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Oral history interview with Elma Lewis, 1997 July 25 and Sept. 19

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Elma Lewis on July 25, and Sept. 19, 1997. The interview was conducted at Ms. Lewis' homeby Robert Brown for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose. This is a rough transcription that may include typographical errors.

Interview

ROBERT BROWN: We're beginning our interview with Ms. Elma Lewis in Roxbury, Massachusetts, in her home. This is July 25, 1997 and it's Robert Brown, the interviewer. Perhaps we could begin, I thought, with the things we've talked about a bit that you may have other things you might want to go talk about, maybe about your family background, some of your early memories? You told me that your parents both came from Barbados.

ELMA LEWIS: Yes, they did.

MR. BROWN: And they were both raised there. Could you talk a bit about that? Your mother, I believe, either had a family or had been married in Barbados. Did they both come up here about the same time?

MS. LEWIS: No. My mother and father did not know each other in Barbados. They were from a different class structure in Barbados and probably would not have known each other if they had remained in Barbados. They're a product of American, how shall I say, socialization.

MR. BROWN: Ah, up here?

MS. LEWIS: Yes.

MR. BROWN: But down there is a little, rather rigid?

MS. LEWIS: That's right. You know, the English system prevailed and prevails most places where the English have been the dominant rulers. They have affected the culture of the people.

MR. BROWN: Mm hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. LEWIS: But my father came here as a 19 year old boy and he came as immigrants come - black, white, pink or green - from all points in the world. They come seeking the opportunity to work in this supposedly classless, raceless society. When they get here they find out that it is different. But that is the thing which America says and teaches and people expect, only when the black immigrant comes it's different.

MR. BROWN: And even your father thought it was going to be much better than it was?

MS. LEWIS: Oh, of course. Everybody does. Everybody does, but it isn't when they get here. When they get here they meet a different reality.

MR. BROWN: Now, when would he have come? You were born in '21. Did he come -

MS. LEWIS: That's right.

MR. BROWN: - somewhat before that?

MS. LEWIS: Just a bit before that. He was 24 years old when I was born and he came here when he was 19. He was 19 years old and he came because a friend of his had come before him and saved the passage. And as immigrants of any particular group do, they send for each other and they work together to bring the next one and the next one. And that's the way he came.My mother, however, came differently. And as a slightly older young woman she had been married in Barbados. Not in Barbados, I'm sorry. She had been married in Trinidad. Her parents had sent her down to Trinidad to marry a Barbadian boy who was doing business there whose name was Athalston Corbin. And he shortly -

MR. BROWN: You mean they arranged that she be married?

MS. LEWIS: Arranged marriage. And shortly after that he died of typhoid fever and left her with two little babies, over two years old and 18 months old: my brothers Don Leon Corbin and Clarence, George Clarence Corbin. When he died she was returned to her father's home with her children.

MR. BROWN: Back in Barbados?

MS. LEWIS: Back in Barbados. And she, not wanting to go into another arranged marriage, asked her father to give her a passage to America, and he did. And she came bringing her young cousin, Rose Jordan. Rose Jordan had her 16th birthday in America. My mother brought her to their cousin, James Jordan, whose granddaughter resides in that house next to me now.

MR. BROWN: Oh, right here on Homestead Street?

MS. LEWIS: No, it's the corner of Walnut Avenue. The address is Walnut Avenue, but it is the corner of Homestead Street. And then started a long tradition. That might have been the year 1919, 1918 that my father came. I would have to look at my mother's passport to make sure the year, that she came. But they met and married and I was born. When I was 11 months old her parents died, her father died in Barbados. Her mother had died a little before. And she went and got her children and brought them here and we grew up as a family of five in Roxbury. And my older brother - my younger brother, the younger of those two boys, that is.

MR. BROWN: Yes, George.

MS. LEWIS: George Corbin became a physician and died quite early at just slightly under 35 years of age. He died of leukemia in 1950. My older brother lives downstairs in this two family house which my parents bought in 1944. They bought this house. And he lives down there now and is 83 years old.

MR. BROWN: And he - well, we can talk about it but he went on in his career as -

MS. LEWIS: He went on and became a classical pianist and organist and then subsequent to that he became a psychological counselor for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

MR. BROWN: Your parents were both rather, as we'd say today, politicized when they got here; do you think so?

MS. LEWIS: Oh, yes. Oh, yes, they were. But my father most surely was political. My mother was interested in education and elegance and well being, as any woman of her class would have been. And my father was very hurt with the promise that America had not fulfilled and he was very - first he subscribed and listened to Booker T. Washington but found that to be a somewhat less than elevating message, and followed Marcus Garvey. And until now we subscribe to the doctrine of Garvey, Garveyism. The "Up You Mighty People, You Can What You Will."

MR. BROWN: As opposed to the Washington -

MS. LEWIS: Accommodation.

MR. BROWN: Accommodation, yeah. So he as a very young man then, or perhaps even from Barbados or was it -

MS. LEWIS: No. When he came here he heard Garvey. He said he heard him when he was 20 or so and he thought that that was for him and he followed him. And several unpleasant experiences with racism made him understand that that was really a way to go.

MR. BROWN: Did he discover immediately - he came to Boston, is that right?

MS. LEWIS: He came to Boston.

MR. BROWN: Did he discover right away that it was quite a racist element in society?

MS. LEWIS: Well, yes. You see, I think that those young people had a much harder time. If it's hard now, think of what it was then. He came to work for 19 cents an hour in laboring work. He worked several kinds of work. One thing he did, he worked - no, let me, I'm ahead of myself. He went hoping to get a job. He was a very smart boy and he wanted to work at a place like the

place he'd worked in Barbados, and that would be S.S. Pierce in Boston, but they laughed at him.

MR. BROWN: A fine grocer.

MS. LEWIS: Yes. They thought, well, how ridiculous that he expected that. They could offer him a job as a janitor. So he went then to work at the docks unloading sugar from the sugar boats as they came in. And he had to work six days a week, 10 hours a day, one weekend off in the summer without pay. Those were -

MR. BROWN: He couldn't expect to even be a clerk?

MS. LEWIS: No, no, nothing of that.

MR. BROWN: Or anything like that?

MS. LEWIS: Nothing of that type. That did not come until I was a college girl. But after several very unpleasant experiences with Hunt Spiller where the foreman didn't give him the promotion because the foreman was white and somebody from Poland was white so he gave it to the Polish person rather than to him, my father - my father thought he would get it because they were both of English background.

MR. BROWN: Yeah.

MS. LEWIS: But he saw then, as he said, that accidental nationality had nothing to do with it. Race had everything to do with it. And he then therefore had better look at this thing racially.

MR. BROWN: Yeah, yeah. He had assumed he was part of the British nation or -

MS. LEWIS: That's right. That's right.

MR. BROWN: And that this, who is, Hunts Miller was -

MS. LEWIS: Hunt Spiller was the name of the corporation.

MR. BROWN: I see. But they -

MS. LEWIS: That was the corporation. And the foreman there did not give him the promotion, which would have given him two cents more an hour. And he said even two cents was withheld from him. So then he followed Garvey after that.

MR. BROWN: And did that mean in the early days for him what, organizing, going to meetings?

MS. LEWIS: Well, we went to meetings. When you say organizing I think you're seeing a thing that came later.

MR. BROWN: [Inaudible.]

MS. LEWIS: No, you just - don't add to. Just hear. Just hear. The reason we never get it right is because people add their knowledge.

MR. BROWN: Yeah.

MS. LEWIS: And there isn't any knowledge there. There is no precedent for the way we have been treated. And it never gets straightened out because when we tell it is edited. It doesn't need addition. It's just as we say it. It's very, very simple. Very simple. Somebody looks at you and they say, "You are black, we will not allow you." Then you don't organize. Organize what? They've killed you. That was a different day. The organization was among black people. You get together and you do what you will. They worked hard, they saved their money, they educated their children and they hoped again and he died bitter because he saw that after all of the education in America there was still blocks against black advancement, that his children had two and three degrees apiece. They were doctors, they were everything. They couldn't hope to be presidents. There was as yet one senator and then that one senator was Edward Brooke and that one senator was being abused.

MR. BROWN: From Massachusetts?

MS. LEWIS: That's right.

MR. BROWN: But he was being abused?

MS. LEWIS: And he was being abused. That there was no way through. That I would still have to expect that in my lifetime and my children's lifetime and grandchildren's they'd work for a way through. So that the Garvey message of "You must have your own," was the message that he sought. So when the major society seems to say, "you are being bitter and you are divorcing yourself," that is not true. We have been divorced.

MR. BROWN: Yeah.

MS. LEWIS: They seem to be saying to us, "try not to notice that you are being hurt," but that is not possible.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. So the Garveyism was within the black community?

MS. LEWIS: It was a black movement, the United Negro Improvement Association. UNIA, United Negro Improvement Association. And it sought to bring all elements of the African diaspora together to work to own steamships, to have African liberation of the African countries. He did live to see that.

MR. BROWN: Yeah.

MS. LEWIS: I don't know if in my lifetime I'll live to see them capable, but that's fine, because when you finally have your own head and your own license you will get yourself together sooner or later.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. So your father lived until when?

MS. LEWIS: Nineteen seventy six.

MR. BROWN: How did he meet your mother? How did that come about?

MS. LEWIS: Well, it's a small community and they met socially going to UNIA meetings, which met every Sunday, and they had lecturers. And I wouldn't call them organizers. They were lecturers they came and lectured.

MR. BROWN: So your mother went and participated?

MS. LEWIS: That's right. She was a Black Cross nurse. And they had - he met her at church, St. Cyprian's Church.

MR. BROWN: An Anglican church?

MS. LEWIS: That's right. And even in the church, the church had snubbed them and they had had to form their own parish. St. Cyprian's is the parish that came out of that.

MR. BROWN: Your mother, her political interests grew after she got here also?

MS. LEWIS: Yes. She was not naturally political. He would have been political no matter where he was or of what race or whatever.

MR. BROWN: You mentioned the Black Cross nurse. Was this a special service?

MS. LEWIS: Within the UNIA. We sought to be self sufficient.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. So some of your earliest memories of various activities and -

MS. LEWIS: My earliest memory is three years old, standing on the stage reciting a poem about the beauty of black women. I played with dolls that looked like me. I, everything. I had a very strong cultural identity from the beginning. And it was not very possible for me to be denigrated by white people because I always had a strong sense of self, always. And I have been encouraged in my teaching and in my directing of people to give them that same sense. That liberates. That does not want to do any damage to anybody else but it strengthens one's self. I don't know, that seems to have been hard for non blacks to accept. I don't know why, because everybody wants that for himself. Every man wants it.

MR. BROWN: Yeah.

MS. LEWIS: So I would wonder why anybody would deny it to another.

MR. BROWN: Mm hmm, mm hmm. [Affirmative.] But that has happened repeatedly, hasn't it?

MS. LEWIS: Oh, yes. No, that's that story. It doesn't happen repeatedly, it's an ongoing saga. It's an ongoing saga.

MR. BROWN: So at three you were reciting a poem about the beauty of black women.

MS. LEWIS: Mm hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. BROWN: And were there, I suppose there were children's groups?

MS. LEWIS: No, this was to adults.

MR. BROWN: To adults?

MS. LEWIS: To adults. The UNIA meeting. Every meeting they had a - every Sunday they had a program at 3:00 p.m. We'd go to church in the morning, went to Sunday school, came home, had our dinner and went to UNIA meeting. Now, my father also went every Sunday to a concert and a lecture. That was the way he spent his free time. He enjoyed European classical music to the 11th power. And he found his money spent going to Symphony Hall. He went to hear singers and he went to hear the orchestra. He loved the orchestra until he died. He loved it. He has left all kinds of recorded music that he used to go to Boston Music and buy all the time to just listen after he didn't go anymore. And he went to - he was a member of Ford Hall Forum until he died. He went to hear somebody every Sunday night.

MR. BROWN: Lectures on topics of importance?

MS. LEWIS: Topics of the day.

MR. BROWN: You mentioned that his conversation was always serious?

MS. LEWIS: Always serious. He had no frivolous conversation, no frivolous activity. He worked and he studied and he read. And one of his great sadnesses was when his eyesight diminished and he couldn't read.

MR. BROWN: Were you able to get him the tapes you could listen to or things of that sort?

MS. LEWIS: Oh, that was - you keep forgetting the timing.

MR. BROWN: Even in '70?

MS. LEWIS: No, that wasn't that available, no.

MR. BROWN: No.

MS. LEWIS: This is all very new.

MR. BROWN: Yeah, it really is. You mentioned that he was a good friend of the father of John Wilson.

MS. LEWIS: Yes, a lot of those men, and Mel King. He had gone to school. Do you know Melvin King?

MR. BROWN: Mm hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. LEWIS: He had gone to school with Melvin King's father. In fact, he was the best man at their wedding. But that is not surprising because in immigrant communities immigrants all live together when they come over. And they've known each other from the old country at that age. And when they come that's what they do. Now, those men were serious men. There was no frivolity in them. They couldn't afford to be. Had they been, you would not know the names of their children because the children, black children in America, particularly male, who have not really serious raising are soon demolished by society. And if you see any black man over 40 standing up then you know he has had very serious raising. It was not casual and it happened to be, it was not loving and soft and it happened to be. No, it was seriously concentrated, directed

by, usually by the father because the society was patriarchal and we just accepted that.

MR. BROWN: Mm hmm. [Affirmative.] The father ruled.

MS. LEWIS: The father ruled. It was a patriarchal society.

MR. BROWN: You said that your parents, both of them, were adamant that you three children make a mark, make your mark.

MS. LEWIS: Yes. I don't remember them seeing it as making a mark. I remember seeing it as salvation, self salvation and the advancement of the race. You were taught to advance the race, to do everything for first your family and then others like you, because that was their only opportunity out of destruction. The society was made to destroy them and if they were not going to be destroyed that was your responsibility. It was not so that somebody would know my name, it was so that I may do good. We were raised to do good, to be good people, advance the cause of other people. We were also very, very steeped in Christian doctrine. So the Ten Commandants were your Bible, you know. If you didn't know anything else, you knew those. You knew exactly what to do and you were very - very, very moralistic people. Very moralistic people.

MR. BROWN: And did the UNIA, things were discussed there and then those things you learned in Sunday school and at St. Cyprian's, did they mesh together rather smoothly or was there -

MS. LEWIS: Well, yes, I would think so. I would think so. Except that at church you don't hear much about belligerence and in UNIA you heard, "Fight, fight, fight with all your might," you know. But yes, they meshed together smoothly, just as in any other society, any other element of society. What you teach at school, what you teach at church go together.

MR. BROWN: Right.

MS. LEWIS: What you teach anywhere in the society goes together. And if you want to see what resulted of that, just look at the people it produced. They're around you and we are talking to them every day. Of course, some people do not abide by what they're taught and some people carry it to another level. In the case, Louis Farrakhan and Malcolm X also come out of that experience.

MR. BROWN: And so they came at one time or another. They were from right here, weren't they?

MS. LEWIS: That's right, and they came out of that particular experience. That experience was not right here. That was a worldwide experience, the Garvey movement. But they came out of that experience and they did come from here, both. And I think that you'll find that a great deal of progress that blacks have made in America along political and financial lines did come from this area.

MR. BROWN: Do you think that was because there simply happened to be -

MS. LEWIS: No.

MR. BROWN: - some gifted people here? Charismatic?

MS. LEWIS: No, I don't think that. I have a very strong faith in divine providence and I don't know why a just God would put the gifted people in any one location.

MR. BROWN: No. [Laughter.]

MS. LEWIS: [Laughter.] So I think that it's probably because the conditions were of such. There were not as many - there were very, very few blacks. When I was a child in Boston there were only 20,000 blacks here, so there was not a black population so that I'd go to a black school. There was not a large concentration to fight at jobs or anything like that. There was just a very small community. And it was possible, despite the fact that you were being oppressed, to make inroads on understanding things and education. And it was possible to get a foothold, let's say, to get a foothold. And then when World War II came, that opened up the floodgate.

MR. BROWN: Through employment?

MS. LEWIS: That's right.

MR. BROWN: And large -

MS. LEWIS: That's right. They needed your efforts in the factories, et cetera, and so a better wage had to be paid and you could use the better wages to do better things. It was possible for more children to go to college, all kinds of things of that nature.

MR. BROWN: Even though this was an oppressive society here because it was -

MS. LEWIS: It wasn't oppressive here. America was oppressive.

MR. BROWN: But I'm just thinking of the Boston situation.

MS. LEWIS: Well, I can't think of Boston. I think it's the wrong thing to do. People do that. Boston was not - Boston was a different oppression of you. In the South they were lynching you and burning you on trees. In Boston it was oppression of a different quality. But it's America. This was the form it took here.

MR. BROWN: But you were able to get a foothold here partly because of the small numbers and being in school, for example?

MS. LEWIS: Well, I was able to go to school. And then when World War II came then here came the opportunity for employment. Prior to that there was not the opportunity for employment. But you got remarkable people like Elwood McKinney, who later became a district court judge, who was a Pullman porter at South Station after he was a Harvard graduate. And that's a sad thing to have to say. That does not happen to a boy who is not black.

MR. BROWN: Yeah, no.

MS. LEWIS: But you see, from the time my father migrated here to World War II that was still true. Elwood McKinney was a lot, lot better than that. And my father migrating to Boston, that's 20, 30 years - 30 years later. And he's a Harvard graduate by then. Harvard graduates couldn't find jobs if they were black.

MR. BROWN: And then later he was able to -

MS. LEWIS: They were able to -

MR. BROWN: - become a judge?

MS. LEWIS: That's right. But that's a lifetime wasted.

MR. BROWN: Yeah.

MS. LEWIS: You don't recapture those years. And we're constantly asked, "aren't you so excited this is the first this and the first that?" No, because you think of a lifetime wasted. You would not be so happy if your son carried bags at South Station until he was 40, 50 years old to become an acknowledged professional when he'd graduated from college at the regular age of 21.

MR. BROWN: It was only after World War II or during the war -

MS. LEWIS: No, during the war. So my early memories are very complicated. There is no - we lived complex lives, as we still do, but they're not as complex as they were then. But we live very complex lives, and I'm sometimes worried because there's a charade going on now between younger people - not young people, younger people and the predominant class in America that all is well, when we all know it isn't.

MR. BROWN: Mm hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. LEWIS: And the constant querying us as to things that, that's rubbing salt in a wound. The wound is - just rub salt in it.

MR. BROWN: Well, you then were going further to school during World War II, but before that your brothers -

MS. LEWIS: They were completed.

MR. BROWN: They were completed and they had remarkable - I mean, they were precocious, weren't they, because one you mentioned already went to Harvard.

MS. LEWIS: Yes.

MR. BROWN: And can you talk about that? Your mother was determined to -

MS. LEWIS: He walked to Harvard. Yes, we were determined people. We were determined people. And I look at people my age. I look at the black population that's 60 or 70 years old and I think that people should look at them with tremendous respect instead of abuse. How they went through what they went through to arrive at this, how there comes to be a John Wilson or any of those people is remarkable. They had to come from very determined people, very determined people. That's not just true in my case, that's true all along. And we as children, these children say, "I'm going to be a movie star." We didn't say those things. We said, "I'm going to do magnificent things," whatever they were, different in each case. And they were all for the edification of someone else. It was never, "I'm going to buy a big Cadillac," or any of that.

MR. BROWN: Yeah.

MS. LEWIS: And most of us have, in fact, done that, have used our abilities to further the cause of others. I look at this small community of Roxbury. Do you know the name Ruth Patson?

MR. BROWN: Yes.

MS. LEWIS: I grew up with her. She called me up a couple of days ago to see how I was and she said, "I don't think we've done badly for a small group of poor kids, do you?" See, and she grew up in a one parent family and her mother doing day laboring work, and her mother was dead when she was 19. She was dead, yeah, and left that plugging in there. "You have to do that, you have to do that." And she married and had three little babies and then a few years still plugged and plugged and plugged. That's the way we were brought up.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. Yeah.

MS. LEWIS: And even if you did go to college you didn't know anything about the college dances and things like that. You didn't know anything about that. I knew nothing about any social life the years that I was in college. I knew go to class and work. And we were privileged to have that because other kids came out of high school and went to waitress or mother's helper or work in the factory or whatever. So if we went to college, no matter how skimpily - with one set of clothing or two - you were privileged.

MR. BROWN: You're saying that materialism and buying something, instant gratification, was not in your -

MS. LEWIS: Or if you were going to get gratification ever. When my brother was going to medical school no black doctor had a hospital affiliation and you still were going to be a doctor without hospital affiliation. So it had nothing to do with instant gratification.

MR. BROWN: How were -

MS. LEWIS: We had personal gratification is what I'm talking. There was no concept of personal gratification, not instant or otherwise.

MR. BROWN: How did he manage that with no black -

MS. LEWIS: Well, he went - he took his - the other thing was that you were supposed to not be allowed to pass.

MR. BROWN: You mean it was sort of -

MS. LEWIS: The medical board.

MR. BROWN: Oh, really?

MS. LEWIS: You were just automatically failed. When people talk about affirmative action, there had to be affirmative action. And the young people don't even know how to answer that question. It angers me, because we had to have affirmative action to keep from being robbed. That's what affirmative action's about. It's not about for giving the undeserving. And everybody knows that but nobody articulates it. That's what it was about and is about. And if it's being wrongly used, use it rightly, but don't say it isn't needed. Big difference. And when he didn't have hospital - he went around to every hospital and asked them one by one by one by one until

he met a just man who put his - Harry Derow, who was a Jewish doctor at Beth Israel. And Dr. Derow took him under him and they went to the board of Beth Israel. I can't remember. I did know for years the name of the board chairman. And he was the first black doctor in Boston with hospital affiliation, and that was Beth Israel.

MR. BROWN: Now, when would that have been? Was it before World War II?

MS. LEWIS: No, it was at the end of the -

MR. BROWN: The end?

MS. LEWIS: Mm hmm, the end of the war.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. Yeah.

MS. LEWIS: So you see, the history of us coming through is not that long.

MR. BROWN: No. No. You've mentioned that your brother and your mother, I guess, went - your mother went directly -

MS. LEWIS: My mother.

MR. BROWN: - to the Harvard president, right?

MS. LEWIS: Yeah, and asked to let him in, which she didn't have the tuition to pay.

MR. BROWN: Right.

MS. LEWIS: And then she paid it as she got it in bits and pieces and drabbles, the way she bought the piano in bits and pieces and drabbles.

MR. BROWN: That your brother could use, right?

MS. LEWIS: That's right.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. Yeah. You also mentioned that despite this poverty there was never any let up in your parents' indication that you children were to do the best you could for other people and so forth.

MS. LEWIS: No, there was never - that's a given. That's a given.

MR. BROWN: That was right there.

MS. LEWIS: And that's a given among - it's not in the - that's a given among immigrants. Watch them anywhere today. And that's what's making the Congress all angry with the immigrant, but they ought to be pleased with them.

MR. BROWN: Sure.

MS. LEWIS: They ought to be pleased with them because that's part of what made those men congressmen, the immigrants who brought them here, because I take it they're not native Americans, the congressmen.

MR. BROWN: Yeah.

MS. LEWIS: Immigrants brought them here and those immigrants worked hard for each other and other people. That's how I got to be.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. You were - I wanted to [inaudible] by asking, you were always doing some kind of work?

MS. LEWIS: Always, always.

MR. BROWN: At three you were reciting poetry.

MS. LEWIS: And at 75 it's very, very hard for me to understand that I should sit here. I have to work now. It's impossible for me to understand how not to work. I'm guilty when I don't work.

MR. BROWN: Mm hmm, mm hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. LEWIS: I never, I never was developed to a life of leisure. A life of pleasant work, yes, but work. You must be a contributor. And that's what we do with children in our family until today. You have to be productive. There's no entertaining you. You don't come in the world to be entertained, you come into the world to make it a better place. And that's automatic. You come into the world with that. That's what you're here for, to make the world a better place.

MR. BROWN: So, for example, you said you began work at age 11 doing I think you call it platform work?

MS. LEWIS: Reading.

MR. BROWN: Readings. And this was not merely to, exalt in yourself or to -

MS. LEWIS: Oh, no.

MR. BROWN: - please your mother, say.

MS. LEWIS: No, no. Make money.

MR. BROWN: Make money.

MS. LEWIS: And not to make money to buy clothes or something of that type. To make money - you saved your money from the beginning. I'm paying this little boy here $5 a week.

MR. BROWN: The little boy who brought me up here?

MS. LEWIS: Yes. He's my grandnephew. To sweep around the house outside, the yard and the gutters. And he's got to put $2 of it away for college and he's got to put another $2 away. He's only got $1 a week to spend. He's got to put another $2 a week away for his Christmas presents and this, that and the other thing, but other people.

MR. BROWN: Right.

MS. LEWIS: That's a tradition. That's a way of life.

MR. BROWN: And so with you when you did your readings, your platform readings.

MS. LEWIS: The same thing. They took the money and they developed - when my father died I was 55 and he had $1,500 left that was my money I had earned when I was young.

MR. BROWN: And he had kept that?

MS. LEWIS: I had the bankbook then. The bankbook said Claremont Lewis, custodian for Elma Lewis. I was 55 years old.

MR. BROWN: And he held that.

MS. LEWIS: Waiting for me to be broke, I guess.

MR. BROWN: [Laughter.] Where did you go to high school and was high school an important time for you?

MS. LEWIS: No, I didn't like that.

MR. BROWN: No? Was there any special schooling?

MS. LEWIS: No, that was, it was in my way. It was in my way. I started, I started at Boston. I started at Girls Latin School but I didn't finish there because it was preventing me from going to dance class and other things that I wanted to do.

MR. BROWN: You by then were, wanted to dance?

MS. LEWIS: I knew what I - I always knew what I was going to do, always, all my life.

MR. BROWN: What was that?

MS. LEWIS: That I was going to do things, to act, to dance, make music. I always knew that so I didn't see the point in me learning six languages, et cetera, which I'd had to do, but -

MR. BROWN: Probably at Latin?

MS. LEWIS: Yeah.

MR. BROWN: That was very academic.

MS. LEWIS: Well, I did it. I did it right up to the senior year but then I said no, it's keeping me, and I didn't do it. So that's not important to me.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. But now the dancing, what did that stem from? Was there, were you, a certain kind of dancing you wanted to do or interpretative?

MS. LEWIS: No, no. It was ballet that I - I taught ballet for 30 years. But my nursery school record shows that that was always my inclination. If you read my nursery school record, which I'll let you read sometime in one of these interviews, I was two years and 11 months old and I already chose that that's my direction. I came in this world to go a certain way. So when my father says I asked him to teach me the poem maybe I did. He says I did. He said I saw a child doing that and I said that's what I want to do. And he was all too happy to do it.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. So did dance, dancing mean lessons year after year, lessons?

MS. LEWIS: Oh, yes. Oh, yes, day after day after day. I used to do it every day. That's why school was getting in my way. [Laughter.]

MR. BROWN: Sure.

MS. LEWIS: Every day after school.

MR. BROWN: Primarily ballet?

MS. LEWIS: Ballet, yeah. And I studied tap and, well, the other stuff, yeah. Tap, whatever. I was a good tap dancer.

[tape stops, re starts]

MR. BROWN: Continuing interviews with Elma Lewis. This is September 19, 1997. We talked a bit about your childhood and youth in Boston and I thought maybe we could begin today by discussing your college going to Emerson College in Boston. That was in what, in the 1940s. And what did you - you graduated there in 1943. And can you talk a bit about that, what Emerson was like, what it meant to you, what you had in mind from that education?

MS. LEWIS: Well, when I went to Emerson it was late 1939, just out of high school. And my father had liked Emerson. Actually the person who led me in that direction was a Bertha Muzzy, who had been my elocution teacher as a child. She had gone to Emerson College. She lived in Spencer, Mass. And I, oh, I just loved her. She was very dainty. When I knew her I thought, elderly white woman. Perhaps she wasn't as elderly as I thought but you know how children look at people. She had coiffed gray hair which was very stylish and she had a slim, stylish body and wore beautiful clothes. And she came to the Cooper Community Center.

MR. BROWN: That was down in, that was in -

MS. LEWIS: In lower Roxbury.

MR. BROWN: Lower Roxbury. And you began -

MS. LEWIS: And I was there. And I don't know why I was there because it was not something my father liked to let me do. But she thought that I had talent when I was a little girl and so she had me come to her apartment and take private lessons for a dollar a lesson when I was little. And I was so short I couldn't reach up to press the elevator button, but I never did tell that to my parents because I knew that if I told them that they would stop me from going. So I used to go earlier than my lesson and wait for somebody to come that needed to go up in the elevator.

MR. BROWN: And let you in.

MS. LEWIS: And then I would tell them what floor I wanted. [Laughter.] And they would press the button. And I was - enchanted afternoons with Ms. Muzzy.

MR. BROWN: And you would go there to what, learn rhetoric and speaking?

MS. LEWIS: That's right, and elocution and poetry, poetic interpretation and the passages from plays and other things. And that's how I happened to earn the living of which I speak at 11, because she had so directed me. Now, as I was going through high school it was her ambition for me to go to Emerson and my father agreed with that wholeheartedly.

MR. BROWN: Because your father was very interested in your cultural upbringing, is that right?

MS. LEWIS: Oh, yes. And he liked that oratory, et cetera. He was week after week going to hear an orator. And he cleaned a building where Emerson - I'm not sure whether Emerson was in that building or not. It was on Huntington Avenue where you saw Emersonians coming and going. And he also saw children's plays. The [inaudible] Major Players used to put those on in what is now the Huntington Theater. It belongs to BU. But it wasn't the Huntington Theater then.

MR. BROWN: That he saw -

MS. LEWIS: I'll remember the name of it after a while. I forget now. And he saw me going in that direction so he encouraged me to go to Emerson. But Emerson was not necessarily a wholeheartedly happy experience for me. I was the one black there and I was there about a month before anybody even said hello to me.

MR. BROWN: Really?

MS. LEWIS: Yes.

MR. BROWN: Had that been true before in the larger community where people -

MS. LEWIS: No. I told you how I lived in the larger community before, that we lived in a mixed community for one thing.

MR. BROWN: But there at the college they were quite different?

MS. LEWIS: Well, that was a totally white environment, totally white. And they just ignored me entirely. I can't say they swore at me or hit me or something of that type, but they ignored me completely for about a month. And then after that month somebody chose to speak to me and then another couple of kids. And the one girl's name was Doris Miller. She was a Jewish girl. I became very, very friendly with Doris and we went all through the four years together. I had a couple of other friends. Norman Lear was my classmate.

MR. BROWN: Norman?

MS. LEWIS: Lear.

MR. BROWN: Lear.

MS. LEWIS: But Norman dropped out in the second year and went to Hollywood. He never finished. And therefore I know him now as an adult but I had missed going to school with him.

MR. BROWN: Yeah.

MS. LEWIS: But Emerson, I loved what we studied. I loved it. The first couple of years I did X number of drama courses that were drama from the beginning to Shakespeare, Shakespearean drama, drama this, drama that, and modern American plays and modern British plays. And a phenomenal amount of literature did I digest.

MR. BROWN: Was this reading or going to plays?

MS. LEWIS: Both.

MR. BROWN: Both.

MS. LEWIS: Both. Well, courses involve many things, you know, when a professor structures a course. I took courses in these things and then I spent all of my other spare time - I was by that

time teaching at dancing school, Doris Jones' school where I told you I went.

MR. BROWN: Mm hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. LEWIS: And I was by this time an adjunct teacher there. So all of my time was spent going either to Doris Jones', to the ballet, or sneaking in the backs of theaters - Doris Miller and I and a few other souls who thought we were destined to be great actors and actresses - or on the Emerson campus in this kind of study. And Emerson put on an incredible number of plays, and still does, with its students. But I was never included. I think in the whole four years -

[END TAPE 1 SIDE A]

MS. LEWIS: In the whole four years that I was there I got to be in one play. I was only cast once in Much Ado About Nothing and then I was cast as a man, and I was an unlikely man, so that -

MR. BROWN: Well, was that simply because you were black?

MS. LEWIS: Yes. What else?

MR. BROWN: Because - so you missed that aspect of the training?

MS. LEWIS: That's right, and I never got to go to any social events. When people talk about their college years, I don't have social events to talk about. I never went to proms and dances and doing sororities and things like that. I'm an AKA and I was made AKA honorary in the black society because I was, that was not available to me.

MR. BROWN: And AKA was a sorority?

MS. LEWIS: Is a sorority, to which I still belong.

MR. BROWN: Yeah.

MS. LEWIS: But after I achieved in life. I didn't join any sorority in my college years. But AKA made me honorary sister more recently, maybe 20, 30 years ago.

MR. BROWN: So your time at Emerson then was a bit of a strain as well as a great opportunity?

MS. LEWIS: Well, it wasn't a strain because I - well, I hear people saying that all the time. I knew where I was going, I knew what I was going for.

MR. BROWN: Yeah.

MS. LEWIS: And when you look at people my age who got an education that's what it was, unless you went to a black college in the South. We knew where we were going.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. And you knew you wanted to go there principally to be an actress?

MS. LEWIS: I wanted, I thought I was going to be an actress. I thought I was going to New York. As soon as I graduated I was going to free myself from these manacles and go to New York. But that was equally unrealistic. What was I going to play in New York? You don't hear of actors and actresses. One, one, one is what you got then. And then what did they do? They played mammies or slaves or something. That was not going to be suitable to my temperament. I couldn't have done that. So that's the story of my life at Emerson. Years later, 1968, when I had graduated, the president called me and asked to come over and visit me. And he came over to visit me and to ask me if I would accept an honorary doctorate at the next commencement. And at that time that's when I became sad. I wasn't sad at tears welled up in my eyes and I said, "an 18 year old girl needed kindness. A 47 year old woman doesn't need honors, but I'll accept it because maybe it'll enhance my earning ability." And I went and got an honorary degree at the same time Norman Lear got one. We both were in that group of people, honoraries, and one of the astronauts; I think it was John Glenn.

MR. BROWN: Also?

MS. LEWIS: There were four of us who got honorary degrees at that point. I don't remember.

MR. BROWN: So it was four years of pretty intense study?

MS. LEWIS: Oh, yes, but I enjoyed it. I studied costuming and I worked a lot in the anatomy class and the dance classes.

MR. BROWN: Anatomy classes?

MS. LEWIS: Well, to study dance properly you have to study anatomy. So I, that was a good period of my life. I tell the young people all the time that's the only time that you're ever with people who match you. You're all studying the same thing, going the same way, talking about the same thing. Later on in life you have to be sitting with people who are interested in psychiatry, social work, interested in nothing.

MR. BROWN: Yeah.

MS. LEWIS: But when you're in your college years you're going through the same exact thing and it's refreshing.

MR. BROWN: Well, you then upon graduation in 1943 -

MS. LEWIS: Well, my father and mother really knew that there wasn't that much out there for me and encouraged me to go to graduate school and study something else. My father wanted me to study pharmacology, but that didn't suit my temperament.

MR. BROWN: Did he think that would be a very good practical way?

MS. LEWIS: Well, yes. He would help me open a drugstore and everybody needs drugs - black, white, pink and green. But I could not see myself in that direction. So the compromise was I went to Boston University School of Education and then I studied and I did a year there in education of the exceptional child, exceptional at both ends of the scale.

MR. BROWN: I see, both -

MS. LEWIS: Exceptionally bright and exceptionally handicapped. And that stood me in good stead. When I was at Emerson I took courses in speech pathology under Samuel Robbins, who was a noted pathologist, and did my practicum in the Habit Clinics of Boston, and they existed in the various hospitals. Now when I went to -

MR. BROWN: These were called what clinics? Excuse me.

MS. LEWIS: Habit Clinics.

MR. BROWN: Habit Clinics.

MS. LEWIS: For stutterers, stammerers, people with cleft palate.

MR. BROWN: Oh, yes.

MS. LEWIS: All the variances they had other disorders but the area in which I concentrated was the speech disorders. And the Habit Clinics treated many things, other habits, but we were concentrated in speech.

MR. BROWN: Did you like that work, because you were -

MS. LEWIS: Oh, yes.

MR. BROWN: - a student of speech?

MS. LEWIS: It's interesting. But I, if I had had to do something other than what I'm doing I might have spent my life in pathology but it wasn't my first desire. All of this time I was teaching for my money at Doris Jones' school of dance, you know. So I never left dance, never left dance.

MR. BROWN: You'd begun there as a young -

MS. LEWIS: Thirteen year old.

MR. BROWN: When you were quite young, right.

MS. LEWIS: Thirteen year old. And now she decided to move to Washington and I opened a school in 1950 because there was a void there.

MR. BROWN: So before you opened your School of Fine Arts?

MS. LEWIS: There was a void there. Now, that was my School of Fine Arts. I decided to open a school.

MR. BROWN: When she moved to Washington?

MS. LEWIS: Not just right on top of it, but when she moved a void was created. So when I came out of BU probably instead of going to work and endlessly in public education I decided to work where I could do more things, and I went to work at Harriet Tubman House where they let me put in a girls' program. In the girls' program I could have drama and dance and many other things. It was a whole girls' program. But I was always hemmed in by what they wanted me to do. I would come home -

MR. BROWN: It was a community house?

MS. LEWIS: Yes.

MR. BROWN: For the neighborhood?

MS. LEWIS: And I was not, I'm not minded in that way. I'm not minded to be bound. So my brother - well, I'd come home complaining, complaining, complaining, complaining and my mother said, "well, why don't you open your own school?" And my brother said, "give it your own name and then everybody will know your name." That's the best advice I ever got.

[tape stops, re starts]

MR. BROWN: And so without too much trepidation you opened your own school?

MS. LEWIS: Well, yes. Nothing is as intrepid as youth.

MR. BROWN: Right.

MS. LEWIS: I didn't know what it took to open a school. Had I known, I might have been intimidated. But I'm the kind of person that once she gets a hold of something I don't let it go. So I struggled with it all of my life.

MR. BROWN: What did you have, did you take over Doris Jones' place?

MS. LEWIS: No. She had gone; it was closed. It was closed.

MR. BROWN: So you had to find room?

MS. LEWIS: That's right. I found an apartment on Waumbeck Street, 7 Waumbeck Street.

MR. BROWN: Waumbeck Street, mm hmm.

MS. LEWIS: Right here in the Roxbury community. And I don't know if the people understood what I was going to do, but they let me have it. I can't imagine many people letting you do that in their apartment today. It was a nice two family house and I had the bottom apartment. And I took the bedrooms and made study places out of them. One bedroom was a piano studio and one bedroom was an art studio. The living room and dining room together, which opened into each other, were the ballet studio. The kitchen was the dressing room. A room off the kitchen was the sewing room. And there we were. I had 25 students.

MR. BROWN: Right off the bat you had quite a few students?

MS. LEWIS: Twenty five.

MR. BROWN: Now, you were pretty well known?

MS. LEWIS: Yes, because I had been around performing, yes.

MR. BROWN: What kind of dances had you done, was the core classic ballet?

MS. LEWIS: Classic ballet. We'd done some flamenco and a good deal of tap. Modern is what I had studied at Emerson.

MR. BROWN: Now, modern was more free form or was it -

MS. LEWIS: No.

MR. BROWN: That's not quite - that's inaccurate to say?

MS. LEWIS: No. Well, if I have to explain it to you you won't understand. It's the style of Isadora Duncan and Martha Graham. That's a different technique. It's a different technique. It's not from, it's not an European technique. It's an American technique. It is now who would I say the foremost explorers of it are now? The Twyla Tharp people and those various and sundry people like that.

MR. BROWN: But you began with ballet at the -

MS. LEWIS: Yes, yes, and it's still my principal understanding of dance.

MR. BROWN: What is it about ballet that particularly enthused you or -

MS. LEWIS: Well, maybe it's the era from which I come. Let's start with that. Modern dance was a new thing and a technical, technical facility comes from some training, and people trained in European classic ballet. I couldn't be trained in the Kabuki. I don't know that. This is what was available to me. And between that and I guess if you were talking about Broadway dancing, people did tap dancing at that time and so I took that, too. Then African dance and its derivatives were added by 1952 or '53 because I am, as I told you, brought up to be a pan African.

MR. BROWN: Right. Right. And that - would you have performers come over or instructors -

MS. LEWIS: Oh, yes, my -

MR. BROWN: From Africa?

MS. LEWIS: Not from - there are enough Africans here out of New York and everywhere else. By the late '60s and '70s and into the - we had authentic people teaching from their tribes, et cetera. All of this is available. But my goodness, unless you're going to spend the rest of your life with me I can't talk that out. I can give you 200 teachers' names who taught in my school. No, it's not a small thing to talk about.

MR. BROWN: So did you spend a good deal of your time finding these teachers and encouraging them to come and work?

MS. LEWIS: Well, I don't know if I -

MR. BROWN: In the beginning?

MS. LEWIS: - spent a lot of time doing that. We started with a core of teachers that I had here and then work attracts people, you know. They say, "I want to come." Or you dance someplace and you see them and you invite them to come. I don't think I spent a lot of time actually sitting there and planning time. No, it evolves. It evolves. If we went to see - Talley Beatty was one of the foremost of the black modern companies, and Alvin Ailey. You know Alvin's name?

MR. BROWN: Mm hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. LEWIS: And Pearl Primus. All of those kinds of people. And Barbara Tudiola Tunji. The Tudiola-Tunji's have become my second family. But all of those kinds of people. In the art world you keep meeting other artists and you say, "here is what I'm doing; do you want to be a part of it?"

MR. BROWN: And would they come through from time to time?

MS. LEWIS: Not from time to time. They'd come on a regular basis. Sometimes - Ms. Tudiola Tunji must have been with us for three years, twice a week. No, for 10, 15 years twice a week.

MR. BROWN: Teaching special classes?

MS. LEWIS: African percussion. Not special classes. You enrolled in his class like you'd enroll in a course. He came to teach a course. Not special classes; good, straight out courses. Talley Beatty

was resident in this house for three years and built a company which moved around and performed, traveled and everything. And it was taken over after that by Billy Wilson, who is now the late Billy Wilson. Billy Wilson was trained, got his training in Philadelphia [inaudible] and went on to train in Holland and was with the ballet in Holland and then came back here. And he's a splendid, splendid dancer and technician. Who else can I tell you about that - Arthur Mitchell used to come on a regular basis. Everybody came. Not from time to time. You can't teach from time to time. Teaching is not like that.

MR. BROWN: Regular, where you can count on it.

MS. LEWIS: Well, not count on it. Had to. Teaching is a - you can't take, assign people into a course and somebody is going to help them from time to time.

MR. BROWN: Right.

MS. LEWIS: No, I had a school.

MR. BROWN: And the house I believe you told me your parents had purchased in the 1940s is a big house.

MS. LEWIS: This house. This house.

MR. BROWN: This very house on Homestead Street?

MS. LEWIS: Yeah. Yeah.

MR. BROWN: You just said that one of the dancers, did he teach here or was a resident?

MS. LEWIS: No, I said was resident here.

MR. BROWN: He was a resident here.

MS. LEWIS: Resident here. And we went to - the very first time he [inaudible] he wasn't with me in Waumbeck Street but he was with me in Grove Hall. That place doesn't exist anymore. That's been torn down. And then he taught in Charlotte Street in Dorchester. And then when we had the full company we were over here on Elm Hill Avenue. And he was resident here for three years but he taught with us for about 10 years. Donald McHale did, taught with us five years. Any number of people.

MR. BROWN: Did your students come from all over? Were many of them from this city?

MS. LEWIS: Well, the majority of them were from, were community based, but some of them came far. There were some little white children who used to come down from Maine because their mother was a dance teacher in Maine and she so valued Billy Wilson's teaching that she brought those children in twice a week for a number of years to Billy Wilson. And Talley Beatty has just about the largest professional name you could have. He did several - he's a choreographer more than a teacher, but he taught.

MR. BROWN: Were performances on the premises or would your -

MS. LEWIS: No, no.

MR. BROWN: - students go to a large hall?

MS. LEWIS: Oh, no, we always went - no, we never used small performances. That's from the stage at that's on the stage at John Hancock Hall. That's the smallest place we went. And when they performed they had a 14 piece orchestra, live in the pit. Oh, no, we didn't do small things. No, we didn't do small things.

MR. BROWN: So you got fairly big fairly fast or quite fast?

MS. LEWIS: Oh, right away. I knew what I was doing. Right away. No, we didn't sit and do little piddle piddle piddle.

MR. BROWN: Well, you'd started at age 3 performing, reading.

MS. LEWIS: That's right. I wasn't ready to throw away my life but I was in my early twenties. I'd

be more inclined to start small today than I was then because youth is intrepid, as I told you.

MR. BROWN: Yeah, yeah. And you said earlier, yeah, when you're young you're hopeful and you don't know what -

MS. LEWIS: That's right. You're intrepid.

MR. BROWN: - obstacles arrive, right.

MS. LEWIS: You're intrepid, mm hmm. Life is there.

MR. BROWN: So the dance was a major if not the major component?

MS. LEWIS: Well, because I could always depend on me.

MR. BROWN: Yes.

MS. LEWIS: To kill myself to teach or whatever else when nobody was available to me. But Vernon Blackman - by 1968 we had all of these people in a locked in position financially and then that became burdensome.

MR. BROWN: You mean you had to carry -

MS. LEWIS: A big payroll.

MR. BROWN: A big payroll.

MS. LEWIS: A big payroll.

MR. BROWN: So you had -

MS. LEWIS: That took me away from much that I should have been doing artistically and gave me fundraising chores. I refused to administrate. That I wouldn't do.

MR. BROWN: No, but fundraising you would have to do.

MS. LEWIS: Yes, but I don't think that I would ever let that happen to me again.

MR. BROWN: This, your school became quite well known and quite widely known, is it fair to say, by the end of the '50s?

MS. LEWIS: Oh, I would think so.

MR. BROWN: I mean, you had some pretty big names.

MS. LEWIS: I would think in the middle of the '50s. Duke Ellington, everybody.

MR. BROWN: People like, well, you just mentioned about Duke Ellington. Would he -

MS. LEWIS: Everybody knew. Everybody knew. Everybody did, and came. Artie Shep, Max Roach, all those kinds of people, all of them. By the time it was 1969, 1970, we were really world known.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. But people like that, and singers. I think you mentioned Roland Hayes. Was he -

MS. LEWIS: Well, Roland Hayes, I'd been involved with him all my life. All my life. So then it was not hard to get Roland Hayes to do things. He was a much more, how shall I say, precious person, so you couldn't just throw him in with young students. He had to, he was very selective.

MR. BROWN: But he was a very effective teacher with those who -

MS. LEWIS: Well, a couple of people, yes. But he wouldn't, no, just being advanced didn't matter. He'd be very selective. He was a precious person.

MR. BROWN: What about Ellington, did people like Duke Ellington teach?

MS. LEWIS: No, but he was there all the time inspiring. I brought him for that, inspiring and playing. Now, they would come, people like Ellington came and played in the, I guess it was in

the '70s when we had the Playhouse in the Park.

MR. BROWN: Yes.

MS. LEWIS: He would come and play a concert twice a year in the park. Three and four thousand people would show up and be all over the hillside. Arthur Feidler brought the Boston Pops out there and did a performance, two performances out there. We had no trouble attracting anybody.

MR. BROWN: The school by the '60s and '70s, then is that your - you moved into the place off of Beauville Ave; was that about -

MS. LEWIS: On Elm Hill Avenue.

MR. BROWN: Elm Hill Avenue.

MS. LEWIS: At Elm Hill and Seaver. The property that the Jewish people contributed.

MR. BROWN: And you moved there in?

MS. LEWIS: In 1968.

MR. BROWN: Did that give you more facilities?

MS. LEWIS: Oh, yes. That was a grand facility.

MR. BROWN: A great place, yeah.

MS. LEWIS: I'm sorry now that we're not there. It was sold last week to a Pentecostal church and I guess the New Life will build a place. But that was very precious to me, yeah.

MR. BROWN: You had good places and spaces?

MS. LEWIS: Well, I think they thought that remodeling anything is not that good, and we needed about $15 million to go into that to make it what we wanted it to be. We'd already spent $3 or $4 million. And there was an element of the Jewish community which didn't want us to have it and they came back and although we can't prove just who, elements of them burned us out two or three times.

MR. BROWN: Really?

MS. LEWIS: Mm hmm. [Affirmative.] And I had a rocky time there and I didn't want to make race war so I didn't say a lot.

MR. BROWN: Yeah.

MS. LEWIS: It gets on my nerves when, in cases like the O.J. Simpson case or in cases like the one that the Haitian fellow now that the police have abused.

MR. BROWN: Yeah, in New York.

MS. LEWIS: In New York. And I hear the commentator saying, "they're going to play the race card." The race card what? The race card is there.

MR. BROWN: Yeah.

MS. LEWIS: It's not playing any - I don't know what that means, play the race card. If you say somebody did something to you because of race that's wrong to say? We're supposed to always shut up when somebody does something to us, but when somebody does something to other people they just say it.

MR. BROWN: Yeah.

MS. LEWIS: Well, that's not true. And I feel badly because 15 years of a good facility was lost to children and adults who needed it, who needed it.

MR. BROWN: Yeah.

MS. LEWIS: Because somebody else - you can't just shut up about those things. And I'm going to write fully about those things as I go along writing my book, so it will be here after for these people to read. And who chooses to read it can read it and who chooses to not.

MR. BROWN: Well, you brought in - did you have in mind, what components were there to the school, say in 1968? There was dance and?

MS. LEWIS: It was, there was dance, there was drama and the spoken word. Drama had things out of it like mime and playwrights workshop and lots of things under there. And music, we were teaching music on all of the instruments. And it had, dance had many departments. It had a professional company and it had ethnic company and it taught ballet. Costuming, that - I love that. We had two old designers who taught, Gus and Lucy taught, and they taught -

MR. BROWN: Gus and Lucy was their names?

MS. LEWIS: Yeah. They taught for making, for fashions they taught street wardrobe. They taught costume for the stage and they did all of our costumes. Dance, drama, music, art. Art. They painted and sculpted.

MR. BROWN: These same people?

MS. LEWIS: No, no.

MR. BROWN: Oh, now we're talking about this activity?

MS. LEWIS: Yeah, that's right.

MR. BROWN: The costuming was an important part in -

MS. LEWIS: Yes.

MR. BROWN: - theatrical training, in the stage?

MS. LEWIS: That's right. And not just was it an important part of the training, we had all those productions coming out that we had to costume.

MR. BROWN: You did your own, right.

MS. LEWIS: Yeah. You couldn't have afforded anything else.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. But the school, you'd laid out quite a lot of money by the time you were on Elm Hill Avenue. I mean, you were -

MS. LEWIS: Well, that's [inaudible] I was behind when I was piddling it out. See, what was piddling it out. And I don't mind that at all but then people told us that our board would be more impressive if we got business people and businessmen, and the businessmen have retrenched us to we were out of business because I was raised to be solvent. And I don't know anything else, including Harvard, that waited until it was solvent. If you do that you can't thrive. You cannot.

MR. BROWN: You have to have program and activity to proceed.

MS. LEWIS: And then, that's right. That's right.

MR. BROWN: The bottom line.

MS. LEWIS: That's right. Everything in the world is in deficit, even the United States government. So how could you be the only solvent thing? That's the constant argument.

MR. BROWN: Well, was the general community when these businessmen came out, was the general community by the late '60s, early '70s more and more interested in the school?

MS. LEWIS: Oh, well, there never was any [inaudible] more and more. They've always been interested. We didn't have any problem.

MR. BROWN: That's never been any?

MS. LEWIS: No, we don't have any problem. It depends on who you mean when you're talking about the general community. If you're talking about the white community, they don't want us to

thrive so they're not going to put money up.

MR. BROWN: And they didn't even in -

MS. LEWIS: In the beginning or in the end.

MR. BROWN: In the '60s?

MS. LEWIS: No, no. America is America.

MR. BROWN: In the '60s there was all this loud talk about civil rights by the white community.

MS. LEWIS: Well, yes, but civil rights, we weren't in the civil rights. We weren't in civil rights. And that's just talk anyway. I can't - I tell you over and over. This is a thing that you're doing, the thing that white people do. Why do they keep bringing it there? It isn't there. It might make you feel better but it's not there. It makes us feel worse. People keep asking me that and asking me: What do you think of race relations, are they better or worse? They're the same. You can't spend the rest of whatever little energy you've got beating that. What for?

MR. BROWN: Sure.

MS. LEWIS: That's all I'd do if I woke up with that in the morning. There are people that make that their career. I wonder why. I wonder why. I wonder why Al Sharpton makes this - can he do anything else? Can these people do anything else? I don't know. I can't understand that. It is not rewarding. And there's no point in telling white people every minute, "you're bad, you're bad, you're bad." They know it. They want to do it that way.

MR. BROWN: Well, your life was hard, right?

MS. LEWIS: Well, it was hard and it was civic work. I spent 30 years being a member of the Zoo board. I spent 10 years being on the College of Arts board. I spent two years being a visiting fellow at South House at Harvard. I spent five years being on the Committee of Permanent Charities, which is now the Boston Foundation. I spent - what other things have I done? So many, doing whatever the city needs. I've been wherever, wherever, wherever. And all of the educational programs. I've been, I'm a 22 year trustee of WGBH. No, but I'm not even saying that. I'm saying that if you do me enough harm I'm going to hurt you back. And I tell you not to do it, don't do it. I, that's the one thing I agree with the Muslims. They say, "I will not harm you, but if you harm me may Allah be with you." I agree with that. So what's the point in talking all the time about who likes me. They don't like me, I don't care. I don't care. That doesn't affect me. I go to Emerson. I couldn't sit and spend the four years on, "make him speak to me, make him speak to me." What is that?

MR. BROWN: No.

MS. LEWIS: What is that? And people don't respect you at the end of it if that's what you do. They wonder why you want to be with them so dearly. If you don't want to be with me - one summer my nephew, who is now 53, was a little boy. My mother was preparing him to go to church. He was three. So all week long she was talking about how you sit still in church and you don't talk and you don't do this and one thing and another in church. And she told him over and over, "we're Episcopalians," so you know how quiet the church is. So when Sunday came she took him to church and he's sitting there. She gave him a hymnbook or something, prayerbook, to play with. He was playing with his prayerbook, shh, shh. And finally he said out loud, "all right, then. You don't talk to me, I no talk to you." So, okay, if you don't talk to me I won't talk to you.

MR. BROWN: [Laughter.]

MS. LEWIS: "Leave me alone. Leave me alone." And he was right. He wasn't doing anything. She kept bothering him. And it's appropriate for that to keep coming up. Why - a lot of us worry about that. Why is it that people who are white are always so preoccupied with liking, "do you like me, do I like you?" What is that? See, you don't ask that of white people. You don't. What is that preoccupation with "like"? People have their work to do. They've got to do it. They've got to do it. And if you've made up in your mind to close them off into another place, another living place or education place, they have to take that and push forward and push out of it if they want to and if they don't want to they have to make it better where they are, or they have to die. Now, those are their options. "Like" hasn't got anything to do with it, not unless you're going to get married.

MR. BROWN: Are there more options now than when you were young? There are, aren't there?

MS. LEWIS: Oh, yes. Yes, but we worked for those.

MR. BROWN: Oh, I know.

MS. LEWIS: We fought those. And just as there are more options, there are more blights. More blights.

MR. BROWN: More blights.

MS. LEWIS: More blights. Wall to wall. I never, ever heard of anyone who couldn't read and write when I was a child growing up. I never, ever heard of anybody who couldn't get some kind of menial job. The menial jobs are gone. So a large segment of your colored - I say colored in the sense of many colors - population is out of work. There's nothing for them. I never heard of a black man in prison when I was a child. Now they're there wholesale.

MR. BROWN: Yeah.

MS. LEWIS: Now they're there wholesale. So there's a bigger blight. I can't look at the issue of professional people, like my good friend Roderick Ireland becomes this justice of the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts. Why is that such a triumph? It took 300, 400 years to do it.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. Why is it such a -

MS. LEWIS: A triumph. I think you'd be ashamed of yourself to say it took us 400 years to do this but now we've done it, not instead of saying look at what we've done. Why is that such a triumph?

MR. BROWN: Mm hmm. [Affirmative.] It's a point you made to me earlier that a number of African ancestors were high ranked, cultured people.

MS. LEWIS: Right.

MR. BROWN: Unlike the bulk of the Europeans.

MS. LEWIS: That's right. They didn't take the best from Europe. They took the best from Africa, though. Nobody was crippled nor maimed nor mentally retarded or anything. The best.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. Yeah.

MS. LEWIS: You know, but I don't know why [inaudible] had a preoccupation with everybody being loved.

MR. BROWN: What about the visual arts?

MS. LEWIS: The visual arts.

MR. BROWN: In your school. Did you have them, something of that all along?

MS. LEWIS: All along. That has probably been the most successful thing because in the beginning in planning - not the beginning. When we were moving to Elm Hill Avenue in 1968 I was seeking ways to undergird each department and I thought that I would go to the Museum of Fine Arts and get some undergirding. And they thought that they were patronizing me so they said, "we'd be happy to do that if you can find anybody of museum quality." Because, poor things, they didn't know there were blacks of museum quality out there both as painters and as art historians. So -

MR. BROWN: They didn't even know of black painters at that time.

MS. LEWIS: Both. I said as painters and art historians. Painters don't run programs. Art historians do. They didn't know we could get either. So I went on a quest. One of the people that I brought died last week but he didn't actually come to us. He interviewed. And so did Barry Gaither, who is with us now. Barry was only 24 at the time. I was 48, I can remember.

MR. BROWN: And he was a graduate student, had just been?

MS. LEWIS: He had just finished Brown. He had gone to Morehouse to college and to Brown to

graduate school. He'd just finished at Brown. And they saw him, very talented. The reason I got him was because John Wilson hired him. John Wilson was my friend. Do you know the name John Wilson?

MR. BROWN: Oh, sure, I know.

MS. LEWIS: Well, John and I grew up together and John - I went to John first and said, "John, help me make a museum." John said, "well, I don't know how to do that. I don't know anything about making museums. I only paint pictures." And Calvin Burnett, who was also my friend at the time and who was our first art teacher in the Elma Lewis School - Calvin Burnett was.

MR. BROWN: You mean way before 1968?

MS. LEWIS: Nineteen fifty. He was the first art teacher, Calvin was. Well, they told, those guys told me, "no, that's a specialist you need and that's an art historian." So then John stuck with me and we went to Brown and found Barry Gaither. James Lewis was in Baltimore at the time running a museum program, interviewed for this job. He said, "You're going to be very sorry you're hiring that young boy. He's going to give you a lot of trouble." But Barry has never given us one day's trouble. He came and set up the art teaching program in the Elma Lewis School of Fine Arts and the museum for NCAAA.

MR. BROWN: So he set up both? He ran both?

MS. LEWIS: Yes. Anybody who did something in NCAAA had to do something back in the Elma Lewis School. Anyway -

MR. BROWN: You wanted a museum by then?

MS. LEWIS: Yes, but I didn't, I wanted the school. I've always wanted things that teach more than I want things that display. His heart is in the museum. My heart's in the teaching.

MR. BROWN: Do you think as you look back, I mean, nothing to do with Barry and the great accomplishments he's made, what if you'd had an artist? What if John Wilson had -

MS. LEWIS: They wouldn't do that. They don't do that.

MR. BROWN: I know, but what if John said, "Look, I'll try. I'll give it a try."

MS. LEWIS: Well, it probably would have been a failure. I don't know. But people don't do that. That's like saying to a cardiac physician, "take out, treat my kidneys." He'd say, "well, I can't do that." They don't do that. They say, "oh, no." I got, I started to be educated there just as I was educated about percussion. Years ago when Pearl Primus was dancing and we had percussion groups et cetera I would say to one, Alphonse Cimber, a spectacular drummer out of Haiti, and I saw Mr. Al Tooney's dancers out of Nigeria and I would say to Cimber sometimes when drummers were there, "why don't you play for these dancers?" He said, "It's not my countryman. He's not my countryman." And I thought that was some kind of a terrible statement he was making. And I said, "well, why can't you play for him even if he's not your countryman?" I was not grounded enough in the culture or either of them's language for them to explain it to me. When I went myself to Africa I saw what he was saying, that those drums speak language and you have to understand that language to drum for that person. And therefore the drummers of the Senegalese are Senegalese. And if you're performing according to the Yoruba tradition, those are Yoruba drummers. And he had the influence of Cuba and he's Afro Cuban and Cimber over here on this continent. And that's the first time.

MR. BROWN: And he told you that?

MS. LEWIS: Yes, he told me about that. I hadn't understood what he said.

MR. BROWN: Yeah, yeah.

MS. LEWIS: And they don't dance by a count or a pattern or whatever. The drummer tells them what to do and when to change and they're listening to the language of the drum.

MR. BROWN: Well, the variety then was much greater than you had supposed?

MS. LEWIS: Yes. You'd hear, if I brought them in here to dance for you. You wouldn't understand. You'd like it, you wouldn't like it, but you don't really get the depth of it. It's like listening to Bach

and you don't know counterpoint and harmony and theory and the rest of it. You hear some things but you don't hear what the other person -

MR. BROWN: Yeah, yeah. Similar, it can be similar in the visual arts, too.

MS. LEWIS: In all of it. In all of it.

MR. BROWN: Well, your intention throughout was all the arts, the visual, the performing -

MS. LEWIS: That's right.

MR. BROWN: - the musical.

MS. LEWIS: That's right, mm hmm. It always was there and still is. And it's not the arts that are my concern. It is the culture. It is what the arts are telling you. The arts are how man speaks about his life. The arts are not something of beauty. The arts have to teach you magnanimity and many other things, virtues. The arts teach the virtues. And the arts explain the culture so that you can correct the culture, preserve it, discuss it, think on it. It's what tells you who man is and where he's been and where he's apt to go. That's what the arts do for you. It gives you the culture. And there's no denying when you hear the Irish with the wailing songs or you hear the Irish with the cultural, the coloratura singing that those little Irish colleens do, that's an entirely different sound from Jewish people singing the Kol Nidra. You hear the kind of difference in the culture. Not only do you hear the difference in the culture, you hear the difference in the time. If you listen to the music that the South African blacks were making and you hear the music now you can identify the period. Let's come to America, let's come to America. The songs that the early settlers sang. You can say that's then. No matter who tells you it happened at a different time you'd say no, that's then. You can hear that. And you can hear that that's not Elvis Presley, right, and you can hear that that is not Duke Ellington. You say a different people made that sound even. That's what interprets the culture. The arts interpret the culture. When you see Henry Tanner paint a picture of an old man praying with a little boy over a measly meal that addresses itself a lot to what those black old men had to do in the South getting those children up and over. Right?

MR. BROWN: Yeah. Yeah, it encapsulates right there.

MS. LEWIS: Right there. And it hits you somewhere where you live and you don't need 10 million words. We don't have to speak in the Tower of Babel [Genesis 11: 1-9] .

MR. BROWN: Right.

MS. LEWIS: Which is what we do all day long. That's a wonderful story.

MR. BROWN: The Tower of Babel?

MS. LEWIS: Yeah. All these people came and they became confounded until they couldn't even speak to each other anymore. Those are the allegorical stories that are marvelous, if we look at them for what they are. Wonderful allegory. We're all living now in the Tower of Babel. We talk to each other all the time; we don't know what we said.

MR. BROWN: That's right. What do you think of new languages now? I mean the technological languages, computers, the various ways you can -

MS. LEWIS: Well, around the world everybody will have the same computer language but they'd better do better with their own native languages to use the computer languages with each other.

MR. BROWN: Is your role at the school still fairly great? Are you -

MS. LEWIS: Well, it had been slack before but I'm getting in there now for a while to save what I did because they were getting to be too artistic and not cultural enough.

MR. BROWN: Now, can you very briefly distinguish there?

MS. LEWIS: Yes, I just did. I told you what the arts were and what the culture is.

MR. BROWN: That's right. And they had the cart before the horse?

MS. LEWIS: Well, no, they have a different interpretation, like many people. Art among people,

among European, people of European extraction is an abstract. Art among other people in the world is not an abstract. It is the stuff of life. And that's where we must remain if we're going to be whole.

MR. BROWN: It was beginning to stray from that?

MS. LEWIS: Well, the school wanted to go where the Europeans go but I don't think that's where it needs to go. In fact, I know that's not where you need to go.

MR. BROWN: They were going to go that way by doing what, by dropping certain things?

MS. LEWIS: No, by changing the way you approach them. The approach in teaching is what's important. The approach, how you teach is what's important.

MR. BROWN: How was that, just in a summary, your way of teaching, your -

MS. LEWIS: Well, I don't think you can do that in a summary. It's just the teaching from the spirit, and I can't give you my spirit.

MR. BROWN: So it was not only -

MS. LEWIS: It's a spiritual -

MR. BROWN: Very personal base then.

MS. LEWIS: Spiritual. Don't go away from that. Spiritual.

MR. BROWN: Spiritual.

MS. LEWIS: Personal is abstract.

MR. BROWN: Okay, spiritual.

MS. LEWIS: It's spiritual. It's spiritual. There's not other words for that. It's from the spirit of man, the spirit of God in man. And I think more and more Europeans don't deal with that, object to it and find that hard. If we are going to sing "The Lord's Song" in a strange and foreign land as the [inaudible] how can I sing "The Lord's Song" in a strange and foreign land? Then we've got to stay whole. We've got to stay whole. Just look at the South side. They're becoming more and more bestial. Just look at it. I can't understand it. And I don't see why other people don't see and hear that they're going the wrong way. A couple of days ago they said two girls were in New Hampshire with these three boys and they went off and killed them and they ran away. More and more and more and more every day, every day. Some boy kicked a teacher in the head, the teacher is dead. All kinds. It's because nobody teaches properly anymore. I don't care about those computers. I don't care about those numbers. I don't care about how much money. Where is the substance of who we are and what we are and what mankind is doing here? That's got to be what it's about, or else why teach? Anybody can mix up paint and get a pretty color to put on this wall. Anybody can paint a picture that tells you something. But anybody can't take a picture that moves your spirit to a great place. That's what's important.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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