

**New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Foundation Archive  
Oral History Collection**

**Interviewee: Barbara Lacen Keller  
Interviewer: Rachel Carrico  
Date: September 5, 2017  
Location: New Orleans City Hall**

**003.PPF.083**

BLK - -- just in case.

RC – That’s a good idea.

BLK – See, I do a lot of interviews, that’s why.

RC – You know, you know how it goes. Ok, yes, all right. All right, Ms. Barbara, we’re ready.

BLK – Barbara, B-A-R-B-A-R-A Keller, K-E-L-L-E-R, but I’ma say it again, Barbara Lacen Keller, Barbara B-A-R-B-A-R-A Lacen L-A-C-E-N Keller K-E-L-L-E-R.

RC – And let us know where and when you were born. [00:00:38]

BLK – Ok, I was born in New Orleans, Louisiana, I am seventy-one years old. May 1, 1946, to be exact.

RC – Ok! Ok. And we are conducting this interview at New Orleans City Hall, and if you, could you say just a few words about your position here, but we might come back to it in more depth later.

BLK – Sure, sure. I work for the New Orleans City Council, in fact I work for the Council-At-Large, Stacy Head, where I serve as her director of constituent services.

RC – Ok, great, great. And, as we were talking a little bit before we turned the camera on, that I listened to a recorded panel discussion at Jazz Fest in 1994 --

BLK – Wow, that’s a long time!

RC – A long time, and you remembered those two panels, those stage panels, and in those, in those conversations, you mention that, at least at that time, that you had been documenting the history of --

BLK – Sure.

RC - -- the culture here --

BLK – Mmhmm.

RC - -- and I wondered if you might just tell me a little bit about that.

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BLK – Right. Well, let me share with you a brief history about who I am. As I said, I was born in New Orleans, but the uniqueness of my life, and I'm so excited that I am truly what we call a culture bearer, I come from the family and mother and father where my mother's side was Mardi Gras Indians, social aid and pleasure club, in fact, my mother is, to my knowledge, my mother is the only existing Mardi Gras Indian spygirl, and she's eighty-nine years old, she's still living, and they cannot find any other female, or know of any other female that served as a spygirl with the Mardi Gras Indians. And I also was a Mardi Gras Indian, I was what they call a Little Queen, I was a Little Queen, and I started that at the age of three or four with my mother's family. And my father's family was musicians, they were musicians, and dancers. I had an uncle, he was a world-renowned saxophone player. My grandfather was a musician, so I come from a very strong culture background of the music, Mardi Gras Indians, and second line. My mother was a second liner, so as you can see, I'm deeply rooted in the culture.

RC – And can you tell us some of the names of these family members that you mention?

**[00:03:10]**

BLK – Oh, sure. My mother, who's the only existing, that they know of, spygirl, her name is Augustine Germaine Lewis, she's eighty-nine years old. My grandfather's name was Julius, I'm sorry, Lawrence Rankins, and coincidental, not coincidental, but I know everybody [WORD UNCLEAR] to me with the Andrews family. Well, the Andrews family, and the Andrews family grandfather, Mr. Noone [?], and my grandfather, Lawrence Rankins, Sr., were musicians together, where they made their instruments, and they would play in the French Quarter. They would dress like women and actually play in the clubs in the French Quarter. And my uncle, his name was Leroy Batman Rankins, and he was a world-renowned saxophonist. He played with the family's band, Roy Brown, and he also played with Mr. Dooky Chase, who later, who transitioned not long ago. So those are some of the people. And I was married to a musician, I was married to Anthony Lacen, better known as Tuba Fat. So, you see, I am deeply grounded in the culture, all the way around, music, dance, Mardi Gras Indians and the like.

RC – And which, was there one particular Mardi Gras Indian tribe that your mother --

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BLK – Yes, in fact my mother’s family was the Mardi Gras tribe called the Cheyennes. There’s a group now, but that’s not the same tribe. Our tribe, the Mardi, the Cheyennes, it consists of my uncle, my mother, two of my uncles, and my mother, another family called the Shake Sliders [?], most of them, the chief was Little Boy Shakes, now his, the Big Queen [WORD UNCLEAR] his sister, so it was Germaine and the Shakes that started the Cheyenne tribe. But there is a tribe now, but that is not the same tribe that was created, we’re talking about in the ‘40s. So, 1940s. Mmhmm.

RC – And is that tribe still around, or is it because everyone --

BLK – No, it’s another, there is a Cheyenne tribe, but I don’t know any of them to be descendants of the original tribe, that I know of. Mmhmm, yes.

RC – And you mentioned, did you mention that your mother was involved in social aid and pleasure clubs as well?

BLK – Yes, she was involved in social aid and pleasure clubs. She was involved in a club called the Jolly Bunch. The Jolly Bunch was a strong club, and they had women, lady Jolly Bunch, but in those days, you know, that’s getting to the interview, we’ll talk about how some changes have evolved around women and their role in social aid and pleasure clubs, mmhmm.

RC – And about what years would your mother have been involved with the Jolly Bunch? [00:05:55]

BLK – She was involved in the Jolly Bunch in the ‘50s, somewhere in the ‘50s, mmhmm, yes, uh huh.

RC – Ok. So that kind of brings me to my next question, is that yourself – actually, before I ask that, tell me about you, and the different, your role in the culture, and I guess maybe starting by different societies that you’ve belonged to, you said as a child you masked as a Little Queen.

BLK – As an Indian Queen, yes. And I was also in the Lady Jolly Bunch; in fact, I was its youngest member at the member at the time that I was in the organization. And then later, I, for some reason, I just drift away from it, and I had my family, whatever. Then, excuse me, I started a female group of the Money Wasters, I am one of the founders of the Lady Money Wasters, that’s out of the Treme. Excuse me. And then, I migrated

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uptown, and after I migrated uptown, I joined a club called the Original New Orleans Lady Buck Jumpers. And they were like a year old when I joined --

RC – And when might that have been, '85?

BLK – Yes, uh huh, '85, '86 I joined the group. They were organized in '84, and I joined, '85, '86 I joined the club. Mmhmm.

RC – And so it was before that that you organized the Lady division of the Money Wasters.

BLK – Yes, before that. In fact, I organized the Lady money Wasters around '80, '81.

RC – Ok --

BLK – Mmhmm, yes. [00:07:26]

RC - -- and, so, I wondered if you could speak a little bit about the different kinds of voluntary societies, or sometimes they're called secret societies, or organizations – you mentioned several different ones that yourself and members of your family have been in.

BLK – Well, to be honest with you, you know, in the African-American community, there are different societies. You know, you have your Greek societies, you have your Mason societies, you have your social aid, you have your benevolent societies, they have various, you know, and I've been blessed to be well-rounded, only society I've never been a part of is the Easter Star, but I am a very proud member of a Greek society, Sigma Gamma sorority.

RC – Have you?

BLK – Yes, yes, I am, yes I am.

RC – Represent [WORD UNCLEAR]. [laughs]

BLK – And also, I am, you know, because of all the people had the misconception that when it comes to social aid and pleasure clubs, that it's a certain class of people, but that is further from the truth. Cause at one time, the culture was known as the backstreet culture. It was known as a culture of a certain class, of somewhat of a degrading and something, and even til today, there are some people within African-American community shun and look down on the social aid and pleasure, but it comes from all walk. People come from all walks of life: educated people, common laborers, people from all walks of life. And it is not, you know, as people become more knowledgeable of

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its culture, because it is, it is something that derives from the motherland, Africa, cause you know, we started through the churches, and the benevolent societies, and the benevolence is basically that, taking care of your own. And when they say social aid and pleasure club, what they mean by that, pleasure, but the aid was taking care of each other, because at one time, it wasn't acceptable or it wasn't to be that we would have insurance, and we had to take care of all the nickels and dimes or however, and those things were created where, through the church or whatever, through the benevolent society, they would take care of the sick and the dead. So, that's basically, so, as various organizations within the African-American community, especially in New Orleans, you know, where we have, and they all have it, when you lead, of how they serve, and which they serve. And they have government rules that they must abide by, they, and it must also have a standard and the quality in representing those organizations, and I think that that's what it is, that people have a choice, that they choose to be involved in.

RC – Mmhmm, mmhmm. And I've been, you know, looking back in old newspapers, just trying to get a sense, I mean, we know this club's been around for a long time. You know, I just did some of these newspapers in *The Louisiana Weekly*, for example, in the 1920s, you know, there's listings for their activities --

BLK – Right.

RC -- of embroidery and pleasure clubs --

BLK – Mmhmm, fine.

RC - -- and all kinds, mutual aid societies --

BLK – Right. [00:10:55]

RC - -- and travel and leisure clubs, going on excursions --

BLK – Right.

RC - -- just a whole variety --

BLK – Well, because, right, because also, and I forgot to mention, even with the Mardi Gras, the Mardi Gras culture, and the Mardi Gras, and the mask thing, you know, there was organizations, the Young Men Olympian, the, I'm sorry, I'm not thinking, Young Men of [WORD UNCLEAR] and there are some other ones, where' they'd have the Mardi Gras balls and the debutantes and things, the Zulu organization, and I am proud to

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say that I am one of the members of Mystic Krewe of Femme Fatale, and that is the first predominantly African-American female Mardi Gras Krewe. We're celebrating our fifth year coming up in '18 --

RC – Congratulations!

BLK - -- and – yes – and that is a group, like I said, predominantly African-American, but we're open to anyone, but we're predominantly, six hundred women strong, and that's a, we're a Mardi Gras parade group. And also, you know, these different organizations, like those of us, like the Buck Jumpers, the Original New Orleans Lady Buck Jumpers, after twenty years, there were some of us that decided that our season has changed, and we did not want to participate in parade anymore, so what we did, we started a travel club. So we have the Buck Jumpers Travel Club, and every year, sixteen ladies, we get together, we travel. We go various parts of the world, not just the country, where we travel, so it is a spin-off, so what you said about the different societies, how you go from one to another, you know, so --

RC – Yeah, yeah, right. And the, you know, I've heard some people say today that the clubs have this kind of, a lot of clubs might have a focus on putting together a parade as, like, the number one focus --

BLK – Right. [00:12:54]

RC - -- but with that, historically, wasn't always the case, right, that the --

BLK – Right.

RC - -- parade is a celebration of this group of people that got together for other purposes.

BLK – Right, right, right. See, because what happens is that, well, when it maybe comes to social aid and pleasure clubs, cause not all social aid and pleasure clubs parade. Ok?

Some of the – cause I know of a club called the Calendar Girls. They didn't have a parade, but they had a social aid and pleasure club. So, that's why some people start tagging on marching to they name, social aid, pleasure marching clubs. Because most social aid and pleasure clubs, the main thing is going towards the cultivated activity, the culminating, I'm sorry, activity, is the parade. Which is a huge responsibility, to plan a parade, it takes, it takes time to plan a parade, it takes, it's not just with people just get together one Sunday, we're gonna do it this Sunday, let's go. When in New Orleans, at

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any time, you can have a parade and a second line, all you have to do is get the permit and the band and you could do it for anything. But when you say a parade, then that takes to plan that, cause you got to plan your, you gotta do your clothes, your colors and your clothes, and some people have a theme, and you got to get your decorations, your streamers and your fans, and it takes time to put all that together.

RC – To raise the money for it!

BLK – And not only that, I'm gonna tell you now, financially – I think, now if somebody could tell me where it's changed, to me it's the only self-sufficient culture that exists. It is self-sufficient, you have to take care of it. Now, over the years, there've been some different funders that have been able to contribute, but they don't contribute to total cost. Now, for instance, I am the founder and the organizer of the New Orleans Social Aid and Pleasure Task Force. I founded the Social Aid and Pleasure Task Force. The original name was the New Orleans Culture Tradition Task Force, and then we started meeting and the suggestions of some people, Fred Johnson, and some other people, that we change the name to Social Aid and Pleasure Task Force. And you may not believe it, coincidental, one of the main things that, when I organized this task force, was to look at some conditions at the Jazz and Heritage Festival. At the Fest. And those conditions were, and I felt that, as a woman, I felt that they were degrading the conditions in which we had to change clothes, I felt was not appropriate, and I felt that there was some of the things that we needed to address. I also felt that there were some other things within this city that needed to be addressed. So, and, glad to say, and I must, I must commend Quint Davis and his staff, because they were willing to listen. [00:15:57]

RC – And this, when you say the condition of changing clothes, you mean when the clubs would go to parade on the grounds during Jazz Fest --

BLK – Right, when they go to parade on the grounds, they would have this large tent, and this large tent had, like, a curtain. And it was, draw the curtain, and the men on one side, and the women on the other side. Well, the other acts had trailers. They had a bathroom, they had trailers, it was air-conditioned, but that wasn't for the clubs, they wasn't doing that. And I felt that wasn't right, because I felt that, as we do a Jazz and Heritage Festival, and we showcase and spotlight different cultures, that was one of the main cultures,

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because it is, and it was a part of what the Fest was about. So, I did not feel that those conditions was conducive, and it was not right to women. And Norman Dixon, Sr., he's gone on to transition, and he was working with the Jazz and Heritage and the social aid and pleasure clubs, and Gregg, I think it was Gregg Stafford, and we had a conversation, we said, we met and we talked about it, and I shared that, and I explained to him how I felt, and how it shouldn't be. You know, and I left with one thing, I said, 'Now, just think about it, what if it is your wife, or your daughter, just think about it, would you want that.' And they gave that some thought, and what happened, it changed. It wasn't where we had to demonstrate and boy, it wasn't, and, but they listened, and they saw. So now, when you go, when the clubs go the Jazz and Heritage, they have trailers now, air-conditioned, with bathrooms, where they're treated in the same way as all the other acts. Because they are that. You know, and I am proud to say that I am a member of the Jazz and Heritage advisory board now, and over the years, you know, cause I worked for the Jazz Fest, in the kids' area, for quite some time, so I know how important it is, and I know how important it was for them to, to make sure that everyone, whatever culture, that it's treated in a way that everyone can appreciate. That when the people come, they appreciate what they're getting, and seeing, so let's look at everybody the same. So that, so, you know, that worked out, mmhmm. And I also, with the task force, I was able to sit with the, the city, with Joe Valentino, he's no longer with us, he's retired, he's responsible for police escorts and parades, and where we were able to sit down and I also felt that three things I wanted to address, one was the conditions of the Jazz Fest; one was to come up with a structure for parades that you know just what the elements are, or how the elements are defined, what you can and cannot have; and the other one was to create an ordinance for the city that the clubs would have some type of protection. So what happens is that, what happened is we were able to sit down and define what elements were. You know, that they have so many cars, and a float will account for so many cars, so, and also, also have a protection where, because at one time, clubs, like I had a club, I'm in a club for thirty years – you in the club, you get mad with me, you leave, and you start your club. [00:19:40] But you gonna run and put your money, take my date. That wasn't fair. So we also looked at a way to protect those clubs that they would keep their



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same Sunday. So traditionally, you know, the first Sunday in August would be your Sunday. The first Sunday, next Sunday in August would be my Sunday, but it would protect you in a way that people tend to have to just come, I got my money, first come, first serve. We were able to, excuse me, we were able to establish that that doesn't happen, to give the club a sense of protection. Now, also, now, if you, you still keep your date; now, if you don't parade within a certain amount of years, I think two or three years, then you lose your date, then somebody else can get it. But it did protect you, because before that, you had none. So there was, so those things needed to really be taken care of. Now, for the ordinance concern, we never were able to get that together, and to be honest with you, I somewhat pulled away from the task force, and the reason why I pulled away from the task force, and I have no problem saying it on tape or otherwise, because I had gotten to the point that I wanted to serve more as a resource than the leader per se. And also, there were some elements within the task force that wasn't willing to work in a compromising way that everyone would be, everyone would basically be protected and get what they want. Because sometimes, it all depends on the table to determine the outcome. And not all the time, the same tactics will get you the result that you really, really need and what you're doing. So, I, I gathered it was best, cause I did not like the direction, and I decided to step away. I am a person that, I'm not about trying to get you to understand me. But if I feel that you're not willing, I'll eliminate myself, cause you have the right, so I just eliminate myself. And that's what I did. And what has happened over time, that a lot of clubs that were in the task force are no longer in the task force. Now, why they're not, you have to ask them that question, I wouldn't know.

**[00:22:07]** But, you know, I am also a strong believer that as we sit here and we talk, no matter what it is, you can't rewrite history. No matter what's done, how it's done, or what will come of it, you can't rewrite it. It is what it is, you know? And as I sit here and I need you to understand that I am a culture bearer, I am serious about my culture. I love my culture. It's a part of me. So much that I have instilled in my family, my children and my grandchildren, how important they are, and I find that a lot of people are, take it so lightly, because I don't think they understand the importance of it, and that's, I also, and another thing, what I wanted to do in the task force was to establish a curriculum within

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our school system in New Orleans where, where, well, part of the curriculum would be part of the history, social studies, history, where everyone would get, the children would get the opportunity to understand, because what's happening is now the culture will become extinct if we do not educate and encourage the children to be a part of it. It will become extinct. And it will perish for the lack of, the lack of the knowledge, because a lot of people think that it's just about any given Sunday, where people parading up and down the street with these green dollars shaking up and down. It's not that; it's deeper than that. It is some, and I think, I really want it to be a part of the curriculum where, cause, where people would have a better understanding. And a lot of people define a second line, I don't, I define it as a moving party. It is a party that is continuously to move. It moves, it's a party! It's moving. People are gathering, and they're not standing still, they moving! It's a moving party. You know, and it is a party where it should be open, accessible to any and everyone. No matter how old, how young, where you come from. You know? So, I mean, you know --

RC – Two follow-up questions I wanted to ask --

BLK – Mmhmm.

RC - -- on some of the things you just mentioned: I was curious just about the years of when you were talking about the work with the task force, what year, do you remember what year you established it, about --

BLK – Yes. [00:24:47]

RC - -- and what year you transitioned out of it.

BLK – I started in, ok, when was Katrina? Katrina was '04, right?

RC – '05.

BLK – '05. I think I started the task force somewhere between '02 and '03, 03, somewhere up in there, somewhere up in there – I have a lot of my stuff at home, I have to look at – it was before Katrina. It was like, before Katrina, it had – wait wait wait, let's see. Cause I called the first meeting at Ashe Cultural Arts Center. What I did, I [laughs] I gave out these little fliers at the second line parade telling everybody to come, you know, the clubs to come, I was actually putting together. Some people thought I was crazy. My,

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Norman Dixon, Sr., who's gone on to heaven, chances for glory, he said I was crazy.

[PHRASE UNCLEAR], we gonna have nothing! You know. But, it was --

RC – You're not crazy.

BLK – Mm-mm.

RC – You saw a need.

BLK – I saw a need, I saw a need. So, it had to be somewhere between one, between one, because between Katrina came in '05, between one and three, I organized. [00:26:02]

RC – Uh huh.

BLK – Uh huh. And I stepped away in, I stepped away, when Katrina was, '05?

RC – Mmhmm.

BLK – And I stepped away '06, and one of the reasons why I stepped away, cause we had this meeting, and they wanted to have, for Martin Luther King, on Martin Luther, and also, I'm also one of the co-chairs of the Martin Luther King Federal Holiday Commission for the city of New Orleans. The mayor of the city served as chair, and they put community people as co-chairs, and I'm one of the co-chairs of the Martin Luther King Federal Holiday Commission. So, we're planning to have this big second line for Martin Luther King --

RC – In 2006?

BLK – 2006. So, I suggest that we not have a second line, I suggest to show a sense of solidarity, that all the clubs will come together, and we will have a march without music to honor Dr. King. And, all right, we would have a march to honor Dr. King with no music. Some of the people felt that, no, we need to have a second line with bands and all that stuff. And, to be honest with you, I felt that it would be, you know, we're coming out for something, but strength, sometimes solemn is so [WORD UNCLEAR], it gives such a message, you know, that we would all walk in solidarity. No music, all clubs, in solidarity. Just, for Dr. King and also for ourselves to let 'em know that our culture's resilient and we shall come back. But, some factions within the task force felt, no, that we need to have this big second line, and what they did, they had this big ole second line, and I'ma be honest with you, I didn't, I didn't participate, I was on the sidelines, and I watched it pass, and I felt that it's, people came from all over the country, came back for

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the second line. And at the end of the second line, there was a horrible shooting. And I just felt that, you know, so, and I was, gave me more feeling that I needed to step back, because it wasn't, you know, because I really felt that our culture, it is so significant, that we need to have a stance, and the stance should be more than just what people think we are about as a parade.

RC – Cause the culture's much deeper --

BLK – That's right. And I felt that that would, that will show, that will demonstrate and show the world that yes, we about that, we a party, we know how to bring it, you know, we gonna do the thing, but today, it's about a sense of solidarity, it's about being resilient, and also about honoring Dr. King at the same time. But, some people didn't feel that.

RC – I want to ask you something, this might not be a fair question --

BLK – Mmhmm.

RC - -- do you feel that there would have been a less, it would have been less likely that that shooting would have occurred if it had been a march instead of a second line?

**[00:29:26]**

BLK – Yes, I feel it would have been, it wouldn't occur. Yes, I do. Yes I do. And not only that, I had suggest that we would disband the march at the Martin Luther King statue, and one thing I can say, that, you know, all depend on the tone, will determine the outcome. You know, that's just how we talk about crime in the city, we will never be made bare, we will never have a city that's totally without crime. I'm, trust me, I'm not living in a fantasy. You know, we gonna always have murders, we'll have drugs, we'll have all that. Ok? But I notice certain things you do will attract certain things. You know, and I felt, I said we'll start downtown; we'll march uptown with no music. All the clubs together, no music, just march. Together. And we'll come, we'll leave at Martin Luther King statue. And that's it. You know? But what happens is that it is so sad, because social aid and pleasure clubs have, they been treated so unfair, so unjust, where they been given the responsibility of things that happen, but it's not their fault, because it's not the social aid and pleasure club that cause the problem. They're not the one, but people use that as an opportunity to come and catch people. Oh, there he is! And they have, they can, they

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care less. They care less, you know, and we drinking, having a good time, and the music, you know, and there it goes. So I'm saying is that, not that, don't get me wrong, not that the person you see, but, no ma'am, no, and nine times out of ten, no man, I don't want to be bothered with that, I'm not going to that. I'm just saying. I'm just saying.

RC – Sure.

BLK – I'm not saying I'm totally right, but that's only my opinion.

RC – Right.

BLK – You know?

RC – And I wanted to, on the flip side of that, do you think that the numbers of people would have, if it had been a march, that the numbers of people attending it would have been as many people? [00:31:49]

BLK – No, I don't think it would, and it might have would have. Cause it all depends on how you spill it. It all depends on the message that you send, what we're doing. This is our culture, this is our – cause you gotta understand, the social aid and pleasure club, and the culture's a family. We are connected. You know, we are connected, we're family, because what social aid and pleasure clubs also, what it does, it teaches you a sense of togetherness, of brother and sisterhood, entrepreneurs, artists and craftsmen, and it teaches you so much. So, it's, it's, we're like a family. We, social aid and pleasure clubs, they be, members be together more than they be, you know, family! And then it's where everybody participate, mothers and fathers and grandparents and children and cousins and, you know, so, it's, it all depends. You know, so, and I think, the social aid and pleasure, our culture has an obligation to have an image of, to be diverse in so many other ways, yeah, we have a second line, yeah, we do this, but we also do this. You know, we stand for this. And, while I was in the Buck Jumpers, I was the PR person, I organized our first back to school picnic. I was the, Buck Jumpers was the first ones to do that. The Lady Buck Jumpers, where we did the haircuts and the hair braids and, it wasn't just a lot of, come in, get school supplies; it was a family thing. And the other clubs started doing the same thing, you know? And at one time, in the '80s, to be honest with you, in the '80s, there was some clubs, we used to get together and have a picnic, the clubs would get together and have a picnic, like the Scene Boosters, the Buck Jumpers, it was a lot of

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clubs uptown. And they would get together, and we'd have a family fun day! Have games, and activities, and it was a wonderful thing, you know, so I'm saying is that the culture has so much within its element, that it's not just about a parade. You know, so, and that's what I, myself as an elder, and as a culture bearer, that's what I really want the world and people to see, that we stand for something, we're not just about a parade. You know? There are so many other elements to what we do. You know, you know, we have a sense of responsibility, you know, and --

RC – If you had to put words to that thing that it is you stand for, like we stand for, and outline them, what would those things be? In your words. [00:34:44]

BLK – Well, we stand for, to support and have an image and a responsibility that we are, the culture is ours, it's uniquely ours. It is the only culture that really belong to us. And in that, as we, the culture of living and having a strong family, come from that. Also, giving back. Also, of, it stands for, also, of training and educating, so, that's, that's what I want it to be.

RC – Yeah.

BLK – Mmhmm.

RC – Since you brought up the '80s, I wondered if you would take us back there a little bit, that moment in the late 1970s, early 1980s, from what I've been told, and read, and heard --

BLK – Mmhmm.

RC - -- that there was kind of a bit of a moment, maybe a bit before that, in the '60s, maybe early '70s, where, you know, the social aid and pleasure clubs, at least in marching, had kind of dwindled, brass band music had kind of dwindled --

BLK – Well, first of all, in the '60s, in the '60s, in the '60s, you didn't have that many social aid and pleasure clubs. You didn't have that many. You just didn't have that many. You had the, and I'm gonna be honest with you, other than the Young Men Olympia, I think, wait, might have, uptown, you may have, I could be wrong, I stand to be corrected, I tell people that, when I do these interviews and whatever, I stand to be corrected. I think at the time, you had the, in the '60s and the '50s, you had Young Men Olympian Benevolent Society, you had, I think, the Valley of the Silent Men, I think, I'm not sure.

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Downtown, you may have had the Treme High Steppers, or Sixth Ward High, something like that. I don't think you had any in the Ninth Ward. You really didn't, the Jolly Bunch, the Jolly Bunch, this was around this way. But you really didn't have that many clubs. And what happened, it didn't really start revolving til, like, in the '70s. That's when the clubs started bursting out, I think it started with the Scene Boosters, and the Calliope Steppers, the Money Wasters, and all those people, then the Ninth Ward started, then you start, but, and you didn't have that many lady clubs, cause most of the lady clubs came from within the men clubs. And also, with the Jolly Bunch, the, I remember as a child, cause my mother was a part of it, the ladies, it wasn't permissible for a lady to be on the street dancing. The ladies sat on the back of cars, looking pretty in these beautiful gowns, and these cars were decorated and stuff like that, that's, the ladies didn't dance. Now, to my mind, and I stand to be corrected again, there was a group called the Lady Zulu, but they wasn't affiliated with the Zulu. That's right. The whole different thing. And they paraded uptown, but they were, like, they wore black skirts and white blouses, you know, they wasn't, they was like, like a benevolent, ok. But they didn't shake up and down, they'd do their little march or whatever, whatever, and that was that. But, what happened, when the Scene Boosters came on the set --

RC – And that would have been late '70s, early '80s? [00:38:22]

BLK – The late '70s. We still in the '70s.

RC – Ok.

BLK - We like '70, what's this, wait, '76 – we oughtta say '73, '74, somewhere up in there, we're gonna go, like, I'ma call somebody before you leave, I think, like, '73, '74, something like, because I started the Lady Buck Jump, cause I got married in, I married Tuba in '80, let's see, '79. And I started the Money Wasters – so I'm gonna say, the Fun Lovers start like, bout '75, somewhere up in there, I might be wrong. And the Scene Boosters had a lady group called the Fun Lovers.

RC – Oh, the Fun Lovers was the lady group, attached to Scene Boosters.

BLK – That's right. The Fun Lovers. That was DeeDee [?] and all them. And to my knowledge – I stand to be corrected – outside of the Lady Zulu there wasn't really a second line club, ok. They were the first ones I knew on the street, to second line, to start

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second lining. The Fun Lovers, from the Boosters. Then, you had the, see, and the Calliope Steppers, they started a lady group, I forgot the name of they group. Jet Setters! Ok. Miss Naomi just died not long ago. The Lady Money Wasters, then we started the Lady Money Wasters. But, the Lady Money Wasters, we were the first lady club that paraded under they own banner. The first female club to parade, have our own parade. We didn't parade, we had our, we parade our, on our own banner, we had our own parade. We wasn't attached to the men.

RC – Whoa, so a separate day.

BLK – A separate day. Separate permit, everything.

RC – Wow.

BLK – We started uptown, and we came downtown. See, at one time, you just could parade from sunup to sundown. Years ago, the Jolly Bunch, cause I remember, as a child, but they later, with the restrictions of police, they defined that if you downtown, you stay downtown. But see now you could come to that, you [PHRASE UNCLEAR] time. But, the uptown clubs stayed uptown, downtown – but, for one year, the, the, shoo, Money Wasters, one year, cause you know, the clubs is clean rival. It's like a football team. They purposely started uptown, in Booster territory, and came downtown. They did that on purpose. But customarily, the clubs stay downtown, stay uptown, you know. So, and then later, some other clubs came on the scene, where they started at Armstrong Park and came downtown, you know, so, as time passed, and, what, it really started busting out in the '80s, like the, the Buck Jumpers started in 1984, and this started back in Gert Town, Hollygrove, Gert Town. It started in '84, and the men started the club first, and then the men went and got some ladies together, and they organized the ladies. Then, from there, a lot of other clubs started happening. But, in the early '60s, it was, wasn't that many. The early '70s, wasn't that many. They really started popping up in the '80s, that's when they start, pssss!

RC – Why do you think that happened? [00:41:53]

BLK – Well, various reasons. One, I think, because a lot, like I was telling you about that stuff about folks got mad and got out, start they own group. Cause, see, a lot of clubs split off from other clubs, you know, like we all in the club together, you get mad, you leave,



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you start your club; I get mad, I start my club. And that's what they did, a lot of clubs  
spinned off with members from one club, and starting another club. And now, there are  
so many clubs, there's not enough Sundays. At one time, they had Sundays to spare, but  
now, and that was also one of the reasons why the task force, I felt it was important that  
these clubs that had been existing, and been parading, had to keep their date in tact.

Because of the fact that, you know, like Pigeon Town, they have a club – everywhere,  
they have clubs everywhere now. Everywhere have clubs. They everywhere. They are  
everywhere! There's so many clubs, I could tell you, there are so many now, there's not  
enough Sundays. You know, so that's why they needed something to protect them, to be  
sure that they would have their date.

RC – Right. And why do you think, in that particular moment, you know, what was going  
on in society, you know, in the '70s and '80s that was, why were there women all of a  
sudden felt like, oh, we need to change this, we want to be on the street, we can do this,  
you know, we can do what the men do. [00:43:11]

BLK – Mmhmm. Well, I think, once you're on the street, within the men club --

RC – Just that the women wanted to be, like your club wanted to be parading on their  
own day, and dancing on the street, and not riding in cars anymore.

BLK – Well, I think what happened is that, like I said, the Fun Lovers, they were the first  
of those. And to be honest with you, I don't think there was really a specific reason, I just  
think they just wanted to dance.

RC – Mmhmm.

BLK – They knew how to dance, and they just wanted to dance! So, you know, and the  
men, and the culture felt, ok, that's all right! You know, cause the second line is out here  
dancing, the women, so why not have a women division?

RC – Right, right.

BLK – You know, and then they do it, you know?

RC – Yeah.

BLK – So I don't really think it was, it was anything, a competitiveness, or to show, I  
think it was just that, we want to dance, and the men, and, you know, encourage that, well

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dance, let's dance. You know? Cause it wasn't a thing where they was challenging anyone --

RC – They were accepting it, right?

BLK – That's right. They were, mmhmm.

RC – Yeah, that's good. I think it was, I think it was you who might have said this, back in one of these 1994 panels, I can't remember, but I think it was, something about how the women's liberation movement kind of happened --

BLK – Yeah, right, you know, and then, yeah, you know, but you gotta understand, especially in the African-American community, it wasn't about women being liberated, it was just that I think it wasn't that, well, we gonna show 'em, and, because as I told you, what's so unique about this culture is how they love, how we love each other, how we support each other. Case in point, I remember that same year, the Lady Money Wasters, when we had our first parade, we were late, we were behind in getting our stuff done. I remember that morning, how all these men came to my house. And helping us getting everything together, for us to make it on the street.

RC – Right.

BLK – You know, so that was a sense of togetherness. Even though you're going out by yourself, we're still here, we're gonna help you. We gonna help you get on the street by yourself. So, I think it was, seem different to liberate. Women, during that time, of that era, you know, the women stand, we gonna stand for, we gonna show you how it is, we gonna show you how it go, but I don't think in the culture that's what we were doing, I think what we wanted to do, even though we were part of it, we still wanted to show you we could do it on our own, too. In our own way. We only did that one time.

RC – Ah, that you paraded separately? [00:45:50]

BLK – Yeah, we only did it one time. Mmhmm, we did it one time. You know. But, also, now, what happened with the Lady Buck Jumpers is that, you know, like I told you, the men started, the men started the Lady Buck – the men started the Original New Orleans Buck Jumpers, and then they recruited the women, and the children, with Junior Buck Jumpers, we had three divisions. And what happened is that, a period of time, there were a couple of years that the men did not have, did not parade, but that meant nothing, the

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Lady Buck Jumpers still put it on the street. You know, so, in a sense, if you look at it, what it did, when the men did embrace, and support the idea of women coming out, what it did, it gave us a sense of, that you could take this, you could do this. You don't really need us. You know, in a good way, you know, in a good way. Cause I'm, to my knowledge, I don't know – again, I could be wrong, I've never known where it was a competitive thing with the men and the women.

RC – Right, right.

BLK – Mmhmm.

RC – Well and it seems now, too, that the Lady Buck Jumpers are, you know, they're such a force, and known as these, just like, dancers that really, I mean, just like, their whole back --

BLK – Well, but see, what happened too with the Lady Buck Jumpers is that a lot of people don't know, we had different layers. We had layers, at one time, we had as many as thirty women, but we had layers. And that was the uniqueness of the Lady Buck Jumpers is that we had a group of dancers, we had a group of people that didn't dance, we had, so, and that was theirs. We had, like, myself, I, I'ma be honest with you, I was in the Buck Jumpers, I think I was on the street maybe twice. After that, I got on the car, cause I told 'em, I said, 'I don't want to dance anymore.' But we had this group of dancers, you know, Linda and Barbara and Ida Mae, and Kim, and I could call their names, there was a bunch of 'em. They were our dancers. And everybody could dance, but those of us, the older ones, we were recognizing that it wasn't bout competing or trying to keep up with these younger women. We put them in the forefront, cause they our dancers. They gonna dance. We gonna basically lay back some, you understand?

**[00:48:15]**

RC – Mmhmm.

BLK - And then eventually what we did, so, and we also allowed that you, in, you come, you don't, you be a Buck Jumper, don't be a dancer. They would ride on cars. So, like I said, we had layers. You know?

RC – That really speaks to what you were saying earlier, about how there's more to the culture than a parade.

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BLK – That’s right!

RC – Even within the parade, there’s layers of participation.

BLK – That’s right. And then also, we ran out, we ran the Buck, the Lady Buck Jumpers as, even though we were a social aid and pleasure club, we ran it as a business. It was a business. And had certain people that was a business element, like myself, the president, some other people, we were the business element of the club. I was the PR person, we had business managers, we had our president, we had, with, you know, recording secretary, we, it was ran like a business. We had treasurer, financial secretary – we ran it like a business. Every month when you came to this meeting, you had a, we had ledgers, everybody got a copy, your name, you knew what everybody owed, you knew what everybody was paying, you knew that every three months we had what we call a check-up. You knew what you had to pay. We also had a strict rule that if you were not paying up, you could not hit the street. I don’t care who you are. You could not, you had to be paid up, you could not owe the organization one penny. It was business! It was nothing personal. It was, cause it costs to do this. So, it was business. PR, I was a PR person, I was a person responsible to put that out there, and I did, I was responsible, I brought those ladies from, like I said, the backstreet culture to the front street, while developed a relationship with the administration. Marc Morial, the mayor of New Orleans, was the mayor at the time, where I was able to negotiate with, the Lady Buck Jumpers became his official group.

RC –The mayor’s official group? [00:50:16]

BLK – That’s right. And also, we, when the inauguration and everything, I was the one that negotiated with the culture, with the cultural economy department that during the inauguration you would have the Mardi Gras Indians and the social aid and pleasure – Marc Morial’s the one started that --

RC – Mm, and that came in about what year?

BLK – Marc, that was in, that was in ’80, that had to be in the ’80,’80, I’ll have to look and see, ’89? ’88, ’89, somewhere up in there.

RC – Ok.

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BLK – And every mayor thereafter, it was the same thing. You know, every, you know, like, whatever it was, I made sure, we worked with the sickle cell anemia, hand shaking, we did a lot of stuff. We did a lot of things, a lot of, you know, to get that image out there. Also what we did, we, we was a group to reckon with, what I mean, with the fashions. I brought you some pictures.

RC – Oh yeah, yeah, yeah

BLK – We set the tone to the street. In the organization, I was also given the responsibility to help to coordinate, get the, help the group to coordinate to get together once we would choose the color, then we'd have to look at what we gonna do with this color, how we gonna do it, what we gonna wear. And we became our worst enemy, because every year, we had to go back to the drawing board, now, what we gonna do? You know, we set the tone, we brought the fashion to the street. We brought mink and leather and all that stuff to the street that nobody had ever thought about doing, and I really feel that the Original New Orleans Lady Buck Jumpers are the ones that created the tone of fashion for the ladies today, of the street. I really, I really believe that. You know, and to be honest with you, a lot that I see now, I am so impressed, I'm, I'm really happy, and I'm proud, but I'm also sad in some ways, because I find that I had to talk to a young man that has an organization, I don't recall the name, but, I'm a little disheartened by some of the content that I witness out there. With the actual clubs. Not the second liners, not the people coming, but the actual members of the group. And --

RC – In terms of what they're wearing, or in terms of, what do you mean by content.

**[00:53:06]**

BLK – Their conduct. The way they act.

RC – Oh, conduct, conduct.

BLK – Yeah. And some of the people that they invited to participate in their parade, cause like I told this young man, when you invite somebody to participate, they representing you. I am, I'm, I'm a little disappointed and disheartened about the behavior and the conduct, also some of the language. That's coming from off the floats, cause you know, now you have the DJ, with the mics, and the music, and the cursing and all that, because, you know, as I told you about earlier, this is a family thing. This is a family

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thing. Everybody's coming. The old people, young people, the babies, your grandma, your aunty, your mama, all them coming out to see you! To support you. They don't need to hear all that stuff coming from you. You, you invest in too much, you do too much, and you look too much, you representing something that is sacred. And you could clown, but don't curse. Don't talk about body parts, don't talk about what you gonna do with these body parts. And [sighs] so I'm, I'm a little taken aback by that. And I like to, I would like to see the ladies, and it's coming from a lot of ladies, and I would like to see that change. I would like to see them work on that. Because it's taking something away from them. Cause they spend a lot of money, and they look so nice, they be out there so proud, you don't know how proud I am! But when some, and they want to twerk and back that thing up, come on, on the queen float? The queen is elegant, she's a queen! You royalty! Your maids and your attendants are the same. Act like that. You're not supposed to be doing that kind of stuff. You know, and I'm a little disappointed in that, and I really hope that, you know, and I've spoken to a couple of people, and it's to a point where I'm seriously thinking about maybe organizing a retreat, or doing something, to try to get some of these sisters in the room and talk about it. And see what we can do about it. Because even though I do not participate, that does not mean I don't love my culture. And I am concerned about what happens, and where it's going. You know? As I say, I'm an elder now, I'm a resource now, but I'm just not gonna throw my hands and say 'All is gone,' just, you know, and a lot of people I've talked to, they agree, men and women. And I --

RC – [WORD UNCLEAR] people?

BLK – Hm?

RC – Do you think, is it a generational divide, or do young people you talk to also agree?

**[00:56:03]**

BLK – Both, all, it's, you know, and a lot of young people I think is that they kinda skeptical about addressing it because they may, because of the flack that they may receive, so, cause sometimes it's more of the messenger, the messengers, it all depends, so I'm really thinking about trying to organize something.

RC – Yeah.

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BLK – You know, with some groups. Cause like I said, this is actually club members. And participants, not the people coming. Cause you can't control the people coming to the second line, but you can control within your organization, you know, so I'm really, because, it's serious. You know? And also, I don't know if, you know, another question?

RC – Oh, go ahead, go ahead, whatever you were gonna say. [00:57:02]

BLK – To be honest with you, I want to share, and I've shared this with some other people – as you know, it's getting to the point now where [sighs] I have to be very tactful of the way I say things. I see that there are a lot of people from other persuasions, more now, coming to the parades than ever. At one time, you seen 'em, very few. Now, they're everywhere, they're coming from everywhere. Of different persuasions in there.

RC – Different races, people, tourists --

BLK – Yes.

RC - -- all kinds of people, right?

BLK – Everywhere, everywhere. Now, you heard that I said that this is our culture, it's uniquely ours? And I'm saying this, and I have no qualms, I have no problem, but some things I feel that should always stay ours. And I'm just gonna give you some example. The Vietnamese, they have their culture. It's their culture. I haven't seen any African-American in the Vietnamese culture yet. Yet! Ok? Italians, they have their culture. I, they may invite you to come, but they not a part of the culture. And I can go on and on and on and on, the Jewish, and this that and the other, I can go on and on and on. So, I have concerns, and those are only mine. That don't mean that I'm right. But --

RC – But it sounds like you've sensed that there's some power in, in that --

BLK – Yes, and

RC - -- being

BLK – I think, that's right, I think that you should, you could come, but I don't think that you should be a participant and part of a group. A second line group. That's only my opinion. Because it is our culture, and I think, like I say, uniquely ours. Can we have anything of our own? Other than negative stats? I'm just, you know, and I, and I'm not prejudiced, I'm not biased, I'm not racist, I'm none of that. I'm none of that. But when it comes to that, I think that should be something that should be us. You know, and there

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are some clubs, they do not allow it. Ok? And I could call them by names. They do not allow it. And they've made that a, they've made it known, and I'm not gonna call names, and they basically feel the way I feel. You know. So, and my thing is, no, I'm not gonna say that, no, but anyway, but I have concerns about that.

RC – Yeah, yeah. One of the things I wanted to ask before, when you were talking about being a resource, and you may not participate visibly, you know, but you're so involved in these other ways. Your position at City Hall involves working with the clubs --

BLK – Right.

RC – -- from inside the City Council.

BLK – No, not really.

RC – Not really, not in an official capacity. [01:00:30]

BLK – No, in my official capacity, I am director of constituent services. That simply means one thing, I work for you, I work for everybody, I represent, you know, I'm a problem solver. But that does not mean if clubs need me to assist in any things, I will do that. Because I can say to you that since I've been here, I never worked in city government until the person I work for now was elected, and she asked me to come work for her, and I decided – cause I've always been a community activist, I've been involved in the community for over fifty years. Politically, and otherwise, you know, I've been instrumental in a lot of things. In education, and parental involvement, and stuff like that, but I never worked in city government until this person was elected, and she asked me to come work, and I came in. And there have been some times where the clubs have gotten some negative stuff, where petitions were called, about the clubs.

RC – I see.

BLK – And I had to intercede. And also, in working for the person that I work for, I was able to educate her on the dos and don'ts, also preceding with the culture, cause she thought that second line was jazz funeral, when they bury a dope dealer, all that kind of stuff. She didn't know! She did not know. Ok? She did not know. So I was able to educate her, and then some other people on some things, you know. So, I'm able to intercede, if I can, when I can.

RC – I think your microphone might have fell off. Oh, there it is.



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BLK – Is it on? Can you hear it?

RC – Yeah, yeah, I can hear it.

BLK – Ok. I'll just hold it then.

RC – Yeah, yeah --

BLK – That's fine.

RC – I'll wrap it up here. And the person you work for is Stacy Head. [01:02:26]

BLK – Yes.

RC – Yeah, yeah, just to say that on the record.

BLK – One of the best people in the world! My baby, I love you Stacy! [laughs]

RC – We've covered pretty much everything I wanted to ask about. I, well, I have this question, it might not, it might not make any sense, but if it does --

BLK – Right.

RC - -- I'd be curious in your response to it.

BLK – Right.

RC – Is, we talked about the different layers of participation, right, in a parade. And also, something that maybe we didn't talk about but is true is that dancing and brass band music happens in places other than a parade --

BLK – Yes, yes.

RC - -- right so this is something that pervades, is pervasive, and not just in this --

BLK – Yeah, cause, and you know what, let me tell you something, and to me, one of the worst scams – that's only me, again – is to have second line lessons. There's no such thing! There is no right way, wrong way to second line. Second line dance, as they say it. To me, it's doing what you feel. And what, it's what the music brings out of you. There is no special, some people, like they said, footwork, some people, that is the music moving through them, the music and the music moves and bubbles through the street, and bubbles through your, it gives you, and your body a sense of feeling, that brings your mind, your brain, and your heart, and your feet, and your nerves, to do a certain thing! So this is no right way or wrong way. So I can't understand how you gonna teach, you can't teach anybody how to – you just do what you feel. What the music makes you feel. Some people, the music make 'em, they just, some people the music make 'em, it just, it's all in

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the music. In the beat of the music. That vibrates through you. You know? Some people like to move to the drums. Some people like to move to the brass. Some people, ding ding, cowbell, ding ding ding ding ding. So how can you teach somebody how to second line? It's no such thing. It's no such thing. You know, and, you know, I, I wanted to say, when I was talking about being a culture bearer, and how important it is for the transition, I'm a mother, four children and four grandchildren. What I did with my four children, I afforded the opportunity to be involved in the culture. And my reasons for that was to expose them to the culture, and what happened is that only two of them decided that they wanted to be a part, and that was fine, but that did not mean I didn't expose them, or teach 'em, and know. And through that, I have four grandchildren, and out of my four grandchildren, only one of my grandchildren decided, and he is a musician. In fact, he has his own brass band, his brass band is called Sons of Jazz. He's a tuba player. And -- RC- And what is his name? [01:05:42]

BLK – His name is Michael Brooks. Michael Brooks, Jr. And to me, I tell him all the time, I say, 'You the spirit.' He has the spirit of his grandfather. He plays the tuba, and sometimes his gestures and the way he move, the way he play the instrument, sometimes I really think, you know, I say, 'Boy, you got the spirit of Tuba in you!' So what I am saying is that, what I would wish for my African-American sisters and brothers and families, that you afford the children the opportunity to make a choice. You know, and for so long, like I said, people thought it was degrading, oh, you don't want to do that like the more common people. It's not that. Educated, fine, hardworking, refined people, you know, that just have a deep love for its culture and want to participate. And, like that curriculum, that curriculum in the schools will give them a choice, too. Because it would arise there. Because one of my grandsons said he wanted to be, I can't remember now, but, and the reason why he said he wanted to be is cause he saw, ah, I can't remember, he saw this movie with Cuba Gooding about the deep sea diver, something, yeah, and that's why he wanted to do that. So to say that aroused his curiosity. One of my granddaughters wanted to be a meteorologist. Because of the weatherman! Ok. So, and then she, after she saw, she had to take too many math and science courses, she changed her mind, oh, I don't want that. You know, so all I'm saying is that I want everybody to understand,

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whoever sees this, whoever has the opportunity to hear this, that the culture that we have here, the culture of second line, the culture of brass bands, it is nothing to take lightly. It is a very treasured culture. It is, and I get emotional, because of the love that people will only know that it is a part of us, that those of us who may not have the opportunity to ever travel to our motherland, it was, it's a part that was brought there, to instill in us, cause if you look at some, you say you're a dance major. You look at some African dance, and compare it to some second line. So connected.

RC – So connected. [01:08:16]

BLK – So connected. So, you know, even if you choose not to participate, at least become knowledgeable about it, so that you will have a better appreciation of it.

RC – Speaking of the dancing, this is my last question I have written

BLK – Ok.

RC - -- but is, this is the question I said might sound a little strange. The way you describe the dancing is really moving, and I wonder, is dancing a, the social aid part, the pleasure part, or both?

BLK – It's all wrapped up together. It's all in one. Sometimes, we sashay. Let's sashay, that's benevolence. You sashay in the church, you sashay. Ok? You sashay in African dance. You sashay. It's all, it's all wrapped up into one. It's all in the one.

RC – And it's sacred.

BLK – The dancing, it's about, it's about the beat of the music, that's tapping and tipping on your heart. It's the beating of the music that's tapping and tipping on your brain. It's the beats that are tapping and tipping on the ambience, on the taste that's in your mouth, of a good dish that you just ate. That's what it's all about. Right?

RC – That's beautiful note to end on. [Lacen Keller laughs] Unless you'd like to say anything else.

BLK – No, I'm, I'm truly grateful and honored to, to contribute.

RC – It's my honor to be --

BLK – Thank you.

RC - -- a witness to your memory and the history that you carry.

BLK – Thank you.

Interviewee: Barbara Lacen Keller

Interview date: September 5, 2017

RC – And to collect this information.

BLK – It is hard to know, and my time for transition will come, and I would hope that when I transition, that people will understand that this is true value, not face value, of how I love my culture. Ok? [01:10:18]

RC – Thank you for everything that you've done --

BLK – Thank you.

RC - -- for this.

**END OF RECORDING**

*Transcribed by Jess Pinkham, 10/25/16*