"My Witness" Podcast Transcript
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MMR: Welcome to the "My Witness" podcast, a collaboration between One Voice Nashville and Metro Arts to support *Witness Walls*, Nashville's Civil Rights-inspired public artwork, next to the Historic Metro Courthouse. In creating these podcasts, we hope to honor the fight for racial equality during the Nashville Civil Rights movement, educate youth about this history, and continue the conversation about social justice in our community.

OH: I used to start every child development class that I taught with this saying, "You can't teach what you don't know and you can't lead where you won't go."

IK: My name is Isabella Killius and I'm going to be interviewing Ms. Ola Hudson, who's been an educator in the past and a big part of the Nashville Civil Rights Movement. Can you describe when you first became aware of racism and its consequences?

OH: I was first aware of racism…I guess from birth. As soon as I realized that our schools were so different—of course, I was born in 1930—and my parents were from Selma, Alabama. My first trip to Selma was when I was 10 years old, and although in my hometown of Nashville, when we got on the bus, we knew that we sat in the back of the bus. But when I went to Selma, I was introduced to a new form of segregation in that when you got on the bus, there was a wooden divider that only the bus driver could move. … and regardless of where there was empty seats in front of that wooden divider, Negroes (as we were called then) were standing in the back. You stood until, or unless, the bus driver got up and moved to say that you could sit in the seats that were up there, and most of the time they didn't. So, I guess that was my first real introduction, because until that time, our whole world was the black community—my father worked at the National Baptist Sunday School Publishing Board, which is still located on 4th and Charlotte, and it is one of the publishing houses that publishes the Sunday School church literature. And since my father worked at a black establishment, we just didn't come in contact with the prejudices—we were aware of them, but we didn't come in contact with it. And I used to wonder why my friends would talk about going to town to shop, but that was something that we never did until I think, right before I went on that trip to Selma when I was 10 years old. My father carried me to town to get some things that I needed. And it was then that I saw the water fountains, and one had "white" over it and the other had "colored", and I asked my father "what was colored water?" And he struggled, you know, to try to answer, and then the second thing that happened on that trip when we got ready to purchase something, we stood at the counter and we were the first ones to get there but immediately some white customers came up and the clerk proceeded to wait on everybody except us and finally she said, "May I help you, boy?" And it was then that I realized why my dad never took us to town, that when we got ready to have shoes, he would just draw our footprints and he would do the purchasing and we just didn't have to come in contact with it. But it was then. Then I guess the next incident that we had was a thief or—I don't remember what the problem was—but the police came to our house and almost knocked the door down and just barged in, looking under beds and left without even

saying who they were or why they were there. So I was aware of it, and then of course when I went to school we noticed that all of our textbooks had the names of white schools. I joked when I started teaching and going to conferences, I said for a long time, we thought that East High and West End High and Cohn High were publishing companies rather than schools because all of our books had them, and of course many of the books had missing pages in them but when they got ready to buy new books, they bought them and gave them to the white schools and then we got the books that they used. So, those were my first impressions.

IK: Wow, that's so interesting. So you were a prominent educator, and you have been for a long time, so how did you use your role of an educator to teach your students and pupils the importance of diversity?

OH: My major was Home Economics. Of course when home economics started it was called domestic science and it was concentrated in two areas: foods and clothing. By the time I came along, the family became a very important subject for home economics and in fact my master's thesis dealt with the family centered home economics program, so being from a strong family, being from a family that was a very close-knit family, being from a family that was centered around the home, the church and the school, that was our world—the home, the church, and the school. I wanted for all of my students the kind of family that I had and I thought that my best means of doing that was relationships.

IK: That's so interesting too, wow! You were a young African-American woman growing up during a racially tense time, so can you talk about some of the challenges you encountered in order to attain an education and your goals?

OH: I'll have to say that the period in my life as an African-American or as a colored girl, as we were called then, was a very, very happy life. Although our lives were centered, our life experiences were centered, in a segregated community, it was the neighborhood that became our world and most of the people in the neighborhood knew each other, they cared about each other, everybody's mother was your mother, and you didn't get away with anything because anybody's mother could speak to you as if they were your mother. When we went to school, our teachers, although they taught out of books that were secondhand and some of them didn't have the pages, they knew what we needed. I would have to say I had some of the best teachers that anybody could ever have. They prepared us for the world that was to come, but wherever you lived in Nashville if you were black, if you lived within the city limits you went to Pearl. If you lived in the county, you went to Haynes. That meant that kids who lived in Bellevue had to go way to Trinity Lane to go to Haynes. But I said all that to say that, though we were segregated, we were integrated because we had every stratum of society represented at that school. The children of the president of Meharry and Fisk and Tennessee State and all of the doctors, all of the lawyers, all of the very well educated people were either our teachers or they were members of the PTA so we had an integrated, culturally integrated, student body and faculty. So we had a good upbringing.

IK: What lessons did your students give back to you, as an educator?

OH: My first teaching experience was when I was 23 years old. And I guess I weighed about 10 pounds less than I weigh now. And I had six girls in my class that challenged me. And I don't know whether they together decided they were going to challenge me but after they had tried

me for six weeks, I knew something had to give. Because I couldn't stand it and I don't think they could either. So I asked them to stay after school and they said we might as well act like this because whatever goes on in this school, we are blamed for it. So we might as well have a good time. And they went on to tell me all of the things that the teachers said about them and I knew they were telling the truth because some of the teachers told me to watch out and I said "well I have a proposal. I want us to pretend that we're just meeting—you don't know me and I don't know you." I said but I know I know some things you need, and you have some skills that I need, because at that time, the home economics teacher at that particular school had to prepare and serve a meal after every football game to all the teams, both teams, the coaches, and guests of coaches invited and the principal and his guests. And I had never worked at a restaurant, I'd had one course in quantity cooking but some of them worked in restaurants and I knew they had some skills that I needed. So we shook hands and decided we were gonna start over and I learned from those girls that every student wants to learn. And every student can learn. And it doesn't matter what you know—as far as students are concerned, but it matters that they know that you care about them. And if they think you care about them, they will protect you. They will inform you. They will love you until the end of your time. But I credit them with helping me really form my philosophy of teaching and after that, I never, ever had any trouble.

IK: How have racial relations and human relations changed in schools over the years?

OH: When the schools first became integrated, the faculties—it was common knowledge that they chose the strongest black teachers to send to the white schools. And we noticed that the youngest, least experienced white teachers were sent to the black schools. So my sister, who at that time was an elementary teacher at Napier School, which was just a few blocks from Cameron High where I taught, and I made a pact with each other that we were going to stay in the classroom because many of the other strong black teachers were being taken out to work in administrative positions and then some of the others taken out to go to the white schools…it was really depleting our school from some of its strongest resources, so we said to each other, we were gonna stay unless they told us that we lose our job, we were gonna stay in the black community. I became the chairman of the Human Relations Committee of the Metro Nashville Teachers Association, and in that role, as we saw integration looming, we decided that there needed to be some mechanism for teachers to have some training and some interaction, so we developed what we called "the bridge of understanding" and this information was shared with every level. After we developed this, our system received a grant from the federal government to have a department called human relations. And it was in that role that I really, really, really saw what was going on in the school system. And, I think your question was how has it changed? It has changed. One of the reasons it has changed was that, before we were allowed to be administrators and before we were on committees, we didn't know—we thought we knew what was going on but now at least you're at the table. I went to many schools. I went to one school one morning and the lady told me, "We don't have any problems, everything's fine, everything's fine here." Everything was always fine. And although everything was "fine," I wrapped up the conference and excused myself and by that time, the bus drove up, and she said in my ear, "Oh my God. Here comes that bus." And these were first grade children. Cause you see, the thing that really, really bothered us about the integration when it was first started, the black children were first graders, were bussed to the white communities. But the upper class white children were bused to the black communities. So our little kindergarteners and our first graders were the ones that caught it. It's better, but someone said we used to have Jim Crow, but now we have James Crow, Esq. and that one of the biggest problems that we're having is about housing.

Until we do something about that, unless you have a median income, you can hardly afford to live in Nashville. So more and more black families are being replaced. They are buying up houses and building all of these…and just in my neighborhood, I live in the Melrose area, the hottest part of town…12 South, you've probably heard. They tore down the house next door to me and built a house that sold for $939,000. You know poor people can't afford that. It's changed. And the thing that bothers me is that the people who have worked the hardest and still have to work the hardest for the standard of living to be maintained are the ones that they are pushing out. The service people. If you work as a waitress or as a clerk at a store or something, you can't hardly afford to live in Nashville.

IK: Yeah. I wanted to close on this question: you've been…you talked about earlier in the interview the importance of family. And even before the interview I was talking to you and you were telling me the importance of family. Can you just elaborate on that, in general? Just why do you think family is so influential and important?

OH: Every child that's born is going to need, and in most cases will get, at least 18 years of supervised training or interaction. And the only decision that we have to make as a community or as a society is whether they're gonna get that on the front end or whether they're gonna get that on the back end. Meaning, unless we do something about education, paying teachers, good teachers, the price, the cost that they're worth, giving those teachers the latitude to do what they know to do instead of making all of these rules and regulations, we aren't going to have educated children and if they drop out of school, if they can't perform, then they are out on the streets getting in trouble. Or if we don't help to train young people how to be parents and help them to know what children need. And in order to be a good parent, you've got to know and then you've got to do what you want your child to do. If they don't get it here, they are gonna get it in prison. They're gonna get it in hospitals because they have overdosed or they're gonna get it out on the street somewhere. So I think all we have to do as a society is to make up our minds and by doing nothing says to me that we've made up our minds that we don't care where they get it.

IK: Ms. Hudson, thank you! You are such an influential woman and I feel so grateful to have been able to talk to you. Thank you so much.

OH: Well, I believe in people.

IK: Thank you.

MMR: We hope you enjoyed listening to this "My Witness" podcast. To hear more podcasts or for more information on the Witness Walls public artwork, go to witnesswalls.org. Metro Arts' Public Art Collection is funded through the Percent for Public Art Program with support from the Tennessee Arts Commission.

Transcribed by Allison Summers, Metro Arts Commission, 2016