasn't for the NAACP none of this would be possible, even in the city of Portland. We sued the school committee with the civil rights department in Massachusetts to make sure things are better, and we're still working on it. Even though they say they're cooperating, they aren't always. It's an ongoing thing. You have to be vigilant."

"Were you involved in the civil rights movement? Well, yes, since I worked with the NAACP, over civil rights things. We did marches and went to Washington and wrote letters and carried placards and did everything that we could. You know. Even though we were way up here in Maine, when the freedom fighters came here we realized that we had to get out there and fight. And that's what we did. We have to fight still today for housing and jobs and things; they'll try to keep you back, but you have to keep on keeping on. Do you have any memories of this time period? I went to one of the marches on Washington. Not the big one. You know, here in Maine, we mostly heard through the media about the things that were going on. But Mr. Knowles and Mr. Talbot were active; they went to the marches. And we'd do our part here, to try to make things the best that they are here. And during that time when Martin Luther King was doing his peaceful demonstrations. We were abreast of all that and did our best here to do whatever we could for freedom for everyone."

Mrs. June McKenzie (age 72; born 1929 in Portland Maine; fifth-generation Mainer; lived in Maine all her life)

Keywords: childhood experiences, Black Families, Maine

Full Length Interview: [Home is Where I Make It: McKenzie, June](#)



Mr. James Sheppard



"I'm a member of the Lions Club. The Lions Club may even be in Yugoslavia. The Lions Club is an international organization. Are you familiar with the Lions Club?"

"It's a group of volunteers, and they have as a symbol a lion. And it's all over the United States, all over the world, international. And I've been a member of that, and I was president of it for a while. And I brought something here from them, too-the Lions Club. I hope I have it so I can show it to you. Then you'll recognize this the next time you see it. Oh, here, this is a badge. That is from after I was president of the local Lions Club. This club is situated all over the country. They have chapters in every state, and in Europe, South America, Caribbean, Africa, too. Different chapters."

"They call it Black History Month. Time Warner cable, that's the television company, they asked me to give a lecture at the university about Black aviators during World War II. And Time Warner presented me with that plaque after I had completed the lecture. I've set up a program; title of the program is African American Aviators. It's about Black pilots in the United States, including the military. And I set up a slide show and an overhead projector show. It takes one hour to show them. My wife operates the projector, while I narrate up on the stage. Now I've done that at Colby College twice, I've did it at USM three times, and I've done it for some of the local clubs. I'm gonna do it Wednesday at a club out at Cape Elizabeth. And that's where I get these plaques from. And it's usually during Black History Month, February. In fact, Time Warner gave me one year's free cable service. Plus a lot of stuff they gave me: presents and trinkets. That's the sort of thing that I do, now, since I've retired."

Mr. James Sheppard (born in New York City in 1924; both his parents immigrated from Antigua in the West Indies to Canada, then they came to the United States in 1923; moved to Maine in 1971)

Keywords: parenting attitudes and behaviors, Black Families, Maine

Full Length Interview: [Home is Where I Make It: Sheppard, James](#)



Mr. Richard Tarrence



"I was involved for a while with the Boys' Club. It wasn't a very long stint because my son was involved in it. But I did get involved with that for a while and I helped out with some of the local kids. Helping to talk to them about the problems they would have, or were having. Like I said, I didn't stay in it very long because we moved on and he didn't stay in the Boy's Club very long. That was just one. Also, right now I'm involved with the AIDS program – Health 2000 program. I'm planning to attend a few conferences. It's been very enlightening. And they will be able to make some type of differences in that."

Mr. Richard Tarrence (age 57; born 1945 in Cleveland, Ohio; moved to Maine in October 1975)

Keywords: childhood experiences, children's experiences, Black Families, Maine

Selected Audio: [Series 1: Family - Recordings](#)

Full Length Interview: [Home is Where I Make It: Tarrence, Richard](#)