

DR. VALERIE LITTLES-BUTLER

Narrator

KIM HEIKKILA

Interviewer

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**TRANSCRIPT—
DR. VALERIE LITTLES-BUTLER**

Interviewee: Dr. Valerie Littles-Butler
Interviewer: Kim Heikkila
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Location: St. Paul Public Library – Dayton’s Bluff
Length: 1:39:22

Kim Heikkila: This is an interview for the Oxford Community Center Oral History Project. It is Wednesday, November 5, 2025, and I’m here with Dr. Valerie Littles-Butler. My name is Kim Heikkila. Today I’ll be talking to Dr. Littles-Butler about her involvement at Oxford and about her long basketball career. So, thank you so much, Dr. Littles-Butler, for being here and for being willing to share your Oxford story.

Dr. Valerie Littles-Butler: You are welcome.

KH: All right, great. So, yeah, if you could just start by kind of briefly saying what your main connection to Oxford is. Obviously, that will be the focus of much of what we’re talking about tonight, but just briefly.

VLB: I was born and raised in the village of Rondo, where Oxford actually is located. I grew up at Oxford, the field house at Oxford. The building as it exists today did not exist. It was just a field house. And it was full of vibrant young people. So I just stayed at the field house and played sports that were open to boys mainly, but girls were able to play as well. But we had a lot of outside sports, so inside didn’t exist. We were always outside playing sports. So I was very interested in always being at Oxford and having fun.

KH: Okay, great. And so, you say you were there, when it was just a field house, meaning that little brick building. Right? It wasn’t the original first, I think there was a

little trailer almost, but it was the small brick building. Am I thinking of that?

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VLB: That's it, that's it. And more like a warming house. If you were out there ice skating, you could come in, change your skates, or warm up a little bit. It wasn't really big. To me, it was big because it was inside a little building, but we didn't have much of anything. When they tore that down, we were like, Oh, my goodness. We didn't expect to see what we were going to get, but they tore that down, but that was all we had. So, we still continued to play outside.

KH: In between.

VLB: When they started building up, yes. That's all I knew was Oxford. As they built on, they were more inclusive of girls doing different things and activities, arts and crafts, and all kinds of different groups. There were programs like the Loft and stuff that were all engaged for teenage kids who would gather together just listening to music, having groups, mentors were there. Older people in the community would come back and correct us or work with us or teach us different things about life. People invested in young people back in the day, as much as they could. Nobody was screaming about how we don't get paid enough. It wasn't about pay; it was about investing in young people. And so, while Oxford was under construction, the Loft teen center evolved over on Portland. And so, a lot of young people went over there, listening to music and just a place for us to go, stay off the street, stay out of trouble and stay connected. And when Oxford evolved, it was like *the* place, like the best place ever.

KH: When the new building—

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VLB: In the new building. What I really loved about it coming from Ober Boys club, that's where I grew up at Ober Boys club as my mom was the director, and the boys

played sports and the girls had arts and crafts and cooking and all the things that catered to girls. When Oxford was established, we as females were able to play sports and be a part of everything, so it was the best thing ever. One thing about it is we were actually able to not only play, we were able to play with the boys. We were able to play with the boys even though they'd say girls can't play, they would talk about us and talk about us, and we continued to get out there and play. I played basketball, I ran track, I played flag football, and a couple other girls even played tackle football. I didn't play hockey, but I learned how to ice skate. My mom taught many other kids how to ice skate. And yeah, we played games out there. So I did everything all year round.

KH: And this was even while it was just that little field house, or after?

VLB: When it was a field house, it was more ice skating. Yeah, that kind of stuff outside.

KH: Because there was no gym.

VLB: No gym. There's a lot of baseball, a lot of football, and that's what the boys usually played. But we did get to play softball. I forgot about that. I played softball. We got to play softball. Slow pitch, of course. Yeah, it was slow pitch. But there was always something. I remember the older people in the community, they were our coaches and they would come back. Even if you didn't play, you could watch and learn. You watch and learn. And so, it was just fun.

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VLB: It was a family thing because parents would come out and watch their kids and you just have families on the sides and parents on the sides conversing with each other and cheering their kids on. They were a part of their kids' lives. They were present. The community was present. That's one thing I really loved about being in the Rondo Village, because the community was always present. The stores, the businesses, the

schools, the churches, community centers; they were just present. I'm used to adults being there for young people.

KH: Yeah, that's kind of a theme that I want to keep coming back to here, because I think that is such an important part of the Oxford and the Rondo story. So we'll kind of weave that in and out, I think. But I wonder if you could tell me just a little bit about your family.

VLB: My family. My mom, the Ballard [ph] family, were actually some of the original Black families that were born and raised, actually born and raised in St. Paul. Not my grandparents. They were from Michigan and Louisiana, or Kansas City, I should say, but my mom and her siblings and a few of the families, the Smallers, were born in Minnesota, which most of the people migrated to Minnesota. They were born here. That's why in the Rondo community, you knew people by their family, because everybody looked alike. But the families were the units. It was so strong.

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My family grew up, and they were very active in the community. My father is from Oklahoma, and he came here with his mom and was active and engaged. My uncles, they all played softball and very active and engaged in the Negro League. My Uncle Cecil was in that. I was always around sports. To be honest with you, growing up, my dad used to bring me to football games or family gatherings. Nobody touched the TV but my dad. He watched sports. So I was sitting there and watching sports with him. That's how I learned how to play football, just watching sports all the time.

KH: Did you have siblings?

VLB: I am the youngest of four girls in our household. Yes, I have older siblings, my dad's kids, but still, we're close. But then my family, I'm the youngest out of everybody.

KH: And did your sisters also play sports?

VLB: Yes, ma'am, they played basketball.

KH: And how much older than you are your sisters?

VLB: We're all in steps, so I'm the youngest. Starting there, it's one, two, three, four. That's how we are. But I always think I was the last thought, because everybody was born in January except me.

KH: When were you born?

VLB: I was born in August, so I was supposed to be the boy that never came. I don't know. So the closest you're going to get for a boy was me playing sports forever. That's all I do. But, yeah, I'm the youngest.

KH: And what year were you born?

VLB: In '63.

KH: And so, what about your mom? I mean, you said that she taught kids how to ice skate. Was she athletic? Was she involved in sports herself?

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VLB: She loved ice skating.. And my dad loved sports, so he was like, okay, get out there and play. Do what you do. But my mom, her journey was so different than anything as the director. She was young and started working when she was 13 years old. I started working when I was 12. And so, just getting that drive to get out there and do what I needed to do. But she was out there working very young and then became the director even in her early twenties.

KH: At Ober Boys?

VLB: At Ober Boys.

KH: And Ober Boys, was that on what is now the north side of 94?

VLB: It's on the north side of 94, 94 and Western.

KH: Okay, I think I know where it is.

VLB: Yes, ma'am.

KH: I've driven by. And so, what was your mom's background, educationally? Or how did she end up being director?

VLB: Always being at Ober Boys Club, because it had all the activities for girls, and so that's the place where everybody hung out for teens and stuff like that. And growing up there, the church and all of these different things that were going on, Ober Boys Club wasn't too far from the church. So that program, and Hallie Q. Brown. Hallie Q. Brown was actually north of 94 as well. And so, all these community centers were over there on that side, the same side we grew up on. Our house was on 94 and Dale. We lost our home to 94. So when I was a little kid, I was watching it, and I was playing in the dirt as they were building that freeway.

KH: Right, so you were born in '63 and it opened, what, like in '68 or '69?

VLB: Yes.

KH: So, yeah, you would have been a little kid.

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VLB: I was little, but I can remember it because we played in the dirt. I actually remember the houses that were across the street. Then we lost our house, and then we had to move. We were relocated to the other side of 94, south of 94, to Dayton Avenue. Dayton and Oxford, by the way. We were in that area. That's why it was so close, and that's how I ended up at Oxford. I was still a little kid, growing up over there. I didn't go to the Ober Boys club much, but I know it was still open. We went there when they were renovating, or building Oxford, because Ober Boys Club was still open.

KH: And so, do you know, granted you were a pretty young kid when this happened, but did your family get relocation assistance, financial assistance, when you

lost your house and had to move?

VLB: It's like this. They did get financial assistance, but it was enough to move in. It didn't buy the house. They still had to work, and nothing was just paid for. They still had to pay the mortgage and everything else.

KH: And what do you remember as a child when this was happening? What were the conversations about this in your family or in the community?

VLB: One of the main things is like, Where are we going to live? We lived in a duplex. My grandparents lived downstairs. And so, where are we going to live? Where are the kids going to go to school? Because McKinley was right across the street, basically across the street on the other side of 94 now. They tore that down. We had Maxfield to go to. Once they tore McKinley down, they were like, Where are we going? Where are we sending our kids? And when we moved over on the other side of 94, J.J. Hill was over there, and we ended up at J.J. Hill.

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VLB: But they had conversations, which back in the day, when adults are talking, kids leave the room, let them have their conversations. Kids, go be kids. But I do remember conversations about where we are going to live? Because it was unknown. You're uprooted to where? With this kind of money, where are we going?

KH: And again, you were very young, but were you talking to your friends about this? Were you kids aware or concerned about this massive change coming through?

VLB: Honestly? Me, no. Because I was too young to even understand the whole logistics of it. But listening to my parents about so many different things, sometimes I was in the room. If I can just venture off just a little bit? I was always in the room, in the '60s, it was really, really interesting because I saw the dynamics and the emotional roller coaster of my family, politically, because there were so many things politically that have

impacted our household.

In the '60s, you had Martin Luther King, the Kennedy brothers, Malcolm X. So everything in my world about politics was negative. It was sad. It just did some emotional damage to my family, because that's all they talked about. "Our leaders are dying. People that care about us are dying. What are we going to do? We have to work harder. We have to work smarter. We have to make sure our kids have what they need. How are we going to raise them in this world where people that are trying to do well keep getting shot down?" All these different things. So I'm a little kid just listening to this stuff. It wasn't just my mom and dad. It was my family, my grandparents and everybody. And then going to church, because the church was the hub of everything.

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VLB: There were a lot of conversations about community. Be careful, be safe. Mind you, now, I'm in the Rondo community. I lived in barriers, within barriers. You could not venture out too far across the barrier, across University, across Snelling, and across Grand, across Western. As a kid, we just lived in that boundary. And so, moving where we moved, it was within the boundaries, so we felt safe. We didn't even think of moving out of Rondo. Anyway, growing up at that time and listening to your parents, so growing up politically, I struggled even in school when they talked about politics, because I didn't want to talk about it because I always thought it was bad.

KH: Well, for good reason.

VLB: Until I started reading about it and learning about it on my own, yeah. But that was my introduction to politics. It was bad.

KH: Everybody getting assassinated.

VLB: Yeah, the '60s were just horrible.

KH: Yeah, they were. So, and maybe this is what you're saying as you get a little

bit older, but obviously, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, they're part of the Civil Rights, Black Power, Black Nationalist movement, were you learning about that as well, in addition to, okay, now they've been killed?

VLB: Absolutely. Always learning that. My first educational experience that I remember was not at school. It was at church, or in my home. We learned a lot about our history, our culture, who we were. And then, of course, the Black Power movement came along when I was at the age of understanding. Now I'm like five and up, I'm able to understand a whole lot and see people change.

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VLB: By the '70s, people, not only did they change, they started changing their names to more African names and attire, and the afros and everything came out, and it was more cultural senses of who we are, and our identity mattered to us. So just seeing a Black person on TV would freeze a whole Black family, Oh, my gosh. There's a Black person on TV. And we would stop and look. There are entertainers on TV, movie stars on TV. We would just stop and like, Wow, that is amazing, or on the radio. Now, I grew up like that, and I was kind of used to that. One thing about it, where I did grow up, and I tell people my story all the time, and they think I was born down south in the '70s or '60s because I said I had Black teachers, I had Black principals, because they put all the Black teachers and principals in the Rondo area. So I grew up like that, and I was used to that.

So, me personally, they talk about privilege, but I talk about privilege in a different manner. I was a privileged young lady growing up when I did have all the people, the identity of people. I knew who I was all the time, and I was not afraid to be Black. I knew I was Black. I was proud to be Black, until things changed through the educational system. I wasn't able to see the big picture. I was a kid. I didn't see beyond Rondo until the education changed and they started tearing down more of the schools. They tore down

J.J. Hill. That was torn down to rebuild it. So, if you tear down the schools that we go to, where are we going?

[00:20:00]

KH: They're tearing down your houses, your schools.

VLB: There you go. So, you're seeing a pattern of disruption in my life. And what did I learn from it? Did I grow from it? Was I bitter? All of that. But being bitter and just staying there does nothing but learning and to grow through it. And watching the pillars in my community and how they did these things? I have so many pillars in our community. My first principal, Shirley Kaiser [ph], African American female, stern, strict, yes. Had a paddle hanging behind her seat in her office back in the day, but everybody that was the educator was part of the community, right? To this day, I can call Ms. Kaiser, and she'll come to the school. She's one of my biggest fans. She's a trailblazer for real. She'll come, and she says, "I'll come read to your kids." She's one of my mentors.

KH: And what school was she principal of?

VLB: J.J. Hill.

KH: I have heard other people that I've interviewed for this project talk about J.J. Hill and about the really great education they got there from really outstanding teachers who really, again, were invested in the kids.

VLB: Invested in the kids. We had so many teachers that were there. Mr. Helm, Ms. Shroud, Mr. Whipple were there. Delores Henderson [ph] wasn't at J.J. Hill when I was a little kid, but she ended up at J.J. Hill in the system for over 50 years. So, man, I'm telling you, I have so many people that paved the way. I'm sorry if I start naming people and I'll start forgetting people, even all the way up through high school.

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KH: And maybe this is a good time. Maybe I should have said this earlier, but tell

us, for those who are listening or will read this transcript later, what you do for your career.

VLB: Currently, I am a principal, and you want me to tell you the school where I am? I'm actually back in the same district where I was as a kid. My life is in full circle. So,] I was born and raised in St. Paul Public Schools, and I am a principal at St. Paul Public Schools right now.

KH: So you can see this legacy living on, and what you've done and continue to do.

VLB: Absolutely. I honestly can tell you that the trailblazers that have paved the way for me right now, I can call them up right now. Mary K. Boyd, I call her up right now. They paved such a wide path that if you paid attention, they made it easy for us. You just got to pay attention to what they were doing and how they did it. They were fearless, just fearless leaders that came through that educational path. Not only just in education, but in life. And so, if you live in a community where your teachers and your principals, you go to church together, you're in the stores, it's part of the community. So, therefore, thinking about getting in trouble is not a good idea.

KH: Everybody's going to know.

VLB: Everybody.

KH: And it's going to get home to your parents.

VLB: Yes, yes. So me being one of the younger ones and a lot of people really didn't pay too much attention to me because my sisters were older, doing their thing, growing up at the center, sometimes I was just there absorbing and learning and listening and watching and looking at all the people that were taking the time out with young people. That's why my passion is young people. My whole passion. That's why I've been in education for 40 years. This is year 40.

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VLB: To be in education that long, I have to have a love or a passion for something. It is about the young people. They deserve quality. They deserve a chance. They deserve the best. Because people invested in me, I'm going to turn around and invest in them. There's not enough money in this world that could pay me to invest in kids. It's not about money. It's time. It's love. You've got to love them through it, like people loved me through, right?

So there's so many people that I'm thinking about, not only in there, but in the church. They taught us. They taught us so much. One of the choir directors, he was the actual director, the minister of music. Reverend Carl Walker. He is a co-founder of Walker West Academy, right? He was also a piano teacher and taught us how to play the piano, took time out to do that kind of stuff and invested in the young people because he was a musician and he thinks everybody should be out there doing something constructive. Well, actually, I got into music, started playing and I thought he was very strict.

He wouldn't hit you with a ruler, but he'd say, "That is not it." He would hit the key. "That is not it. That's not what I played." And I said, "Okay, I'm never going back to play." I wish I would have stayed with it. But I said, let me go, and I played basketball. I just picked up a basketball and I kept playing. But to this day, I'm on the board of Walker West. Investment. I was taught investment. It's not about the money, it's about lives. That's so much more powerful. Investing is a gift that keeps on giving. That's what I saw people doing, so I'm just used to it.

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KH: I'm not even sure how to quite ask this question. So you've been describing Rondo, or Rondo Village, as you've described it, as a village where everybody is so connected, it's so community based, from families to the organizations and institutions

that make up Rondo. Where do you think that sense of community and village originated?

VLB: Where we grew up, in the Rondo village, it originated because I think it was the barriers that were good and not good, but they were good for us because we just learned how to just live together, thrive together and work together. We had so much unity in our community that, I don't know, families were family, they took care of each other. It was not like a grudge. It wasn't a burden to take in and help somebody. That was the norm. That was the norm. And so, I'm so blessed and honored to be born and raised when I was. I learned so much more outside of the school than I learned in school about life. You learn in school, read, write, and all of that, but how to apply it, where to apply it? I learned that just growing up, watching people and in my house coming home.

School was the thing. That was the ticket, that was the pathway to get out of the community and to do well in life. Education was the value right there. The highest value was your spiritual walk, was church, with God. That was it right there. After that was education.

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KH: And so, am I hearing you right, and I don't want to paint what happened to Rondo and the destruction of Rondo, with the highway, with rose colored glasses here, but am I hearing you correctly to say that part of the sense of community and the village that Rondo was in response to, well, look, the white world is creating barriers for us? And so, in response, you, the people of Rondo, created a whole world unto itself that was nurturing, that was caregiving, that was about values and about—I think somebody else, I can't remember who offhand, but said this as well—also about expectations. So you've described some of your mentors and teachers as kind of strict, but I think sometimes that can be about setting expectations for kids and they will rise to them, I think, oftentimes. Not always, but oftentimes.

VLB: The difference back in the day, growing up. Because I can take my life living in boundaries. I'm born and raised in St. Paul. My mom was born and raised in St. Paul. My dad was born and raised in Bartlesville, Oklahoma, same situation, living in boundaries and barriers and thriving within that framework, because you could put us together and put us anywhere, but as long as we have that unity right there? I didn't even think of that until as I got older that my dad had the same experience as my mom, but they were worlds apart.

KH: But those communities were both defined by—

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VLB: Absolutely. So when he came here, it was the norm. So I miss all of that, the unity of community, where Rondo started to change a lot. A lot, a lot. And I'm going to take it through my lens. I can't take it through anybody else's lens but mine, my experience, and how the barriers and the boundaries were redrawn through the educational lens, right? And so, to diversify other schools, we were bused from Rondo to the forbidden places, across Snelling or out to Highland.

KH: You were?

VLB: I was.

KH: We will for sure come to that. So you said earlier a few minutes ago that the Rondo that you grew up in was kind of formed geographically by these geographic barriers; University, Western, Grand, maybe Lexington. I'm not sure what's on that west side.

VLB: Snelling.

KH: Snelling. So tell me a little bit about, I mean, obviously, I assume they were not physical barriers. So how are those barriers at those boundaries enforced?

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VLB: They were basically enforced externally. You were not welcomed in the neighborhoods outside of Rondo. Very, very, very apparent. We were given the conversation, parents had these conversations with their kids, do not go past here, stay here. It's not safe out there. If you do go, go with an adult and stuff like that. I tell you, once they started having us go venture out, I went shopping with my mom and noticed that this white lady kept following us. I asked her why, and she said, "Just stay close. Just stay close. We're almost done. Just get in, get out, do what you need to do."

My mom used to dress all four of us identical. She loved dressing us up. And I'm like, Oh, my goodness. Sometimes she would venture out, but nobody bothered her. It's just something about her story. She was the very first African American to attend and graduate from Minnehaha Academy. How'd that happen coming from Rondo?

KH: Wow.

VLB: So, watching her, and it's going to come back to fold right now to where I'm going to bring this all back. And so, there's an article about her, I forgot the name of it, but it's from Minnehaha Academy, if you look up Gaynell Ballard, Ray [ph] is her last name now, but Gaynell Ballard, you pull that up with Minnehaha High Academy and you'll find the article about her and her experience. Now, it was an experiment with her leaving her senior year from Mechanic Arts. That's the school I was going to go to, Mechanic Arts. They tore that down. She left there, and they had her go out to Minnehaha Academy because my grandparents were convinced that she was going to get a better education there. My mom became a social worker, by the way, and then she was a social worker in the housing authority. So she worked with the high rises, with the elders and stuff like that. But I'm saying all of this because she was the one and only, right?

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So, now for me to see that and then me experiencing that. And how did my mom

navigate her way through that? So I already had an example to show me how to do that.

KH: By the time you got to Highland?

VLB: By the time I got to Highland. But it was hard because I was younger than she was. I got to Highland, it was '76, and they had just closed Mechanics. I got to Highland in '76, and there was no red carpet. There was no school bus. I never rode out there on a school bus. It was a city bus. I'm coming from Rondo, where I thought we were doing well until I got the Highland. I get off a city bus, and I see white kids getting out of cars and a few getting out of limousines. I'm like, where am I?

The trauma that we experienced from the white students and staff and community was overbearing. It was overbearing. But I was not foreign to white people, because white people were in Rondo. And let me tell you, there was one in particular, there were two, basically, that always invested in us as young kids. I'm talking about when I was playing basketball. Never ever forget him, will always be honored to just be in his presence all the time. Bill Peterson was my guy. Bill Peterson, white guy, invested in the females, him and Steve Winfield, the females having the opportunity to just have a gym to play basketball.

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So they advocated for us so that all the boys had to get out, and it was just the girls able to play. And then he started helping us and coaching us. Now, I'm younger than, can I say their names, Lisa Lissimore and Linda Roberts, and Peggie came around. Peggie was already playing pro ball and stuff like that. She's a beast. And so, Linda and Lisa, they're cousins, and there were so many older ones that were playing, so they wouldn't really let us play because we were the younger ones. Then we'd get out there, and then they would start working with us.

And then some of the young ladies started coaching us. Colleen Scroggins became the coach for myself and Lisa's sister. Some of us were all the same age, and we became

this little dynasty. We thought we were the best team ever, but nobody could beat us. And saying all of this because the investment that kept trickling down and trickling down. So Colleen had this bright idea to say, “Hey, if you guys really want to be good, you need to practice against these boys.”

So we practiced against the boys. And, of course, they embarrassed us sometimes, but sometimes we embarrassed them, but that’s how we grew our confidence. If you want to have some confidence, but watching Lisa and them play? We were just watching and learning as much as we could, absorbing them because they were fearless. It came out even more because there were only girls in there and were able to see that. And so, I ended up actually as a freshman, graduated from high school, and then I was a freshman in college. I went to school in Iowa and Lisa Lissimore was there as a senior and I got a chance to play with her. I got a chance to play with her and she graduated, and then my life went a different direction.

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VLB: But anyway, I’m saying all this is these people, these older young ladies, they’re not even that much older than me, they’re like two, three years older than me. But as teenagers, they were older. They showed us how to do what we needed to do on the court and off the court. Don’t boast about yourself, don’t brag about yourself. Keep playing. Keep playing hard. If that didn’t work, try this. And they showed us how to dribble. They showed everything about sports. I learned so much about basketball. That’s where I learned life. Teamwork, dedication, commitment, focus. Took it to the classroom.

KH: So this investment in young people that you’ve been talking about was also by young people, in other slightly younger people.

VLB: Absolutely, absolutely. If you want to play and build a team and have good people on your team, you teach them. You show them what you expect. That’s the whole

nature of Rondo. You have to live what you expect. Show them people. You don't just tell young people what to do. Show them what it looks like. We had so many men that invested. Let me tell you, Kwame McDonald? My goodness. You know Kwame McDonald?

KH: I've not met him, but I know him.

VLB: Kwame, and Steve stayed in there, Steve Winfield, he just stayed in there and just invested into us. So when we came out of college, WNBA didn't exist, but the Minnesota Phillies folded. So that whole professional organization folded. Peggie Jackson came off that one. She was already playing pro ball. We didn't have anything to do, so they created this semi-pro team. So everybody that graduated from college, we had a place to come and play and continue to play. Investments.

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KH: And that was the Summit University All Stars?

VLB: There it is. Absolutely. And so, I just stayed around people that were just doing it. That's where I just stayed working with them. Let me tell you real quick. Learning how to navigate my way through barriers of people that don't look like me, or white people, I don't care who they are. I wanted to go to the University of Minnesota and stay in Minnesota, but I spoke to the coach, and she said I was too short, which hurt my feelings, but it's okay.

KH: How tall are you?

VLB: Biologically, I'm five-three, but in my head I'm five-six. So I ended up navigating my way and going through a tumultuous time when I was at a, we call it a community college. I told my coach, because I was only going to be there for one year, I transferred there, where I wanted to go, to Florida A&M. Why Florida? Because it's so far away from everybody and I just needed to grow up now. I'm still 18 years old. I graduated

from high school when I was 17. I'm 18 years old and I'm telling my coach at community college this is where I want to go. She said, "Okay, I'll send your footage down to your coach down at Florida A&M." She's a white coach.

And this is where I learned how to do my own business, stop relying on people. And she said, "Yeah, I spoke to him and he's looking ready to meet you." When I should have been doing that myself. I got down to Florida, he's never heard of me, never saw footage, never saw nothing. They're playing a pickup game down in Florida. The girls are playing. He said, "Well, I'm sorry that happened to you, but just get out there and show me what you can do."

[00:42:00]

VLB: I made it as a walk on. He said, "I'm sorry, we don't have any scholarship money. We have none of that left." Florida A&M is a Historically Black College and University, right? "But I tell you what, I could pay for your books." From that time on, I learned how to be a better advocate for myself. I stayed with my advisor and made sure I took care of what I needed to take care of. They said, "Well, who are you? You're a little different. You ask a lot of questions." I said, "I sure do, because I just need to know. I just need to make sure. I'm too far away from home not to be on the right and make sure I'm taking care of my business."

So I'd get in a tournament in Texas and meet up with the University of Minnesota. The coach is still there, the one that said I'm too short. So we get out there, we're playing, we're playing hard. We're playing and I'm dee-ing up somebody, I don't know. We won the game. And I went over, shook her hand. I said, "How are you doing? You remember me?" She said, "I sure do." [Laughter.] It was hilarious. No shame. But I had to go through some barriers to get to where I needed to go. But I learned that seeing other people do that. You don't stop. You just learn how to pivot, right? I learned how to pivot.

KH: And so, how many years did you play at Florida?

VLB: I ended up playing three. I only had three more years of eligibility. No, two more years. I had two years because at the end, I was just student coaching, helping him coach my last year there. I had transferred down there.

KH: And what was your degree in?

VLB: My degree? Business education. I stayed with it. I just came back, ended up coming back to Minnesota.

[00:44:00]

KH: So I am going to circle us back to the Highland thing, but because we're talking about Florida right now, and you've been describing the village of Rondo, that helped you grow up and made you who you were. And then you left. You went to Florida. What was that transition? I mean, you also left and went to Highland, but what was the transition from Rondo and Minnesota to Florida?

VLB: That's a very good question. That's a culture shock because everybody looked like me, even though I shouldn't have been shocked because I was born and raised in it, but I hadn't seen it in a long time. The way it was designed. I think I was just like a kid in a candy store. Just like, oh, my God, this is awesome. This is great. Watching all these young people purposely and intentionally doing what they needed to do, taking care of their business, having fun doing it, in school, focused, driven. So I just felt basically at home, and a lot of the people kept saying I was from Sarasota. I said, "No, Minnesota," because there's Sarasota, Florida. Are there any Black people up there? Prince? No, there's more Black people that live up there. Then I would tell them my story.

KH: Is Florida A&M in Sarasota? Or what city is it in?

VLB: No, it's in Tallahassee. It's in the capital. It's very close to Florida State.

KH: So, in some ways, you had your youngest years in school in Rondo,

surrounded by primarily African American people. Then you have this little significant blip in Highland where that's not the case. And then you go back. I mean, I know you, was it Inver Hills that you were at, the community college up here?

VLB: It was.

KH: And then you go to Florida A&M, and so you're kind of back into a community that you're familiar with in terms of being surrounded by other African American people doing and achieving and all that.

[00:46:00]

VLB: Absolutely. I always tell people I was born and raised in Rondo, but I grew up at Florida A&M, because I was on my own. I had to grow up, and I couldn't run back home. It's too far, and that's what I had to do. But I could tell you a story that is so real that would blow your mind. I'm talking about our pillars and what we had to do and what I learned in my village of Rondo. And I know this is not all about me, but I'm going to tell you how I learned how to navigate my way in life in situations that are so tense, instead of running from them. You learn how to get through it.

So we're in Highland Junior High, seventh, eighth and ninth grade. High school is 10th, 11th and 12th. So we get there and we're sick of getting punched, kicked, spit on, called the N-word, all of that. We're done with that. We're the bad kids because we would strike back if you hit me and blah-blah-blah. I'm a kid now. I'm only like 13 years old, 12, 13, somewhere in there. And so, we got together, now we're still going to church. We told our pastors, we said, "We don't want to go back out there. We don't like it out there. They fight and they call us whatever, and we're called the bad kids and all that." And they said, "Well, we're going to show you how to fight."

And when I tell people that, like, "Your pastor showed you how to fight?" I say, "Yeah, they showed us how to fight." They said, "You don't fight with your fists. You

have to think, strategize, but you have to do this together.” So they showed us how and talked with us, even though we knew it, but they showed us how to do a sit-in. And we did a sit-in at Highland. We were in junior high. Now, you can’t get middle school kids to be quiet for 10 seconds sometimes. But we were in junior high. We were so determined. We didn’t have cell phone devices or anything, but we put the word out.

[00:48:00]

VLB: All the Black kids leave your class about 10:10. Just leave. Just walk out, go to the office, and sit down. Lock arms, just sit down. Don’t say anything. How do you get kids to do that? We just did it. And they showed us how to do that. We had one spokesperson. So the principal comes out on a bullhorn, “If you don’t go back to class, we’re going to call your parents.” Nobody said anything. Imagine that. “We’re going to call the police. We’re going to suspend you.” All of a sudden, here comes the police. Here come some of the parents. Right?

Nobody moved, except one person got up and said, “I have something to say.” So they took her to the office. Robin Hickman [ph]. That’s my sister forever. Robin Hickman gets up, goes into this office, speaks to these people. When this conversation is done, change happens. I learned how to fight. I mean, we were able to participate in stuff out there. I was able to play basketball and do stuff out there. I was able to do the things that I was not able to do before. That’s when I learned how to fight.

KH: Using your brain, and collective action.

VLB: Yeah, it is.

KH: About what year would that have been?

VLB: In ’77.

KH: What year did you graduate?

VLB: In ’81.

KH: So, you're a junior high student activist, essentially. I wonder, do you know, was that covered in the newspaper at all?

VLB: No. No, there was never coverage. It's not like that article right there. It was never covered.

[00:50:00]

KH: Because the thing that strikes me as you were describing this whole event is like, well, okay, we all know if you know anything about history, Little Rock. But that's 1957. That's 20 years earlier. And there's been documentaries and books and people know if they know anything and they know about that. But I think so many people assume, well, that was the South. Stuff like that happened in the South, but not here.

VLB: That's why I tell you, when I tell people my story, they think I'm born down South in the '70s. No, I'm not.

KH: This was 1977 in St. Paul, in Highland Park.

VLB: Yes. I learned how to navigate and fight differently. And even I just went on a college tour, HBCU college tour with kids, and we took them to North Carolina and South Carolina. North Carolina is where they have the four guys that were at the lunch counter.

KH: Oh, yeah, Greensboro.

VLB: There it is. They graduated from North Carolina A&T. So their statues are up there right there. And so, you're going to learn that history right there on the spot. And so, watching them when they did that and me, remembering when, I wasn't at a counter, but I was at school doing this as a youngster, you realize, those were teenagers. I was a teenager.

KH: Yeah, these are kids making change.

VLB: Absolutely. So if you look at some of the marches, most of those are young

people. So that was kind of like the norm. They showed us how to fight and get results that we needed. If you want your voice heard, it's not the one that screams the loudest. It comes in numbers.

KH: Yeah, it was kids getting sprayed with the hoses. And little kids sometimes, too. So, at this sit-in that you were involved in at Highland Junior, how many of you were there?

VLB: There had to be close to about 100 of us that were bused out. There might have been more than that. Because you had seventh, eighth, and ninth grade. And you had the high school side over there, on the other side.

[00:52:00]

KH: Yeah, were they involved at all in this particular event?

VLB: No.

KH: So not at the high school. It was the junior high school.

VLB: We went to our pastors and said, "We don't want to go back." Dr. James Battle, he was pastor at M. Olivet. Dr. Earl Miller who was a pastor at Pilgrim at that time. And they're both from the South.

KH: Okay, so they came out of—

VLB: Yeah, sure. They told us. Even though we saw it before, they showed us what to do. We were just kids.

KH: So, tell me, where were you living at the time that you ended up going to Highland Park and not Mechanic Arts or then Central?

VLB: I was down on Laurel by then, in between Oxford and Chatsworth, across the street from J.J. Hill. I wasn't old enough to go to Mechanics, but I was on my way to Mechanic Arts. When they closed, where was I going for junior high? I don't even remember, probably Ramsey somewhere. I think I was going to go to Ramsey and then

come back to Mechanic Arts. When they closed Mechanic Arts, I was not happy because that was the legacy of my family. All my uncles and a lot of my family went there. My mom was the only one that went to a different school. But everything, the legacy of our family was Mechanic Arts.

KH: Because you were further east.

VLB: Right. And then my dad's side, his cousins, most of them went to Central, on my dad's side of the family. But my mom's side of the family was Mechanic Arts, which was archrivals in the city.

KH: And then you end up at Highland.

[00:54:00]

VLB: I ended up at Highland, yes.

KH: Did any of your siblings end up at Highland?

VLB: We all ended up at Highland.

KH: You all did, all four?

VLB: Yeah. But I am the only one that graduated from Highland. I stayed at Highland. My coach, white female, was one of the ones that would take me home and make sure I got home, because I couldn't take the city bus home. It was late. She would take time out to take me home, make sure I got home every night from basketball practice, and she would talk to me. She celebrated every accomplishment in my whole entire life. As far as an adult, Betty Richardson was one of the most phenomenal teachers out there. She's the one who brought IB, International Baccalaureate to Highland, or to St. Paul Public Schools. Oh, my. She was so amazing. And allowed people to invest.

There was another teacher at Highland Junior High that invested, and she stopped and she saw what was happening to us. A couple of the white kids said, talking about me, "She's talking about us and she's spitting on us and she's hitting us." And the teacher said,

“No, she’s not. I watched you. You guys need to behave and stop.” To this day, that particular teacher, her name was Rosemary Peterson, Spanish teacher, we’re very good friends. Very good friends. Like we were assistant principals together.

KH: Wow. And she was white?

[00:56:00]

VLB: She’s Hispanic. So we were assistant principals at the same time and then I became a principal. She has since retired, but to this day, same thing. I could call her. It showed me how everybody that doesn’t look like me is not horrible. Because they were teaching from the heart. That’s what I do. Whether you learn, you have to teach from heart to heart. Content is there, but if you teach from heart to heart, you reach people.

KH: So there were some people, some white.

VLB: Plenty of people.

KH: How about white students? Were there any white students that were decent?

VLB: Yes, ma’am. Yes, ma’am. Because I played basketball with a lot of them. Yes, ma’am. Everybody wasn’t horrible. They started to gravitate to us after that sit-in, of course. But once we started playing and we got involved and got engaged in a lot of things, we did okay.

KH: So kind of refocusing on your athletic career, your basketball. When you were playing sports, you were at Oxford until junior high. And then did your athletic life shift to school, or were you still involved at Oxford as well?

VLB: I worked at Oxford when I was a teenager.

KH: What did you do?

VLB: I worked in the canteen area where I could sell stuff like that. I did the scoring, the books, the statistics. That’s where I learned statistics, the scores in the books and all that for the team and stuff like that. In summer, I worked there, too. And I still stay

connected to Oxford.

KH: Still?

VLB: Always. Today, I don't go down there as much because of Jimmy Lee, and there's so many things that have evolved, and so it's just a lot of stuff that goes on, and I'm just busy. But I'm still invested in a different way because I go to the games all the time where the kids are. "You come to my game?" "Yeah, I'll come. I'll be there, because I need to see you in a different light." So you focus like that out there, and you're just sitting on the bench, you're not even in the game, but you're focused. You can do that in the classroom because I see you. But there's so many things that have happened, and my life has evolved.

[00:58:00]

VLB: But there's one thing. If you ever talk to Lisa Lissimore, a hilarious woman. That girl is my sister forever. She always tells people, and she would tell you if you talk to her, see, I should have gone to Central because I could be a champion. They were the first in the state tournament. I stayed at Highland. I didn't go to Central.

KH: Could you have changed at that point?

VLB: I could have.

KH: Why'd you stay at Highland?

VLB: Because I had friends that weren't doing what they should be doing, and I needed to just stay away from people.

KH: Friends in your neighborhood?

VLB: Yes. It was easier to stay away and lie and tell everybody my mom won't let me go to Central when all my sisters went to Central. I just stayed away and I just stayed focused. I was so determined to get out of Minnesota; I worked my way out. So when I graduated, I was able to say, "Bye. I'm out of here."

KH: So at what point did you feel like you knew you wanted to get out of Minnesota?

VLB: When I got to high school.

KH: So when this stuff was happening?

VLB: I wanted to get out of Minnesota. I didn't know where I was going. And then I ended up with Lisa. That was the funniest thing in my life. I ended up with her.

KH: Yeah, in Iowa.

VLB: Yeah, but she took care of me. She was nice. Now she's not nice. No, I'm just playing. She's funny.

KH: And you played with her sister, Roxanne?

VLB: I played with her sister. We grew up together. And my mom and her mom are really good friends in the community. Yeah, I played with Roxanne. Roxanne, oh my, she was so good.

KH: And so, who else from the Rondo neighborhood ended up playing basketball with you at Highland?

VLB: When we were in junior high, it was me, Roxanne Lissimore, Stacy Durand. Oh my gosh. Oh my goodness. She was so good. And Denise Simmons and Renee Reed, April Hawkins. I'm trying to go through this whole list of people. If I forgot your name, please forgive me, whoever. I'm getting older. But this was the core people that actually stayed together at Oxford, and we all went to Highland.

[01:00:00]

KH: So Highland benefited from what you all learned at Oxford.

VLB: They sure did, because we were a dynasty.

KH: And now, obviously, there must have been some girls on that Highland team who weren't from Oxford.

VLB: Probably. I don't remember them. [Laughter]

KH: Okay, so it was like you guys dominated that team.

VLB: We did. We did. It was fun though. I mean, we just had a ball. And then ninth grade comes, and everybody's going different directions.

KH: So, ninth grade is when, then people scatter back, some of them back to Central?

VLB: Well, after ninth grade, because remember junior high, seventh, eighth, and ninth grade. And then in 10th grade, my friends that went to Central, Roxanne and Stacey, won a championship, and Central beat us out, so we didn't get to go to state. That's why Lisa rubs it in.

KH: Now, the other thing that strikes me and others have talked about it, too, is how many siblings there are involved, like Lisa and Roxanne, and Stacey Durand had an older sister, Christine Durand, who is more like Lisa's age?

VLB: Absolutely.

KH: And she was at Highland?

VLB: Absolutely.

KH: And then there were the Tierneys?

VLB: Yeah, the Tierney sisters. Yeah, they had babies forever. They had so many siblings on that team and they could all play sports. They were good.

[01:02:00]

KH: So, tell me a little bit, I think you just mentioned it, about the rivalry between Central and Highland.

VLB: It became a rival school when we were bused out there. Other than that, it wasn't a rival school.

KH: Because they didn't have much.

VLB: Right. It wasn't a rival school. We didn't really play too much at Highland. But especially on the girls team, it was a big rivalry because we had some really good players out there. What's her name? I'll think of her name in a minute. She's about my height. I'll think of it in a minute. She'll be mad if I don't say something about her, but she was good. Liz Zachary. Very good point guard.

KH: And what position did you play?

VLB: Point guard. By the time I finished out of high school, a lot of the girls started fading away. I don't know. They stopped playing. So we had six people on my team when I was a senior. So I played every position.

KH: Wow, wow.

VLB: I was that determined.

KH: What was it like to play for Highland against some of your former teammates and your friends from the neighborhood who were playing for Central?

VLB: It wasn't that much of a challenge, because I played against them at Oxford all the time. Dana "Bumper" Watts, we call her Bumper. She was good. A phenomenal point guard. Just playing against these young people and helping me to learn some things like that. I knew their game, they knew mine. So you just do the best you can. Since the chemistry was different, I had chemistry with them because I grew up with them, learning that chemistry with people that didn't look like me because I could pass the ball really, really fast and good, so pay attention, because you're going to get hit with it if you don't. And so, I was building the format of chemistry with them, but the girls I grew up with, I had good chemistry with them, so they kind of knew my game.

[01:04:00]

KH: And then during the summer, were you playing all together again back at Oxford, or All Stars?

VLB: Even during the school year, we would all end up at Oxford. We kept playing.

KH: So you're playing together and then you're playing against each other, through school?

VLB: Absolutely.

KH: So you were just saying that some of the maybe white girls at Highland had to step up their game, a little bit.

VLB: They did.

KH: Do you know, were they coming out of different rec center programs in Highland, and it just wasn't comparable?

VLB: Yes. So, you notice, and remember, we were raised playing boys, so we play aggressive and fast. When I went to Iowa, it's like two dribbles and you have to pass. They still had that going on. No, I'm not used to that. I'm not used to bringing the ball, set up. I'm not used to that. And so, my fast pace, that's my mindset. So, you have to get used to playing with people that are not at that pace and not get frustrated.

KH: So I'm just trying to put this into chronological, historical terms. So Title IX passes in '72, you graduate in '81?

VLB: Correct.

KH: So you're playing junior high and high school ball as Title IX is kind of being implemented, attempted, with varying degrees of success.

VLB: Correct.

KH: I think I told you on the phone when we talked, that the origins of this project on Oxford came out of my interview with Lisa and Linda for a women in sports project, where I was interviewing them about their basketball lives. And they said, "Well, we grew up playing at Oxford. We didn't know that anybody needed anything like Title IX because

we played as girls all the time at Oxford.”

[01:06:00]

VLB: There it is.

KH: So what you’re saying then, and you have this really unique ability to speak to how Oxford may have compared to other, even rec centers in St. Paul, because you played with girls from Highland, and you saw the difference. So one of the questions I’ve been trying to ask and answer is, was Oxford unique?

VLB: At the time, I didn’t know it was, but, yes, I think it was. It was. Because I think even a lot of people would come down and have their kids come play baseball, football; they didn’t even live in a community. They really didn’t. They would come down and play. You have so many people that came through Oxford, the field, or the court, that went professional.

KH: Yeah. It’s amazing. Out of that one place, so many people.

VLB: And if you look back, the coaches volunteered.

KH: Do you think this is because it was a part of Rondo?

VLB: Yes. That was kind of like who we were at Rondo. And then things happened. To this day, people still invest in kids, and they coach and have fun with it. But that’s how I grew up. That’s what I know. That’s my norm. That’s the values that I have, and I still have in my life. Service.

KH: Were you at the King Center ever?

VLB: Yes.

KH: Was the King Center comparable to Oxford?

[01:08:00]

VLB: Yes, in many ways. What happens is they had Hallie Q. Brown moved into where the King Center is, right? So I’m used to the Hallie Q. Brown. Then, more of the

kids that were in the Ober Boys Club area, down close to Western, that recreation center was good for them. They didn't have to walk so far. And then Oxford. Now Oxford and the King Center become rivals, right? I never played for the Martin Luther King Center. I never played anything down there. It was always because Oxford is my heart. So I played there.

KH: And you were closer to that end of town by that time?

VLB: Absolutely. If the gym wasn't open at Oxford, we'd walk all the way down to the King Center.

KH: And was the King Center also fielding good girls basketball teams over there?

VLB: Yes. By that time, yeah, they started having girls basketball. It wasn't as vibrant or established at Oxford, but they started to grow theirs. Then when people started to coach and volunteer down there and build it up, yeah, they had some good teams.

KH: But Oxford is really a seed bed.

VLB: Yeah. Oxford birthed champions. [Laughs.] Seriously, these kids came out confident and just doing amazing things because you learn on the court or on the field, and you were able to apply that to your life because there's expectations. If you want to play, you better behave yourself, you better focus, you better take care of your schoolwork, you better do these things. And you had so many people that were just mentors.

KH: Tell me a little bit more about Bill.

[01:10:00]

VLB: Bill is a one of a kind guy. Everybody that has had anything to do with Oxford knows Bill, and even in the community. He just has a heart for people. And he was always giving and doing something, growing something, building something, working

with kids, inspiring kids, encouraging kids. Even if you're just sitting there, "Hey, what do you think about this? Try this." You don't just sit around, get involved. Yeah. Even at his church, is Bill in the choir? No. Bill's going to find a spot where he knows he can just be Bill. So he'll keep the grounds for your church. Like at the Dunning, keeps the grounds. He's just out there taking care of stuff. He does not sit down.

KH: I believe that.

VLB: So leave him in his element. Let him do what he does best, but he's always going to have an encouraging word for you.

KH: Yeah. Well, I mean, he has recruited all 10 of you that I'm interviewing for this project.

VLB: Bill is one of a kind. And that's why I learned working with people, that's just heart-to-heart. He just loves people. That's just what it is. He's just a great guy.

KH: So I know I'm kind of bouncing around a bit.

VLB: That's fine, don't worry about it. I'm with you.

KH: Tell me about, why basketball? What do you love about the game?

[01:12:00]

VLB: Even though I played other sports, basketball is so many things. Team, right? Like I said, dedication, focus, organization. It helped me stay out of trouble. It helped me balance. See, it's one of those sports I could just go out and play. Nobody has to be out there. I just go shoot. As old as I am, if I go into a phy-ed class right now, I'll pick up a ball and shoot it. So sometimes I'll stay out of the gym. I'm not going to chase the ball because it hurts, but I'll just shoot it. And then the kids go, "Oh, airball." I say, "Just give me 30 minutes to warm up. I'll be all right." But basketball just became my passion.

I guess that was the one that was open where I saw so many females that

gravitated to basketball, so I wanted to be part of that. Then I saw so many of the older young ladies that were playing and they could really play, and I just wanted to do what they were doing, just to be part of that. I was blessed to be able to see all that and experience all that at the same time.

KH: And tell me again what other sports you played. You ran track?

VLB: I did track, softball, and flag football. Which flag football is popular now, again.

KH: Yeah, it's coming back. So did you run track and play softball in high school also?

VLB: No, ma'am.

KH: So it was just basketball?

VLB: Just basketball.

KH: And when you were running track and playing softball at Oxford, were there strong girls teams in both—well, track, I suppose there's a team.

VLB: They were very strong. And then what I learned from being down at Oxford is you run track to stay in condition for basketball.

KH: Ah, gotcha.

VLB: Yes. And so, the one I talked about, Bumper? Bumper was so fast. Her sister. They could just run. Track was in their blood. But playing basketball, Bumper just thrived. She was one of the best point guards out there.

[01:14:00]

KH: Yeah, and I know this article, many other people have written about the ebb and flow of girls basketball in schools and both, I think here and across the country, where it was very popular for a long time, and then for various reasons, it kind of fades away. But I wonder, and I don't know the answer to this, if that story is mostly about white girls?

Like, do you know? Do you have any sense of the history of African American girls in women's basketball?

VLB: I do have a sense of it, and I think the university actually says more about African American female basketball players in Minnesota because of the records that they hold. Linda Roberts; can nobody break her record? And then finally somebody broke her record as far as rebounding and stuff like that. She held that record forever. Everybody else, if you didn't play at this huge level, now, you were just on the team. You had to be just totally phenomenal.

There were so many African American players on the team when Lindsay Whalen played. But you've heard of Lindsay Whalen, right? Lindy Whalen was not by herself. Somebody had to pass the ball to her. [Laughs.] She's pretty good though. She could pass the ball to herself, but she was really good. But I'm just saying, the legacy that they paved. You don't see it until somebody's phenomenal. What's the young lady right now? She came through Hopkins.

KH: Paige Bueckers.

VLB: Paige Bueckers. Phenomenal player. But there were some phenomenal Black kids on that team as well.

[01:16:00]

KH: Do you think it's getting any better? Like in the WNBA?

VLB: WNBA is evolving right now before our eyes, and it's taking shape to have more attention tied to it, the way they are recruiting and having all of these different things that the males have, and what do you call that? The date where they're all drawing and picking names.

KH: Draft.

VLB: Gosh, it must be late. That is the word. The draft day. And you see all that.

Now you see it's as affluent and big as the guys, right? You see how these new players are coming out and doing some amazing things and they get endorsements and they're doing all these things. One thing that didn't happen when we were in school is nobody was getting paid for who they are and all of that. That didn't come about, so I think there's a big difference. We played for the heart of it. We didn't play for money. We played to be seen. Yeah, you wanted to be seen. I wanted to be seen. But I was a senior in high school and there were only six people on the team. How was I going to be seen? You just keep playing. Just keep working on your game. And I ended up getting a scholarship.

KH: Do you think that, to the point that you just made, that some of what's happening in the WNBA and it evolving more towards what the men's game is, or even a college basketball name, image, likeness, all that stuff, is it costing the game anything?
[01:18:00]

VLB: Is it costing the game? I think it is. I think it is. It's the ethics of the game. And now it's not as equitable as it could have been, should have been, and could be. Of course, you have to be the best of the best. But people are doing it for different reasons. And I don't know. I just have a passion for the game. I don't need all the other stuff that went with it, just playing. When I played at Florida A&M, I played against a dynasty. They just smashed us. And maybe two or three of those girls that were in that dynasty at USC, Cynthia Cooper, and the McGee twins and Cheryl Miller, they were just a dynasty. And they just really went on to do phenomenal things.

But playing against people like that? It's like, wow. I was in awe. And they weren't even in the WNBA. They were still in college. We made such a big hoopla over these young people just in college. Then WNBA came on, and then they became a dynasty in Houston. Just watching them play, saying, "Wow, I played against her." Amazing. I didn't play against Dawn Staley though. Dawn Staley was behind me, but that

girl can play. One thing about it is, what I really like about it is they learned the game and they learned the business. There's business to basketball. It is a business and they learned it. That's what I like off the court, what are you learning? How are you applying? You're not going to play forever. I would tell the boys that. You're not going to play forever. What are you learning about the business of basketball? And learning that because, like I said, I'll never let anybody tell my story. I tell my own story.

[01:20:00]

VLB: I'll advocate for myself, because I did that before and I made a mistake, but I learned from it. I could be bitter and just like, I hate people that don't look like me. Why would I do that? That's a waste of my time. I mean, you live and learn. You just learn, I can't do business with you and move on.

KH: Yeah, and obviously, I don't have that kind of experience, but you've just got to decide who you're going to be in the world.

VLB: Yeah, absolutely. So I think basketball has opened up doors. I have this picture that has an African American female holding a stack of books in her left hand and a basketball in the right hand. I ask girls, or anybody, "What does that mean to you?" And then you look in between the books and what books actually say? One says history, one says Bible, one says something else. Why are those on there? And then we just talk about it. And I said, "Are they balanced or is there one higher than the other?"

We just go into dialogue. And I say, "For me personally, basketball opened the doors. The books kept the doors open." See, I'm still not playing basketball, but the doors are still open, right? The books are the ones that keep it open. That's why you are a student athlete. You have to learn how to be a student.

KH: What I've heard you say over the past however long we've been talking applies so much to both athletics, sports, basketball, and the career you've chosen. And

you've been talking about investing in kids. You've been talking about doing it heart to heart. You've been talking about doing it not for the pay.

VLB: Correct. Definitely not. [Laughter.]

[01:22:00]

KH: But because you're serving a greater cause than a paycheck, which everybody needs. That's not to diminish that. We need paychecks. But it just seems like you've spoken so eloquently about both of those things, academics and education, as well as the church or a spiritual life, and sports, in this case basketball. So, yeah, that's been very interesting. I am watching time, so we don't keep you up, but I can hear them vacuuming out there, too.

VLB: I don't know, I don't have a curfew. I'm so old right now.

KH: I'm usually in bed by 8:30.

VLB: I'm just messing with you. I'm just playing. But I think my world; I wouldn't change a thing. Good, bad, and ugly. So, my life, currently, I'm recently widowed, but my husband was a pastor and so we have church and stuff like that, doing all these different things, and kids singing. Ministry is my thing. My ministry is not in the pulpit. My ministry is my life out here. That's what I do. Connect with people. You're supposed to enjoy life. When you don't have a good day or a good moment all the time, but don't live in that moment then. Then don't dwell in it. We have those moments. Don't dwell in the moment that's not prospering in your life. Right? Because that's where depression sets in. I don't want to stay in the dark. I need to be in the light. So I stay around people that are lively. I stay around people that are doing something. That's what I've been doing all my life, just watching people and learning.

KH: And you've been surrounded by good people to learn from.

VLB: Amazing.

[01:24:00]

KH: I may have even said this to you when we talked on the phone, I know I've said it to others, but listening to all of you talk about Oxford and Rondo, I played sports as a kid. I played through our park and rec in Crystal. I don't have this. What you're describing is not—I mean, I didn't have any problems with it, but it was not what you're describing at all. I'm not in touch with people from that part of my life. So, from my perspective, yes, there's something really unique about what you all experienced and have built and have perpetuated. Tell me a little bit, I don't think we talked too much about the Summit University All Stars. So that's after college.

VLB: After college. Oh my goodness! These girls, now, they're at a whole another level of playing now, right? They really could have been in the WNBA or something. And just to play with them. And we are still experiencing racism and stuff like that when we venture out a little further. But by this time now, we're all grown, we're mature, we know how to play, we know how to get ourselves—we're having a bad day, hey, get off the court and put somebody else in. Whatever. But Kwame McDonald and Steve Winfield were our coaches, and we would just play all the time and just have that experience with all these different females. Remember Clem Haskins when he was a coach? His daughter Clemette played with us. She was so good. They were just that level of play coming out of college because there was nothing else for us to do. So they just took the time to get us into these leagues and we played.

KH: And so, what was the geographic scope of this league? Was it within Minnesota? Was it the metro area? Who are you playing?

[01:26:00]

VLB: No, it's the metro area and beyond. We actually even went and ventured out maybe as far as to Iowa or Wisconsin and stuff like that. We didn't go too far. But just

depending on who else had that type of a team in that league. And it was just the Midwest, basically.

KH: And did you describe it or somebody described it as semi pro?

VLB: It was.

KH: Did you get paid at all?

VLB: No. We weren't doing it for pay. We just wanted to keep playing. If somebody got paid, I didn't. I don't care. Give me a burger, I'm fine.

KH: So what were you doing work wise at this point in your life?

VLB: Man, what was I doing at that time? I was teaching. I was teaching as soon as I got out of college.

KH: And where and what did you teach?

VLB: I was a business teacher in Minneapolis, at Northeast Junior High. It's a middle school now. It was junior high.

KH: And so, you were teaching during the day, playing evenings, weekends?

VLB: Yeah, I still played. Loved every bit of it.

KH: How long did you play with this league?

VLB: Oh, man. Till WNBA came around.

KH: Wow, that was a long time.

VLB: Yeah, we played for a while and then people just started having babies. Like me, I started having babies and basketball was somewhere else. I ended up coaching at Highland as well after Betty Richardson [retired], my teacher. She was my basketball coach. And then I coached out there for about two to three years and then I started having kids and then it was just too much. I couldn't balance it. And for basketball, either I'm going to give you 100 percent or I'm not going to do it.

KH: So what years would it have been about that you were coaching at Highland?

VLB: I got out of college in '86. I graduated from Florida A&M, I started coaching '87, because my son was born in '90 and then I would just bring him to practice with me.

[01:28:00]

KH: Had Highland changed by that time in terms of racial demographics?

VLB: Oh, yeah. Because by that time they had just finished the whole dynasty and went to State and stuff like that. They're so good. Amelia Green [ph], and I forgot that there's twins. They were twins. I forgot their names. But anyway, their team was so good. Yeah, they were just that dynasty out there. It had changed a lot. And it still has to grow again. You have to get the kids. Post-COVID, you've got to get all those gadgets out of their hands so they can play basketball.

KH: And so, when did you get your doctorate? And from where?

VLB: In 2008, in St. Mary's, my doctorate. My master's, my administrative license and my doctorate, St. Mary's.

KH: And they're all in education?

VLB: Yes, ma'am. I started teaching in 1986, straight out of college.

KH: And since then you've been in education?

VLB: I've been in education and to this day, some of the very first students I ever, ever had, I can call them right now.

KH: So, you're continuing what you got.

VLB: Yes, it is. Absolutely. It's a norm for me. That's why you invest in the kids. It's more than books. We can do books. We will get it. We got it. Making good choices in life. Matter of fact, it's so funny, I got one of the kids, her youngest kid is at my school right now, one of my first students. Her youngest kid is at my school.

[01:30:00]

KH: So I'm going to ask you some questions, the answers to which may seem obvious, but I want to hear them from you. Why do you think sports are important?

VLB: Oh my goodness! There's mental health, balance of life, physical health, emotional balance, helping you to build your self-esteem. Oh my goodness! It's the best outlet and sometimes it doesn't require money. When I'm mad, I just go play basketball. I just go shoot by myself, get the ball off the wall and just play. Just do it. Get it out, get my adrenaline out. Play basketball.

KH: You have a hoop at your house?

VLB: I do. My grandkids get out there and play. Nana, you can't play. I know I can't play. Yeah, okay. [Laughter.]

KH: Why do you think it is important for a community to have a place like Oxford?

VLB: So kids can be kids. They need to be kids. They need to be out of the house doing something constructive and healthy so they can take that into their adult life and know it's not foreign to do something constructive and healthy for your body, for yourself, and take care of your body.

[01:32:00]

VLB: They need to be able to go somewhere without the barriers and the boundaries of my skill level, just to get out there and experience stuff. You may not play basketball. Remember, Oxford had activities, groups, mentors. It was more than just sports. So there's so many things that are down there that were at Oxford for us. Go home, do your homework. All right. And your parents know where you are. And it closed early enough because when I was growing up, the streetlights were the clock. Before the streetlights come on.

KH: Were you close enough you just walked?

VLB: Yeah. Just walked. Right in the community. That's why parks and recreation are valuable. You have to have a place for young people to just be themselves and grow and have some fun doing that.

KH: Is there anything else you would like to say about how Oxford has impacted your life?

VLB: Oxford is such a valuable part of my life as far as knowing who I am everywhere I go. It's my identity, even though spirituality is my identity, but knowing how to navigate my way through life unapologetically. I can make mistakes, and I'm okay because I learned from them. Playing out there with those boys taught me that. Don't cry. Don't cry. Stop crying. Get up. Get in there. And they would tell you, "Stop crying."
[01:34:00]

VLB: Yeah. So just unity. Family. I'm all about family anyway, but the main thing is you have to live what you expect. That's what I saw at Oxford.

KH: Is there anything else you want to say or talk about or get on the recording?

VLB: Oh, well, I'm grateful. I'm honored. I'm honored for this opportunity. But I'm so grateful that I was born and raised when I was. Because there's so many people that I probably just forgot their names or whatever. But I was raised, and my family is big. My bloodline family is big. On my mom's side, Ballards. My dad's side, Littles, just big. So going to Central, people know the Littles. Going to Mechanics, people know the Ballards. But in the community, they know both families. We know people buy their last name and their families, generations deep.

So when I worked at Central as assistant principal and then a principal on special assignment, and kids would come to my office, I'd say, "Tell me what your name is. Oh, man. I know your great grandmother. You better behave. You know better." I could go real deep on them, and that was the fun part. That's the family part of just being in a

community. Oxford sits in the village that raised me. So I became part of the village and Oxford was just an enhancement to my life. I wouldn't change it. I'm so grateful. I wouldn't change a thing. It was a place for me to just. Just grow up and thrive.

[1:36:00]

KH: That's a treasure.

VLB: Really, really. And then to have these same people be part of my life right now? I'm telling you, if I were to even call Lisa right now, Lisa Lissimore, on the spot, she'll be right there. Linda Roberts would be right there. Yeah, everybody. Ms. Kaiser would be right there.

KH: That's something.

VLB: Yes. And I will never call Ms. Kaiser anything but Ms. Kaiser. That's it. Anybody. The pillars, always mad respect. I can never call anybody by their first name. And I'm half a century older. Still would never call you by your first name. So that was fun. It was fun. Thank you for allowing me to go through this journey to just relive it, because it made me smile.

KH: Oh good. Well, thank you. I'm so grateful to you, Dr. Littles-Butler, for taking the time and sharing your Oxford story and your basketball and just all the things.

VLB: That doctorate came from Oxford, from Rondo. It did.

KH: Yeah. So, before we turned the recorder off, you said that there's something important about your title.

VLB: My title? I could have stopped going to school when I didn't want to go get my master's. I was afraid to go get my master's. My aunt had gone to get hers, my mom's sister. And I'm like, if she could do it, I could do it. I went in and got my doctorate in 2008. My aunt went and got her doctorate after me. She was almost 80 and got it. But the thing about my title is people before me, even if they didn't establish and get to the

doctorate level, they lived at the doctorate level.

[01:38:00]

VLB: It's important that other people behind me see that you can reach that level. Don't stop. Don't give up. Just go for it. I don't live for the title, but I'm blessed to have the title. The title opens up doors. The title does a lot of things. There's privilege with the title. But my name is Valerie Littles-Butler. That's who I am. The doctorate is beautiful. I'm grateful. I worked for it. And I went for it for my family and for the kids to see that you can do that. So, everybody that I surround myself with, and I'm in education, all African American females are doctors.

KH: That's pretty amazing.

VLB: Yeah, we're all doctors. So I'm grateful. I'm humble. I'm grateful. And the ones that didn't achieve it, to me, will always be doctors in my head.

KH: Yeah. Well, thank you. I appreciate it.

VLB: Yes, ma'am.

[END OF INTERVIEW]