

DEBORAH MONTGOMERY

Narrator

KIM HEIKKILA

Interviewer

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Saint Paul, Minnesota



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TRANSCRIPT—DEBORAH “DEBBIE” MONTGOMERY

Interviewee: Deborah “Debbie” Montgomery
 Interviewer: Kim Heikkila
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Kim Heikkila: This is an interview for the Oxford Community Center Oral History Project. It is Saturday, April 12, 2025, and I’m here with Ms. Debbie Montgomery. My name is Kim Heikkila. Today I’ll be talking to Debbie about her involvement at Oxford playground-slash-rec center-slash-community center, as well as her experience with sports and athletics after that, and how Oxford shaped some of those experiences and probably just about the significance of sports to the rest of your life and your career.

I will just say at the outset that Debbie has made such an impact on so many fields, from the Civil Rights Movement, to the St. Paul Police Department, the St. Paul City Council, the University of Minnesota, so many things we could talk about and that she has talked about to many people over the years. But today our focus will really be on Oxford and on her athletic career. So, thank you so, so much for participating in this project and sharing your experiences.

Deborah Montgomery: Thank you.

KH: Okay, so I’m going to start off by just asking you to tell me a little bit about yourself and your growing up in the Rondo community.

[00:02:00]

DM: Well, I grew up at 978 St. Anthony. We had the corner house on the corner of Chatsworth and St. Anthony. Me and my three brothers were adopted by my grandparents. So I was raised by my grandparents. We had a four-bedroom house and three city lots over

there on St. Anthony and Chatsworth.

In 1956, the Highway Department came and took all of our property, and I'm not sure if this is accurate enough for sure, I was going to go down to verify it. I think they gave us \$10,000 for our house back then, which was literally a steal. I mean, they literally stole all the property. But my grandparents owned it. My grandfather was captain of the Red Caps at the Union Depot. My grandmother was the matron in the bathrooms. So we lived on tips. If it was a good tip week, we had meat. If it wasn't, we didn't. I never thought we were poor. We had enough to sustain. And so, that was kind of my basic home background.

I grew up in St. Philip's Episcopal Church with Father Denzil Carty, who was a big part of my life because it was at church where I learned a lot about civil rights stuff, and he was very big in it. So I got involved with the NAACP and became president of the St. Paul NAACP Youth Chapter at the age of 13. Then I was kind of a little radical in my younger days. Allie Mae Hampton was the youth advisor for us at that time. And we would go to NAACP national conventions and the adults would raise money so that I could go as the president of the youth group. So that was some of my first traveling outside of the state. Here's this little high yellow girl from Minnesota raising hell down there at a national convention with the youth group because it was separate.

[00:04:00]

DM: A lot of the kids that grew up in the South are down there and they're thinking, Boy, they couldn't do this down South, say the things I was saying and stuff like that. So the next thing I know, there was a position on the national board of the NAACP for a college member, or so. Anyway, the youth group all decided after years that they were going to nominate me for the position on the national board. So, at the age of 17, I got elected to the national board of the NAACP with Roy Wilkins, Margaret Bush

Wilson—Thurgood Marshall was our attorney at the time—and to sit on the national board with all of these esteemed people and listen to the discussions. And like I say, I was not the quiet person sitting in the corner. So I was always asking questions and, “Why aren’t we doing this?” And the legal implications and things like that. Then I would come back and share that with the youth group and then with the adult NAACP members. But they already had people that were going, so it wasn’t like I was telling them anything they didn’t know. So that was some of my early getting engaged in just being involved with the community and that.

KH: Now, I think I’ve read in one of your other interviews when you were talking about your younger years in the neighborhood, and correct me if I’m wrong, that it was a relatively integrated neighborhood. You went to school with lots of white kids. So tell me a little bit about that. You just said that you learned a lot about civil rights issues at church through Reverend Carty. So tell me how you developed your awareness of the need for something like the Civil Rights Movement.

[00:06:00]

DM: Well, at that time, back in the day, it was always on TV. I mean, everything was showing what was going on and the demonstrations and the burning of houses and the shooting of people. Most of this was down South. A lot of the African Americans, like my grandmother, were from Starkville, Kentucky, and my grandfather was from Lubbock, Texas. And so, we had family from the South. You heard those conversations. Then a lot of the people that are up here are from the South. They would talk because they’d go back for family reunions or whatever the things were and come back and share with us what was going on in the South. I just couldn’t believe it, so I just got really involved with that and trying to stay on top of it and staying engaged and that.

It was kind of interesting because in the old Rondo neighborhood, I’m for sure

you've heard it before, on the west side of Dale was Oatmeal Hill, and on the east side of Dale was Cornmeal Valley. And so, most of the people over here on Oatmeal Hill, like where I lived, right up here on Chatsworth and St Anthony, Dr. Berry, who had his PhD from the University of Minnesota, was involved in the agriculture field. Dr. Crump was right down the street. Our dentist, Dr. Abrams. So, we had all of the "professionals" that were somewhere within reach of us that we had that contact with.

[00:08:00]

DM: We had a lot of involvement with those types of people, and they were friends and neighbors, and we knew their kids. I grew up with their daughters and their sons. So, it was just kind of a very inclusive neighborhood. But an interesting thing was, as I was growing up, because I was up here on this end of Oatmeal Hill, I went to J.J. Hill, which at the time, the only two families up here was Harvey Jones and his sisters, the Jones family, and our family. We were the only Blacks up at J.J. Hill, which was predominantly white and most of the other Black kids from the neighborhood went to Maxfield or McKinley.

Here I am up there at J.J. Hill, and all of my classmates were white. I became friends with them, and they became friends with me. I don't remember a lot of issues that I can think of. I was very outspoken. So, if somebody would say anything, I would always have a response. It wasn't like I was a wallflower or anything and I was a good student. And so, between me and my brothers, that's where we were at, at J.J. Hill. Then when we graduated, I went to J.J. Hill from kindergarten to sixth grade and then went to John Marshall Junior High School.

[00:10:00]

DM: That was an interesting experience because I'm walking home with my white friends that I had went to school with for seven years, and the Black kids that I had met at

Marshall, “Why are you walking home with all those white kids?” “Well, they’re my friends.” So, anyway, long story short—they called it Blood Alley between, I think it was Dayton and Marshall on Grotto, and that’s where all the kids would fight if there was an issue that came up during school. And so, Moline Lowe, who was a friend of mine—well, I didn’t know her at the time, but she was the bully at school. She decided, “Well, you need to be walking home with us.” I put up with this going back and forth, and I finally said, “Okay, fine.” “Well, you need to meet up in Blood Alley.”

Well, what she didn’t know was I was a tomboy. I used to get whippings from my grandparents because if somebody would pick on my brothers, [I would defend them]. I was the oldest of four kids, I’d always fight somebody and say, “Leave my brothers alone.” And then, “You’re not supposed to be fighting, blah-blah-blah.” So, anyway, we go to Blood Alley, I kick her ass. Then I could walk home any way I wanted to walk home.

KH: Take care of that. [Laughs.] And Debbie, what year were you born?

DM: 1946.

KH: So you grew up in an integrated era in the Oatmeal Hill part of Rondo. And just for my own clarification, the doctors that you mentioned, were they white or were they African American?

[00:12:00]

DM: They were African American.

KH: Okay, that’s what I thought.

DM: But the Wheats lived across the street from us. They were white. They were my good friends, Jerry and all of them, all their family. So we played together all the time. Irvin Johnson, Butchie, he lived across the street on Chatsworth. Then you had the apartment buildings, the all-white apartment buildings, that Marvin Anderson and their

family had and owned. And so, a lot of my friends lived there, the Bruins, Margaret, and Irvin, “Puggy”, and Karen, and Pam, they were my real good friends. I’d always be up early in the morning; I’d run over, and I’d go over there. Their father was in the Air Force, so he was a pilot and he was with the Tuskegee Airmen.

It’s funny because some days he’d be coming home from whatever duty he was on, and I’d be at the door, and I’m coming in, and he’s just coming back from a detail or something. And everybody said, “How come you saw our dad before we did?” [Laughs.] I don’t know, because I happened to be at the door when he was coming in. But so that was some of the stuff that we had going on. We were just close knit. Then right behind our house, on Chatsworth, was the Chatsworth Inn, which was a bar. Kids weren’t supposed to go in there, but we’d kind of sneak in there, and the guys would want us to go across the street because there was a grocery store and get them some chips or get them whatever they asked us to get them, and then they’d give us a little change. So we would go in and out, but we couldn’t get caught. [Laughs.]

[00:14:00]

DM: But that was there. Then, like I said, the grocery store was across the street on Chatsworth and Rondo [southeast corner]. There was a horse stall. It was a stable, [across the alley from our house]. The Chatsworth Inn was here, and then there was, I think, one or two houses, I’d have to look at a map to see. But then there was this old barn that the ragman would store his horses in, and on the weekends, he’d get his horse, and they’d go down the street and he had this cart, and he’d be hollering, “Rags, rags. Anybody, rags.” And he’d be collecting rags. But it was just funny that he was there. I mean, that kind of gave you the breakdown of what the neighborhood actually looked like back then. You know?

KH: You said that you were getting involved in NAACP and the Civil Rights

Movement from an early age. Mostly it sounds like because you had eyes on and were hearing what was happening in the South. Did you see, maybe not the same level, maybe not the same form of racism, but was that kind of burgeoning consciousness about the need for the Civil Rights Movement, particularly in the South, was that affecting how were looking at what was happening here, either in Rondo or St. Paul more broadly, or Minnesota, even more broadly?

DM: Well, when you saw it and when you listened to it, first of all, we were isolated. You know, they had us redlined where we couldn't go north of University, we couldn't go south of Dayton, couldn't go west of Lexington, all the way down to the Flats or by the Capitol. That's where the Black people could, if they could afford property, could buy property. They wouldn't let us go any further than that.

[00:16:00]

DM: So to be confined in that environment. We knew the white people, like Mr. Desnick, the pharmacist and the drugstore. He'd be right up here on University in Lexington. Dave, I know all of the kids and everything. Like I say, we all kind of grew up together. We're all here. But it was a mixed neighborhood. We had white people. We had Native Americans. Freddie, I can't think of his last name right now. We had Hispanics. So it was really a mixed neighborhood, but we were isolated into this neighborhood. And then, like I say, to watch TV, and to see what was going on. Then up here, just by the way that we were isolated, it kind of limited our exposure to things that would be going on that, say, some of my white friends, having went to J.J. Hill, were involved in and that I wasn't even aware of, or involved in, nor invited to be involved in. So it was some of that isolationism that was going on.

KH: I talked to Yusuf Mgeni a couple weeks ago, and he was talking—

DM: That had to be a long interview. [Laughs.] I always tell, when people got me

and him together, I said, “Well, you don’t really need me because I won’t get a word in otherwise.” You could take that off of there. [Laughs.]

KH: People have things to say. But he talked about, as a young kid, teenager, very much like what you were saying, that if he and his friends were staying in the neighborhood, everything was fine. But if they tried to go out to Highland, where I live, or elsewhere, then it wasn’t so fine. African American kids were not received well. Did you ever have any of those kinds of experiences? Did you get out of this kind of bubble and have that kind of experience?

[00:18:00]

DM: I probably did, because at J.J. Hill, I had these white friends, and so they invited me to some stuff. Sometimes it wasn’t as welcoming as it could have been. People may say some derogatory things. Being young, if somebody older says something out of context, you’re not going to say something back to them, because you were raised not to talk back to adults, especially when you’re in an area that’s not yours. You really wouldn’t do it in our neighborhood, but you think twice about even doing it away from there. So some of that was maybe happening. My friends were usually pretty good at sticking by me, my white friends. One of my best friends, Gail Galyth, she lived at Chatsworth, right across Rondo. She lived actually on Chatsworth. She was one of my best friends, and went to school together, and her brother Greg. I just ran into somebody. I don’t know if it was her. I think it was her. I think we actually went to lunch together and she gave me a picture of us because we were in the Campfire Girls? No, it couldn’t have been Girl Scouts. One of those programs. I have to find a picture. I’ll show it to you. But we just had lunch. She found me, not that I’m not hard to find, and said, “Let’s go to lunch.” And so, we went to lunch and we just kind of caught up.

[00:20:00]

DM: But I hadn't seen her in years. She lives out in one of the suburbs. I tease people all the time. I said, "I don't go past University and Lexington." And people say, "Oh, come on." I said, "Let me tell you something. If my GPS doesn't get me out there, we ain't going. Because [if] you're telling me that you live in Coon Rapids, or Blaine, if GPS isn't getting me there, you won't see me."

KH: So you're still very rooted in this community.

DM: Yeah. I'm one of the few that's still left in the neighborhood after civil rights and all of us that got our education, and some of the young people, most of them ended up moving out to the suburbs. A lot of my friends are out there in Bloomington, and Burnsville, and Apple Valley. They said they were in Apple Valley. I said, "What?" I said, "I am not driving that far to see you now. If you want to come into town, you can come up and see me." But yeah, no. A lot of them have got jobs and moved out to the suburbs. I get teased sometimes, "You're still in the hood?" "Yeah, I'm still here." I'm a half a block from the house I was born and raised in.

I just got a thing from the zoning board because when they took our house at 978 St. Anthony, we moved to 889 Iglehart. If you follow the African American community in St. Paul, you had to follow the Jewish community because they were the ones that would sell their houses to us. So we bought our house, my grandparents bought our house from the Clawitzes [ph]. If you look at it, it was a huge house. I mean, it was big. It was a four-bedroom house and had a lot of room. We had a back porch and a big yard and a front porch. I go up there now and look at the house.

[00:22:00]

DM: Well, then I just got a thing from the zoning board because some group wants to turn it into a shelter house for 11 people. That tells you how big it is. And so, like I say, between the money we got, my parents got from the house when they took it, and my

grandfather and grandmother working, we paid the mortgage, and we were living there. So the house is still there and now you can see how big it is that somebody's trying to convert it into supportive housing for 11 people.

KH: And that's the one on Iglehart?

DM: On Iglehart, yeah. Then I married my husband who had this house. He was 11 years older than I was. And so, I've been here. So I've moved all of three blocks in my whole life, one way or the other.

KH: Yeah. So very rooted.

DM: Yeah.

KH: So, to transition just a little bit, tell me about your very first experience that you can remember with sports, whether formal, or official, or not.

DM: Well, all of us just grew up here. The only area that we had to play up on this end was the Oxford playground, and it was just a playground. All we had when I was growing up, on Oxford, was a little warming house. Literally, a little warming house. Inside the warming house, they had this board game that you played with a checker, and you had these little sticks, and there was a hole. The board game was like this, and then it was divided like a hockey rink would be, and you had these holes at the bottom in the middle, and you had to try to get the checker through the hole.

[00:24:00]

DM: That was all that was inside the warming house. Then there were six swings and a merry go round. There were, I believe, six Quonset huts on Oxford at the time. I don't remember who lived in them, but it was a lot of the military guys that came back from the service. But there were six Quonset huts there and the field was terrible. Because I was a good athlete, I ran track, I played baseball, I played softball, I played football with the boys. In fact, I think it's Dave Winfield's book, in one of them, there's an article

because as we were growing up, him and Stevie and them, Dave was a pitcher, and I just creamed his ball. [Laughs.] They used to get mad because every time we'd pick teams, he said, "They always picked her first." I said, "I can't help it, I can't help it."

But, no, I was a great athlete. I don't know why I played everything. Because we were all confined, the boys and the girls, and we had a girls softball team. I'll never forget. I know Bill must have said something. I remember when Bill Peterson got assigned to be our rec director. And here is this good looking, well-trimmed, just built, he had just came back from the military looking like a hunk. All the girls were just drooling over him. "Wow, look at this guy," you know?

[00:26:00]

DM: He was trying to get us involved with stuff. He was the first one that got us into, or got me, but usually the rest of us, into skating because he would flood the rink. None of us would. It was too cold. We weren't going to stand out there with no hose and flood the rink. So he'd flood the rink. But then he went out and begged and borrowed. I don't know where he got skates for everybody. The only skates that he had that fit me were speed skates. So I had these black skates with long blades when everybody else had hockey skates or figure skates. That's my first pair of skates that I got.

Back in the day during the winter carnival, St. Paul always had their winter carnivals, he would throw all of us in this little red station wagon. I called all of us little chocolate drops, and here's this white guy taking us all out to Como to go do the races on the rink out there. The first time that we got out there, it was kind of interesting because here we are and everybody else is white. So he's got us by different groups by ages and stuff.

So, anyway, I get up there and I've got these speed skates on. These other kids have really good skates and everything. When they blew the whistle, because I didn't

really know how to skate, I just literally outran them on my skates around and got a little blue ribbon and brought it back. I wish I could find it, but it's probably somewhere.

[00:28:00]

DM: But anyway, that's how I first got into speedskating. Somebody out there saw me and thought, "You know, if she had some training, she may be okay." I don't know who it was. Then I know they were talking to Bill. This didn't happen right away, but in between, they were trying to get me in the Blue Line Speed Skating Club so that I could get better and get some training and stuff. And so, anyway, Bill took us. Bill was always dragging us somewhere in that red Ford Station Wagon. He took us over to wherever that place was.

So, anyway, Mary Meyers, who ended up getting the 1968 gold medal or something at the Olympics, she was in the heat that I had to race against, and I beat her two out of three heats. But they weren't taking me into the Blue Line Speed Skating Club because they weren't going to have anybody Black in the club then.

KH: And was that Blue Line Speed Skating Club on this side of town? Do you remember where it was?

DM: I don't remember where it's at, but it wasn't right close. So that was my first time having any contact with that.

KH: So you became a speed skater just because that was the pair of skates that fit.

DM: That was it.

KH: So it's pretty random.

DM: Yes.

KH: And it was this the kind of skates we see today with the longer blades, which is, I'm not a skater, but I would imagine it's very different to skate on those than it is on hockey skates or figure skates. And that's just what they had for you. Oh, look at them.

Are these—

[00:30:00]

DM: These aren't the first pair. These were a pair that I ended up getting.

KH: Wow, look at those.

DM: But this is what I learned how to skate on. When everybody else had hockey skates and figure skates, I had [speed] skates like these.

KH: Yeah, those are different. So, then, if you couldn't get into the Blue Line [Club], where did you learn? Did you do any particular speedskating training?

DM: I didn't do any training. We kept going to different places. Bill kept us into everything. He'd drag us to different [places], and I'd keep winning [ribbons]. I didn't belong to any club, or nothing, and nobody invited us to be in any club.

KH: So imagine what you could have done with training. I mean, which is not to dismiss what you did without it, but you had that much success without any formal training.

DM: Right.

KH: Wow. Now, were your brothers involved in sports also?

DM: Yeah, they played baseball and stuff. They weren't great, but they played okay.

KH: But you were the athlete in the family.

DM: Yeah.

KH: And your grandparents, the parents who raised you, were they encouraging you to be involved in sports?

[00:32:00]

DM: [No]. Well, all they wanted us was not to get in trouble. That was the key thing. Like I say, they worked a lot. We weren't supposed to get in trouble. I'd get a

whipping if I beat up somebody because they're picking on my brothers. I don't know. I guess I was just born with talent. If I would have had an opportunity, I maybe could have went on and done something great in sports. Because, we played. I was sitting here this morning, I called a friend of mine because I couldn't remember. We had this girls softball team. I love softball. None of our games were at Oxford because our field was so bad, so all of our games were away. Bill once again had all his little chocolate drops in his 1954 Ford red station wagon and taking us out to all these different rec centers to play basketball or volleyball, or whatever it was.

Our parents, a lot of them that didn't have transportation, we didn't have a lot of fans that came to see the kids play. Not because they didn't want to, it was going to the East Side or going out to Como or other places. They just didn't have the transportation. But no, we played ball and he was the coach. He ended up being the coach of the state's all-state baseball team, I think it was. All city, all state baseball team. He would get his baseball players to scrimmage our softball team. So we had to learn how to slide because they weren't changing the rules for us. We were learning how to do the stuff that the boys would do in their [games]. But that was the people that we scrimmaged, just to keep our skills up and things like that.

[00:34:00]

KH: So, at that time, was it fast pitch softball or slow pitch softball?

DM: It was slow pitch softball. But when we were playing with the boys, they were just throwing the ball [fast].

KH: And that's the pitch that you hit?

DM: Exactly.

KH: It was a Dave Winfield, not an underhanded.

DM: No, no. I was just sitting here because our catcher was Lenora Foster, and I

always remember, because she got her front teeth knocked out when somebody slid [into home plate]. Then Margaret Bruin was out in that center field. She was always out because very few people got the ball out there. I was a shortstop. Jackie was the first baseman. Maxine Burch was the third baseman. Marvis Ray, I forgot what position she was out in the outfield, I think. I can't remember who was second base. But anyway, we had a bad team. When we'd go play these other teams, because we had been scrimmaging the boys, we would be killing them. I mean, we would out hit them out, run them, out throw them.

In fact, the only person that would play first base was my girlfriend, Jackie [Coulter], because she said when I threw the ball coming from shortstop, she had broken her fingers like two or three times catching my ball.

KH: Because you were throwing that hard and fast?

DM: Yeah. To this day, she sees me, "Damn it, you caused my fingers to get broken."

KH: So, Bill and Frank, maybe Frank mostly, has also said that part of the reason that maybe other teams didn't come to Oxford wasn't just because the field was bad, but because there was a stigma to the neighborhood. Now, I don't know if maybe that was later, but did you ever get any sense of that, like people didn't want to come because it was Summit University or Selby-Dale or Rondo?

[00:36:00]

DM: I never thought about that. I just knew that when you went to these other playgrounds, they were much better than ours. As it was, when I got elected to the city council, I ran on jobs, economic development, opportunities for our youth and seniors. I went to all the neighborhood groups, and went to the rec centers. I said, "What do you all want?" And those are the things that I got at every meeting. So, I said, Okay, that's what

I'm going to run on. At the time when I was on the city council, Super Target wanted to build their Target up there. Tom Carrico was the real estate person for Target. [Laughs.] I laugh every time I think of him because he told me I wore his ass out. Anyway, my Green people, there actually were people over here, my people said, "Well, we don't want to see a blacktop out there." So we have the only Super Target with trees and benches in the parking lot.

So then 1247 St. Anthony had all of the people in it, and their complaint was, "Well, we don't want to look at the side of any building." So we have the only Super Target with display windows. So, then I said to Tom, "Well, can you make them interactive?" He said, "Debbie, you are working me. We are way over our budget." But as it turned out afterwards, he said, "You know, this may be a model that we can use." So he's looking further down the line. I'm just looking to try to get something done that my community asked. That was one of the things that I did. And then my seniors, we didn't have any senior housing here, so I was able to get Carty Heights built up here on Dunlap and Central, 50 units of senior housing.

[00:38:00]

DM: Then at the Minnehaha Dale Business Development Center, I was able to get the fire-retardant people and some businesses in down there. I was doing the things that my community had asked me to do. Then we get to Oxford and everybody's saying, "Come on. We've got to." So, anyway, we're getting the building done so we don't have a little warming house, and then the field. Ed McDaniel, don't ask me how I became friends with him, he was a Viking. I said, "Ed, I need you to help me get that field turfed." So the Minnesota Vikings put \$2 million in and turfed Oxford Rec Center.

It was interesting because at the time, that's when we found out, we, the city council, and the community, that that used to be a dump. So all the years that we have

been playing on that field, it was contaminated. We didn't find out until I got on the city council in 2004 to 2008. So that's all the years that were playing on that contamination there. They had to remediate the field in order to turf it. The Vikings ended up paying for that.

KH: So going back to Oxford's early, early days, and the field that you're talking about now that the Vikings turfed, where was that relative to those Quonset huts?

Separate?

[00:40:00]

DM: If you go up Rondo and Lexington, just off that vacant area there, that's where the six Quonset huts were, so they were up at the top end of it. Then next to them there was a basketball court just with two little baskets on it. It wasn't a full court. It was just two things where you could run back and forth and throw the basketball up into the basket. Then there were six swings and a merry-go-round. That was the extent of activity, other than the warming house.

KH: Okay, so that field then, that had been a dump, was an empty field at that time?

DM: At that time.

KH: So from the time you were playing on the rock pile, I think I've heard you and Bill describe it as a rock pile, that site had been prior to that, a dump. That's something we need to find out more. Okay. Wow. But nobody knew that until 2004 to '08.

DM: Yeah. When we were going to get it. It's interesting today, I always tell people today, MNDOT hates for me to show up to a meeting. I said, first of all, "You all stole our land and our businesses. And now, along where the old Rondo neighborhood is, we have the highest incidence of lung cancer and asthma of any place along the freeway." Because back when they were doing the freeway, the people on the north side of 94

wanted to see their neighbors on the south side of 94, so we had a fight to get walk bridges across at Chatsworth, at Grotto, at Dale, at Western, just to get over to see our friends and neighbors on the other side. I mean, these were literally fights that we had to have. They didn't want to have those wooden barriers because they wanted to see their neighbors.

[00:42:00]

DM: Now, I don't know if that would have lowered the cost or incidents of asthma and lung cancer, because I don't know what's happening on other parts of the freeway. But the pollution that comes up from the exhaust and that is killing us. So, I always say to them, "First you stole our property, now you're killing us." They don't like me at the meetings.

KH: Maybe not, so when you remember the Quonset huts there—I was just looking at some photographs. I think those are gone by 1958, or so. But you have been playing over there while they were there, where it was very rudimentary, while the highway department is making plans for and then destroying all these houses and properties to build the freeway. And these walkways have been built. So you must have been taking one of those walkways to get from here over to Oxford, or was that much later after that freeway opened?

DM: Yeah, because we had a fight to get those walkways. Yeah, the community fought to get the walkways. I don't know how soon, and you could ask the highway department when they put the walkways in. But I remember a lot of times having to walk up to Lexington to get over to the rec center.

KH: I was going to ask you, too. You mentioned a few minutes ago when you were talking about your softball team going out to these other rec centers, that you noticed a distinct difference between those rec sites and Oxford. A lot of the research I've been doing at the Historical Society I've been focusing on, one of the things, is how many

members of the Rondo, Selby-Dale Summit-University, however you define the community, really advocated with the city to improve Oxford.

[00:44:00]

DM: But what it sounds like you're saying is that you saw the differences. And these were other St. Paul rec centers, right? They were within the same department, same city.

DM: The playground, the league was all the city league.

KH: So you weren't going out to the suburbs? This was all in St. Paul?

DM: Trust me. That little red station wagon wouldn't have got us out. We were lucky to get to the East Side. [Laughs.]

KH: Okay. But you were going and there were girls teams at these other sites. So girls were playing sports through the St. Paul Parks and Rec, but at better facilities, better fields, better equipment, all that kind of stuff. You've talked already about a lot of your girlfriends who were playing sports with you, and that you were scrimmaging the boys team. Maybe the answer is implied in some of that, but what was the relationship between boys and girls who were playing sports at Oxford? Were the boys, like—

DM: Just boys. They were just boys. Like I say, Butch Ewing, Dave, Steve Winfield. I can't even think of all of their names right now. Johnny. Oh my God. Johnny lived across the street from me. Him and his brother, Philip Warren. Johnny Warren, Philip Warren, Mary Warren. I mean, we all lived right there and so that's where we went. That was the only place that was big enough for us to do anything other than play in the streets, which wasn't a good, safe place to play. It didn't give you a lot of room to do anything.

[00:46:00]

KH: But they didn't give you a hard time? When you're scrimmaging the boys baseball team, they were fine with that? They didn't give you any—

DM: Well, they didn't give us anything. They gave Bill crap. "Why do we got to play them girls?" But they didn't give us any crap because he just said, "Hey, they need to scrimmage somebody, and you're it."

KH: Then I assume they see somebody like you and your teammates holding your own and smacking the ball out of the park, so to speak. I know Lisa Lissimore, and I know she's a little bit behind you, but was talking about when she was playing sports over there, how supportive the boys were.

DM: Yeah, yeah. I mean, it was just competitive. That's all I think it was. I don't think it was the fact that they had to play girls. It was just competitive. I mean, they didn't know anything else. They knew this is what we had. They had better opportunities, I think, I can't speak, Bill would know more than that. But obviously a lot of them went on to excel in sports and make money and go to the pros. It wasn't until Title IX that girls even got recognized in sports. I was born before my time. [Laughs.]

KH: Yeah, really. That's what's so interesting to me, because you are playing really competitive sports at a time that a lot of girls weren't, and they didn't have the chance to do that. And that's really what has interested me about Oxford is, well, what was going on over there? And was it unique to Oxford? Was it because it was the Rondo community? Was there something unique about Rondo that supported this?

[00:48:00]

DM: I tell people all the time, Rondo was a village. I'm a city planner. I have a Master's from the Humphrey School in urban planning. Back in the day, we were a village. If you needed something and you didn't have it. You needed eggs or milk or whatever, and your neighbor had it, they would share it with you. It was just a village. Today, we have neighborhoods and people don't talk to each other. It's kind of interesting. I've got three rental houses. They are now rental houses; they were owned before and so,

people move in and out. Every time I see a new group move in, I go over and knock on the door and introduce myself, “Hi, My name is Mrs. Montgomery. I live over here and I just wanted to introduce myself to you.” If they’ve got kids, this is Easter. I have Easter bunnies to give to kids. They don’t know how to handle that because it’s new to them, because people don’t do that. But in the old Rondo neighborhood, how I was raised, that’s what we did. It’s sharing what you have, welcoming people, being inclusive. And you don’t see that today. I mean, everybody’s stuck to themselves, and nobody extends anything. I couldn’t imagine having new people across the street, and I don’t know who they are. If I was them, well, who are my neighbors on the other side of the street? But they don’t care.

KH: Yeah, it’s a different—

[00:50:00]

DM: But in the Rondo neighborhood, everybody knew everybody. If somebody was sick, if somebody was moving, first of all, we couldn’t move, but in the area. But you knew where they were at. Churches were very important back in the day. Everybody went to a church. It was interesting. When I was younger, I didn’t realize this. In the summer, when all of the people in Rondo were working jobs, and most of them were low level jobs, for daycare one week in the summer, every one of the churches, no matter what the religion, would have a summer program. One week we’d be at Pilgrim. One week we’d be at Camphor. One week we’d be at Mount Olivet. One week we’d be at St. Peter Claver. One week we’d be at Mount Olive. That was the church ladies that would find activities to keep us busy, they would cook lunch for us or cook a meal. But that was the church ladies. And so, it was the village again.

KH: It was a community taking care of the kids in summer so the parents could work, and the kids would have something to do.

DM: Exactly. So, I mean, can you imagine that today? I mean, that's what I say. It was a village and people are missing that. How do we care for each other? How do we care for our young? Kids are my passion. I just had a call from some young lady, I don't even know who she is. She said, "Well, could you speak at this event?" And I said, "Well, I'm not too sure." She said, "Could you show up?" I said, "I'll show up." She says, "No, you're very important." "I'm not important, but I'll show up. Just tell me where and when." So, I got it on my calendar from 1:00 to 3:00 somewhere, I don't know, it's on my calendar. As somebody said, if you look at my calendar, if it ain't on here, it ain't happening.

[00:52:00]

KH: So going back to you and your own involvement in sports, what did you like about sports? Is there a way to articulate that?

DM: One, it brought, how do you build teamwork? How do you get along with others? It develops leadership skills. It gives people compassion for those that aren't as good as the others, to help be supportive. Those are some of the things that I got out of it. I'm sure most of the people that I played with got out of it. I mean some of us are really good and some of us weren't as good, but because all we had was each other, we had to be supportive of each other and work on the things that their strength was and what your strength was and figure out how do we navigate that into a program, into a team, into an organization, into that kind of stuff.

So, I think sports have a big part in developing not only stamina, but compassion, leadership, empathy. I think it brings all of that to the forefront. Everybody I know, if you talk to Stevie, or David, or all of them, if you look at the things we grew up in, you don't see that a lot today.

[00:54:00]

KH: Well, and I wonder, too, I've done sports since I was a kid. Not at the competitive level that you did. I was on a high school team for a little bit, but I think that was really important to my growing up. I thought that for so long it wasn't because I was such a great athlete, but it was because I learned all those other things playing sports, as well. So, my question for you is, do you think some of that had to do with how you were coached? How important was it to what you took away from sports that Bill was coaching you or that other people at Oxford or later in school maybe were coaching you?

DM: Yeah. No, I think Bill was very supportive. He was able to identify where our strengths were and to position us in areas where we could be successful. You don't have to be the best, but you want to be part of a team. He was very good at identifying that. I always talk to my students when I'm teaching—that's another part time job I've got. [Laughs.]

KH: Why not one more thing?

DM: I always tell them, "Sit down and think." I teach law enforcement, and I always sit down, and I say in class, "I want each one of you to go back home today," this is during a semester class, "And identify what you think is your strength. God gave each one of us a special strength. You identify what you think your strength is and then be honest with yourself and go and identify what your weaknesses are. Then I want you to come back and share that strength that you think you have in yourself with the class and let us see how you use that strength that you have."

[00:56:00]

DM: "Now let's look at your weakness. Who do you see that's strong in your weakness and how are they succeeding in that area that's your weakness, so that maybe you can uplift that weakness a little so that it makes you better," I can't think of the word, but average, or there's a word, something that I can't think of right now, so that your

weakness doesn't become a detriment in whatever it is you're doing later.

I'm kind of analytical like that. But that's kind of the stuff that I try to get my students to identify, because the ones that I'm teaching want a badge and a gun, God bless them, I need them to understand that. So that when they go knock on a door at somebody's house and it's a domestic or whatever the situation is, try to analyze what's going on in that situation. This is back when I was a police officer, and I'll just use a domestic as an example. You didn't have to arrest everybody if you could just calm the situation down and say, "Hey, why don't you go visit your brother and figure this out and leave this lady alone," or whatever the situation is. Now if you go, somebody's got to go to jail. So, that's a whole another game plan, that. But that's a different story. I don't know.

KH: But what you were just saying about how you teach your students to identify their strengths and weaknesses and how they can improve their weaknesses from that, I mean, that's sports, right? That's a team—

DM: Team activity. Yes.

[00:58:00]

KH: That's very striking. So when you were a young woman and playing all these sports in what, '50s, '60s? That is a time period that at least—and this is my question to you—in white culture, in many respects, not all, but in many respects, there were a lot of negative associations with athletic girls. Did you ever get any of those vibes from anybody around you that, "Ooh, a girl. It's only manly girls who play sports," or "There's something bad about being a tomboy," any of that at all?

DM: It's interesting you said that question, because I laugh. Bill used to get mad at us. Margaret would be out in the field in the outfield, because most of the time the balls didn't get out there because the infielders were kicking it in the infield, and she'd be doing

her nails. And I mean, we were girls. Bill would just say, “Could we focus on the game?” Well, I wasn’t because I was a tomboy, but the girls that were doing it were doing girl things. We didn’t have cell phones or any of those other distractions, so they’re kind of taking care of their—

KH: A nail file. [Laughs.] But the two weren’t mutually exclusive, right? You could be feminine or doing girl things and be on a team.

DM: Yes, yes.

KH: Now, just before I came here, I was looking through old issues of the *Sun* and *Recorder* for you, and I noticed they were just short little articles sometimes that would pop up, very involved in your church, as well as in things like Ms. NAACP, do you remember that? Or the cotillion. So there were some girl things.

[01:00:00]

DM: There’s a picture, I think it’s at Hallie, that had me in a dress. I’m telling you. Me in a dress is not—I mean, if you went in my closet right now, you’d be lucky to find a dress. I’ve got a couple of dresses that I have to dress up in, but dresses were not my forte. I did not particularly care for a dress. I called her my cousin, we were good friends, Isabelle Foster Gilchrist. Her mother, Aunt Cynthia, she was going to come out as a deb. She was one of my grandmother’s best friends, Mrs. Foster. And she said, “You should have Debbie come on out. She needs to come out as a deb.” So, my grandmother, my mom would say, “Well, Auntie wants you to be in a debutante with Isabelle.” And I’m thinking, “I don’t care about being a debutante.”

That’s how you come out in society or something. I said, “I don’t care.” The next thing I know, I’m over at Aunt Cynthia’s house, and they’ve got a book on my head teaching me how to walk straight and stuff so I can come out as a debutante. There’s a picture somewhere, I don’t know who’s got it, of me coming out as a deb. I can’t even

remember who my date was or who the guy was that escorted me. I can't even remember that. I tried to take that drama out of my life.

[01:02:00]

KH: So this was not something you sought?

DM: No. [Laughs.]

KH: You were kind of wrangled into this.

DM: Yes, yes. And it's interesting because, like I say, Aunt Cynthia, Isabelle, they were, I'd say, a little more up than we were, but she was going to make sure that I was going to be a deb.

KH: Well, yeah. I mean, it's like social class capital in some periods, to do stuff like that.

DM: I don't think anybody pictured Debbie as a deb. [Laughs.]

KH: And so, you said this was with your friend-slash-cousin, Isabelle?

DM: Yeah.

KH: Now was Isabelle playing sports with you at all?

DM: Oh no. This is my cousin Isabelle.

KH: Oh, okay. Wow. So yes. She was not out there scrimmaging boys or playing on the rock pile.

DM: No, no.

KH: Wow, she's beautiful though.

DM: So, yeah, no. But, you know, they were determined, Debbie was going to be a deb. [Laughs.]

KH: A whole different kind. So, besides Bill, were there other adults, or at least older figures over at Oxford that were influential to you?

DM: Oh, Mr. Cotton, he lived across the street. God, a lot of the men, the railroad

guys, and I can't think of their names right now, but they were very supportive. "Muggs" [Margaret Coleman] was talking to me the other day because I was telling her I was going to get interviewed. She said, "Well, nobody ever talks about the Cotton Club and the Turtle Club." She said, "Those clubs were the guys were at, and they raised money to pay for you guys' sports equipment and blah-blah-blah."

[01:04:00]

DM: Muggs would know more about that than I do. But yeah, the adults, men, through their social clubs organizations or whatever they had, they actually raised the money for our equipment so that we had equipment. So, once again, it goes back to the village. Those that had shared and those that didn't have engaged however they could. And so, I mean, that's all I know. It's like these young people today calling me all the time. My passion is young people. They don't know that this service that they thought they were doing to me at the police department. I took the sergeant's exam.

I was on midnights. First of all, they put me on midnights in the highest crime area in the city in a one-person car because nobody was going to work with me when every other car had two men in it. I've got two bionic knees from all the bar room fights that I was in. I was all of 127 pounds soaking wet, throwing me around like a rag doll. I'll never forget my very first call on midnights, on my first shift, they sent me to a loud party. Now, most of the time you would send two people to a loud party, but they sent me. So, I pulled up, Albemarle and Front, and it was the headquarters of the Hell's Outcast. They had, you know how all these bikers line their bikes up around? All these bikes were lined up around this, and the music is blasting. Here's all these bikers out there with beer in their hands and noisy and stuff.

[01:04:00]

DM: And this is my first call. I pull up and I am literally afraid. But I knew, here I

am in a marked squad car, I'm a police officer, I have to get out. So I stiffen up and I get out of the squad, and I go over to the fence and here was this biker there, and he's got a beer in his hand and music's blasting and all. I said, "Excuse me, sir, can you tell me who's in charge of this party?" He looks me up and down and this was a quote, you may not want this on your recording, "I've never fucked a pig before." I put my hand on my gun and said, "You're not fucking one tonight." I got on the radio and put out a call signal 13, which is officer needs help. So,] then you heard sirens coming all over the place. And it's like, okay, you know the address, you know who's here. Why are you sending me by myself to this? That was my first call on midnights in the highest crime area in the city.

KH: As a solo woman.

DM: Only woman on the police department and a minority.

KH: Are you saying that it was intentional that they were sending you there?

[01:08:00]

DM: Oh yeah, they were trying to get rid of me. Everything they did, they were trying to get rid of me. It was interesting. First of all, like I say, I was a budget analyst. You only needed a GED to be a police officer. I had a master's degree. As it was, the only reason that the mayor at that time, Larry Cohen, wanted me to take the test, is because there weren't any women. Not Larry. It was Ron Jones who was the EEO officer. He said, "You're the only woman I know that can pass the test," because it was the West Point Military Physical agility test. You had to run 25 yards, go over a four-foot fence, 25 yards, six-foot wall, 25 yards, get over, climb a ladder into a cylinder [and get out]. It was a timed obstacle course. Two hundred and fifty women signed up for this test. I was the only woman that passed, and only eight men did better than I did.

So there is a letter in my file saying, "Thank you for the opportunity to take the test, but I don't want this job." It was a \$10,000 difference in pay. I mean, so the Friday

before the academy started, one of the 10 African American men dropped out. They had to have 10, because it was a court ordered class, Miles Lord said. The only person that the mayor had control of was me because I was already working for the city. So, he said, “Here, I’m going to put you on leave. Just go sit in the academy for two weeks. Let’s get the academy started.” So I’m only supposed to be there for two weeks.

KH: And how many years was it?

DM: [29 years]. Well, here I am, I’m at the top of my academy. I’m doing what I need to do. I’m just keeping up with the guys. In the meantime, I was married and had four kids. My youngest was two and a half. I had to come home, because the other nine African American men were struggling, and we had quizzes every day, law quizzes. I would come home and [take care of my family] then [I would go and meet up with other nine African American men and tutor them for] the law quiz the next day.

[01:10:00]

DM: Then they said, “Well, just stay until the end of the month.” I said, “Who’s making up the difference?” “Don’t worry, you’ll be taken care of. Never trust a politician.” So, now I’m here at the end of the month. Well, now, to me, I’m still able to keep up and do the things. I’m thinking, “Now it’s not about me anymore. If I quit, they’ll say a woman can’t do this job and I can do this job, and a woman can do this job.” So, I said, “Well, I’m going to stay through the 16-week academy.” So, I stayed through the 16-week academy. In the meantime, there’s been a new election, a new mayor. I’m ready to go back to my job. My job was there, but it’s not funded. So, by default, I ended up as a police officer.

KH: So you would have gone back to the other job though?

DM: Oh yeah. Yeah. I mean, \$10,000 cut in pay? But at least it would have shown that women can do the job. As it turned out later, they disqualified that test because the

test was—I mean, how many people are you going to have to jump and climb, you know?

KH: But you could do it because you were very athletic.

DM: Oh yeah. Athletic. So I don't know. Well, that's how I ended up at the police department. In hindsight, it was a good opportunity. I gave a new perspective on policing because I policed in a different manner. In fact, somebody just mentioned yesterday to me when I was telling them about this interview, we had a white police officer in the Rondo neighborhood, Skally [ph]. Everybody knew Skally [ph]. He is a six foot seven, I'm saying white guy and he was the police officer here in Rondo.

[01:12:00]

They may have had more, but everybody knew Skally. And my brothers kind of got in trouble every now and then. It was just not them, but across the board. If Skally caught you doing something you shouldn't be doing his first time, you're going to get a tongue lashing. If he catches you a second time, he's going to take you behind Alaska Drugs and explain it to you. If you get caught the third time, he's knocking on your parents' door and telling them what's happening. Then you may end up downtown, or if the parents are on top of it and work it out, it's another thing. But you had three chances. Everybody in the neighborhood, nobody argued with Skally because everybody knew he was being fair. But to this day, people still talk about Skally. That's what policing was about.

KH: And so, he was respected. He was fair.

DM: When he retired, the Rondo community gave him a party, a retirement party. He was very well respected in the neighborhood. When I got on the job, I was able to do all the stuff that the guys could do. The investigators and the city attorneys loved my report because I could write complete sentences, and complete spelling, and they could understand what happened. So, they enjoyed that.

[01:14:00]

KH: Because you were well educated.

DM: Right. And because you only needed a GED, right? So I did well there. Two years later, they had a court ordered women's class and that's when they had 10 women that got hired.

KH: And so, what year was it that you—

DM: I started in 1975.

KH: So right in the middle of the women's movement and all kinds of attention to that as well as on the Civil Rights Movement, kind of the tail end of the peak of that. So, one of the other things now that you mentioned, Officer Skally and just policing, one of the other things that I've seen in some of the newspapers and some of the other documents I've looked at is that one of the motivations for people advocating for Oxford and to improve Oxford was that recreation, planned recreation gives kids something to do so they don't get in trouble. It keeps them busy.

DM: Exactly. Yes.

KH: As a city planner, I guess my question for you is, what do you see as the role of recreation or recreational facilities in a city or a neighborhood?

[01:16:00]

DM: I think it's important and, one, yes, we need to have recreational spaces and opportunities for young people to learn how to get along, how to do team stuff, work together, develop leadership and to do those kinds of things. I don't know what the mission is, and I think somebody sent it to me somewhere, is for the St. Paul Parks and Recreation Department. We have a beautiful new building over here at Oxford. I guarantee you if you go in there, you don't see as many kids as we had back in the day when we didn't have a facility.

KH: Why do you think that is?

DM: I just don't know what the vision is. St. Paul Parks and Recreation Department—now, this is Debbie—needs to be partnering with some of these other athletic organizations [and social clubs]. For those kids who don't have the exposure, or the resources can get the support after they are identified and whatever their strength is, to try to work with those organizations to work with those kids. It doesn't do well just to have a brand-new building, a swimming pool. Are we teaching swimming? I think I saw something where somebody said we're going to have free swimming somewhere. I don't know if it's at Oxford, or where. But you've got a beautiful swimming pool. The number one killing African American kids is deaths in swimming. Why isn't it that the St. Paul Public Schools, through their recreation gym period, aren't tied to sending the kids, all of them, with an instructor to teach them how to operate in water—I don't care if you can learn how to swim—so they're not afraid of water?

[01:18:00]

DM: To me, now, this is my city planning hat coming on. Minnesota has 35 Fortune 500 companies headquartered in this state and they all have foundations. Why aren't the bigger picture looking at, okay, how does the city operate? How are those divisions, Park and Rec, planning, economics, how are they all tied in and how are we drawing on these foundations? Maybe there's something that they have that through their foundation that they could support the city's effort. I don't say support the city, but a program where they can see their resources going to something that's going to better society, [and] our young people.

Because I always tell them when I talk to young people, "I'm talking to you because you are my future. I'm pretty well connected. Use me. I may not know what the area is exactly that you have, but I guarantee you I can find somebody that's in that area."

And it's those kinds of things. How do we tie that in? Every time I go over there, which isn't often, the parking lot is empty. The building doesn't have a lot of stuff going on. I mean, you got Central High School, which supposedly was one of the number one high schools in the state. You've got classrooms there.

[01:20:00]

DM: How come we don't have any artists? We're known for artists in this neighborhood, Seitu and all of these artists. How come we don't have them volunteering to work to help kids that are good in art, whatever that art is. Knitting. I don't know, is that an upcoming thing? I don't know. But I'm just saying, identify things early for young people that have those skills so that they can develop them and maybe they can use that in their future. A lot of these kids go to college. I just talked to somebody yesterday. They're in school. I said, "Well, what do you want to do?" "I don't know, but I graduate in," he's got a four-year degree in—I forgot what he told me. So, I think he said English. I said, "Oh, are you going to teach?" "No." What are you going to do in English? Are you going to get a job as a reporter? But I mean, those are the kinds of things.

I just don't know that our systems, and I say this all the time, aren't connecting. There's so many resources in this state and we're just not using it to advance our young people. You know, I can't deal with old people. I mean, I'd like you to take care of old people, but I want to see my young people grow. I just went and spoke at a school a month ago. Don't ask me how this guy found me. I didn't even know who the guy was. It turns out he's the son of a guy that I worked with on the job. He's an instructor at this school over there at Career Pathways Academy.

[01:22:00]

DM: I didn't realize that it's a school from sixth grade to 12th grade for kids that have been thrown out of every St. Paul public school. Now, how do you get thrown out of

school in sixth grade? I don't know. This is what the guy told me. So, anyway, he asked me to come talk to the kids. And this is what I told him, I said, "Well, I'm just here for you to use me and I'll share some things with you." I talk from my heart, so I don't have a speech. Each day is a different thing. And I think I talk for 30, 35 minutes.

There are 110 kids in the school. The guy told me 30 don't show up regularly. There were 70 kids there the day I spoke. For 35 minutes, I had their undivided attention. Afterwards they came up and they were hugging me and wanted my autograph. Steve, the guy that invited me, "They have not sat that still for anybody." I don't even know what I said. I mean, obviously it touched something with them. And they all were African American kids. They all looked like me. And so, since I've been there, all I've been saying to everybody, as I share this story with you, is how do I connect services with those kids? Are they connected to mental health facilities? Are they connected to social service? Are there family counseling things? I don't know. But I can't afford to lose 110 kids that look like me.

[01:24:00]

DM: So, I mean, I would be hitting these foundations once I figured out what it is that were the issues so that we can try to address them and to make them think they've got a future and will be helpful to society. That's me. These are the kinds of things I do. I'm not bragging, I'm just saying those are the things I do. I see stuff and I want to fix stuff. And a lot of people don't know how to work systems. I'm pretty good at systems, so I know how to do that. But I'm getting older and slowing down a bit, but it's just something that I want to make Minnesota needs to be the number one state with all the resources they have. I mean, they just raised my property tax. I just want to know, what am I getting?

The last two winters have been pretty mild, but I called down when we had that big snow and I said—I won't say who I talked to, "I promise you I won't call anymore if

you just do two things for me. Will you plow my streets and fix the potholes? That's all I want. I'm tired of picking up hubcaps in my front yard." It's just those kinds of things.

And so, I don't know. Have I answered any questions for you?

[01:26:00]

KH: Yes, you have. When you were talking about why isn't there a connection between Central High School and Oxford, to capitalize on these kids skills or interests? I think especially now when so many kids, including my kid, are so focused on a screen, whether it's in their hand, in their phone, or video games or whatever, it seems like a recreational facility that would get them away from that, and doing something else would be really a good thing.

DM: Even these young kids with these computers and stuff, I laugh. I forgot where I was yesterday, these kids were doing this, typing something. I said, "Well I'm doing the same thing." But I just think they're still using their hands. So how do we tie the mind and the hands into doing something that's going to be creative? So taking those students from Central, and they're not going to keep the building open over there after hours, I don't know what they do. But the rec center is open. You got rooms and then we've got artists, the Seitus, all these other folks that do art and to get them to volunteer, because they're working on grants, too. So let's get some nonprofit time in to share that expertise with these kids that are interested in art or knitting or whatever it is.

Because I guarantee you, and somebody just said this to me yesterday, I don't even know where I was yesterday. All the stuff in my calendar was so full I couldn't keep up, "Everything's going to be run by robots." Okay, so if robots are running everything, what are the people going to be doing? I'm not against technology, but what are people going to be doing? Because not everybody's going to be running a robot.

[01:28:00]

DM: I just don't understand how we're dealing with my 110 kids that are having issues learning in that kind of an environment. So what do I do? Because each one of us has a strength. I tell them that all the time. Let's identify what it is. Then how do we help develop it to make you a successful person? Not just for you. I mean, I want you to be successful individually, but how are you going to add something to society? I'm just not seeing the dots connecting. And, to me, I just go crazy when I sit here and think of all the resources that this state has that other states would love to have. The 3Ms, the Medtronics, you can just go down the line, they're all right here and they've got expertise, and they've got grant money. I guarantee you if you had something you could sell, they'd be happy to fund it. Are we still talking about the rec center? [Laughs.]

KH: Kind of. On that note, I'm going to bring us back in time. Okay, so you played all kinds of sports at Oxford. You went to John Marshall Junior High. Did you play sports at John Marshall?

DM: They didn't have a lot of stuff for us at middle school.

KH: For kids in general or for girls in particular?

DM: Well, all I remember is we had phy-ed.

KH: Okay. So if you were still playing sports, it was still at Oxford?

DM: At Oxford, yeah.

KH: What about high school at Central?

DM: I was before Title IX, so they didn't have anything for us up there.

[01:30:00]

KH: Okay, because one of the articles in the paper, I can't remember what the context of the article was, but you were mentioned, and it said that at Central, you were captain of the baseball, volleyball, and basketball teams. What does that mean? Were you playing? Was it the boys team? What was that?

DM: They had these sports activities. The girls, we played, and everybody would make me captain. God knows why. But I guess you could call it recreational. It's PT. It's one hour of gym.

KH: So it was like a club sport? You weren't competing against other schools, or it wasn't in the high school league?

DM: Yeah.

KH: Okay, so that's what that was. So, for you, you were really living in that pre-Title IX era in school where there were no competitive athletic opportunities for girls, but you were getting it or had gotten it at Oxford.

DM: Yeah.

KH: So when you were in high school, were you involved at Oxford still at all?

DM: Oh yeah.

KH: Okay, so you were still playing all the way through at Oxford.

DM: Yeah. I played ball, ran track. I did everything through the rec center.

KH: Okay. So, in that way, the St. Paul Parks and Rec, or the recreational sports, gave you more opportunities than schools did because Title IX was a school-based initiative.

DM: Just PT, for keeping you engaged in physical activity and stuff. The schools I went to didn't have anything.

[01:32:00]

KH: Now, I know there are other community organizations, athletic organizations that girls participated in sports. I know Hallie had some teams as well.

DM: I was active in Hallie.

KH: You were at Hallie as well. So, that was one of my questions. Obviously we're focused on Oxford here, but how did Oxford interact with a place like Hallie or

others?

DM: Well, if they didn't have activities at Oxford, you'd go down to Hallie. So Hallie was like our second home, you know? And so, I was involved. They got a picture of me hanging up down there. That's with a dress on, or a skirt, anyway. I don't know. But they had cooking classes, which you had cooking up there. But I'm trying to remember. I don't remember taking any of the home ec classes at Central. I was in the academic classes. In middle school, I think all of us had cake cooking and all of that. They made us. But at Hallie, they had all of that. So you were learning to cook and learning how to dance, how do you socialize? They had different clubs you could belong to. We had teams, so we competed. Hallie Q. Brown would compete against different teams.

KH: Now, did Hallie and Oxford teams ever compete against each other? Because Oxford was part of the city and Hallie wasn't.

DM: Yeah, no. I don't think we did. But I'm not sure. I don't think so. I don't remember doing that. I remember going to different facilities. It may have been at rec centers, but I just know that we were the Hallie team. Because, I mean, at the rec center, it was mixed because it was a mixed neighborhood. At Hallie, it was mainly African Americans. I mean, not that there weren't white people, but the majority was African American.

[01:34:00]

KH: Sure. Different part of town, different history, different mission, really.

DM: Yes.

KH: So if you had to quantify the time you spent at Oxford versus Hallie, was it pretty equal? Were you at one place more than the other?

DM: Hallie was far. For us, it was far. So I spent most of my time at Oxford. I was an Oxford kid. I'd get down to Hallie if there was something going on or that I was

interested in or if somebody had me on a team and wanted me to play down there. But I mainly was an Oxford kid. I did most of my stuff up here at the playground.

KH: Now, did you play basketball also?

DM: Oh yeah. Basketball.

KH: Was there a sport you didn't play?

DM: No. I was engaged. And I played against the boys, because a lot of the girls didn't play. And so, that's like Dave saying, "Damn it, she creamed my balls," when he was a pitcher and stuff. But, yeah, no, I was a great athlete, and I played with the boys, against the boys. Like I say, when they were picking teams, the boys would get mad because I'd get picked before them.

KH: So what year do you graduate from Central?

DM: '64.

KH: So, also, lots happening across the country in the Civil Rights Movement. That was a huge summer in Mississippi.

[01:36:00]

DM: I did the March on Washington in '63. You can't see behind the door. I tell people, everybody, here I am, 17 years old. And I'm out at the March on Washington, and if they could zoom in, I'm behind the reflective pool. Everybody said, "Weren't you afraid?" Because my grandfather worked on the railroad, we had passes so I could ride the train, and we didn't have to pay. And they said, "Weren't you afraid?" Well, first of all, the porters from here, Gordy Kirk, and the guys that worked on the trains, "Debbie's going to the March on Washington, and she's your responsibility," they'd tell the porter. Trust me, nothing was going to happen to me because they were going to make sure I was okay. Then when we got to Chicago and changed trains, the porter would say, "Hang on, I'm going to take you over to this train," introduced me to a porter, and say, "This is Gil's

daughter, and she's going on the March on Washington, and she's your responsibility."

I didn't know this guy from Adam. He knew me only by my name, but he knew that I was going to get to Washington, and I was his responsibility. Then when the train went into, I want to tell you Baltimore, but it may have been D.C. I can't remember exactly how the train went. He says, "You stay right here because we have to clean the train and then I'm going to take you on the bus over to the Mall." Then when I got to the Mall, he said, "When you're done, you take this bus and you're going to meet somebody here and they're going to take you back on the train, another porter." But can you imagine, today, a 17-year-old girl going across the country? Nobody knows.

[01:38:00]

DM: Now, first of all, my grandparents, I don't know, they must have thought, "She's going to take care of herself, she knows what to do." But that's what I did. I took the train across [the country] to get out to the March on Washington by myself. It wasn't like I was by myself because when I got out there, there were a lot of my NAACP friends from across the country that I ran into. So, it wasn't like I didn't know somebody. I probably knew some of the kids who came with their parents from the South who I had known from the NAACP. Then I kind of hung out with them, and listened to the speech and was very moved, it was very emotional. Then I did not stay as a lot of those people didn't stay, they got in their cars, or whatever, and went back to where they were going. But I went back down to the train station.

KH: So, you were just there for the march?

DM: Just there for the march. And that's exactly what I did.

KH: So that would have been just before your senior year?

DM: Yep, that's when. I got out of school, and I was going on to march.

KH: And so, you graduate in '64. Then am I right in remembering that you were

deliberating as far as which college to go to between the U and some other out of state?

DM: Well, we didn't have a lot of money, so I was kind of stuck at the U. I'd like to have went to one of the HBCUs, but we didn't have no money, so I was going to be at the U, not because I wanted to, but because that's where I was going to have to go.

[01:40:00]

DM: So I was at the U and I started in '64. In '65, I did the march from Selma to Montgomery, the 54-mile march, which took us five days because we averaged about 10 miles a day in that heat. That's all I remember about that march was the heat. Oh my God, it was hot. You know, being this northern kid and our blood was thicker, and it was just hot. We're averaging 10 miles a day and we're singing and chanting and stopping and at night the ministers and the rabbis would be preaching and talking and some of my other NAACP young people, wherever we stopped, depending along the way, "Hey, my aunt or my grandpa lives over here."

A couple of times we're running through the woods, because the KKK had been out along the march, if you look at the pictures with their guns and everything, chanting negative slurs and stuff, and here us crazy kids at nighttime are running through the woods to get sent somebody's grandma's house, and we're eating food. I mean, we just did some dumb stuff.

KH: Well, that's why young people do this kind of stuff. You don't know, or maybe fully appreciate the risk.

DM: But that was kind of interesting. But yeah, we did some crazy things and then we got there, and we got to hear the speech.

[01:42:00]

KH: Now, this is the mid-60s, and you had talked earlier about how you were first learning about the Civil Rights Movement when you were younger at church. By this

time, are you concerning yourself with any kind of racial injustice here in St. Paul or Minnesota?

DM: Well, yeah, we were doing stuff here with the adult branch of the NAACP. Don Lewis and them were the presidents and that. We would support them on issues that they were doing, open housing and things like that. If they had a march or had a demonstration or had a meeting, we would show up with the adults that were carrying some of that on. So, if you Google Don Lewis and them, they were the people in charge then. And so, we were just real supportive of what efforts they were doing.

KH: When you were at Oxford, because I know it took a long time to get that building built, the bigger building, and a lot of citizen advocacy and protest to the city. Were you part of that? Did you see the need to improve Oxford as a matter of racial justice?

DM: Yes. Yeah, no, I was really involved with trying to make sure that we had got that, which is why it's so disheartening now when I go down there and see that we've got this beautiful building and we're not using it. I don't want to say on the recording, I don't think the city's leadership is doing what they need to be doing. I mean, okay, they're going to raise my property taxes. Could I get some services? Not so much for me. But you got all of these city buildings, and you have all of this other stuff going on.

[01:44:00]

DM: How are you making it better for the residents and taxpayers of the city? And how are we taking care of our young people? I just got a thing, I think. Was it yesterday? Is today Saturday?

KH: Today is Saturday.

DM: Yesterday, I think. The 13th, is that today?

KH: Today is the 12th.

DM: They're going to have the grand opening of the North End new recreational building.

KH: Yes, I've seen that.

DM: And so, I'm glad we're having a grand opening. Did they put in the paper what kinds of services they're going to do? Or put it on the Internet? I mean, I'm old school. I read the paper. But is it on the Internet ?

KH: I just saw the headline.

DM: Yeah, I drove down Rice Street the other day. It's big. It's beautiful. It's the playground or land between Washington Middle School or High School; I don't know what Washington is now. It's there. So, where's the tie? I mean, here we are. Why are we [building] buildings and we aren't [tying in]services? And how are we engaging young people? It is healthy to have physical activity. What programs are we doing to physically improve the bodies of our young people? They just had something on TV last night talking about the obesity rate in the United States. I mean, when I started at the police department, I was all of 127 pounds soaking wet.

KH: And I think too, physical activity is good, obviously for the body, but also for mental health.

[01:46:00]

DM: Yes.

KH: Oh my gosh. Such benefits there as well.

DM: So, I mean, I don't know. I didn't see. I don't know. I think it's tomorrow. I was debating on going over to see what the building looked like. They're going to give tours. I think it's from 1:00 to 3:00. But what services are you going to have there? I mean, what are you going to have in there? What's the city going to operate? I don't want to talk about the leadership of Parks and Rec, but I just think there should be a strategic

plan on how we're going to use our rec centers. Why are we building these beautiful buildings and we don't have plans—maybe they do, I just don't know what they are—on how we're going to engage young people.

These young families. Daycare, they just said, was extremely expensive. Who are we hiring as our rec directors? Are they doing background checks and getting all that done? And then what kinds of programs for different ages in these beautiful buildings that we have to occupy these kids from, I don't know. I mean, what times of days? I mean, are we just doing it after school? Are we just doing it on holidays? Are we just doing it on the weekends? I don't know.

[01:48:00]

DM: I've got this little book, Community Ed, St. Paul Public Schools. West Seventh Street. I don't know. 1780 W Seventh St. I don't know what's there. I just don't see, how are we tying the schools and the rec centers into stuff. Fitness and dance. Where is this? Highland Park Elementary School. Global Arts Upper School. And isn't it interesting? It's in Highland Park. What about the kids over here? They didn't say anything about Oxford. We got a multimillion-dollar pool here.

KH: Yeah, I wonder if there is. There's nothing about Oxford there?

DM: I didn't see Oxford anywhere.

KH: Not even swimming? They have a nice pool.

DM: Aquatic. Como Park Elementary, Como Park Elementary, Como Park Elementary, Central High School, Como Elementary, Washington Middle School, Como Park High School. Something wrong with the Oxford pool?

KH: It's a nice pool.

DM: I'm just saying. I mean, it's these kinds of things. I said this to somebody the other day, Nothing has changed. This is 2025. I was in the Civil Rights Movement back in

the '50s and '60s. Then you wonder why our kids are the way they are. No resources are being invested. If I want to go learn how to swim, I've got to find a way to get to Como Park or to where did I tell you? Como High School. Como Park Elementary. This is all the levels of swimming.

[01:50:00]

KH: I follow Oxford on Facebook, and I feel like they do post something about swimming lessons there, but I don't—

DM: Well, why wouldn't it be in here?

KH: Right, and I don't know, is Community Ed the same as Parks and Rec? They two different? But to your point, why aren't they working together?

DM: The thing is, we as a people in the Civil Rights Movement, we spoke up. I don't know where our leadership is right now. I just said to somebody yesterday—you can tell all the meetings I was at yesterday, I can't even keep track. The DFL, I've been a Democrat my whole life, they don't have a platform. What are they running on? And then you wonder why we got a guy that can't remember his sentences, you know? And it's like, what's our platform? I mean, I'm not the brightest bulb in the tree here, but I'm just trying to figure it out here. You see, I kept this right here because I'm sitting here trying to figure out what are we doing for the people that are here?

[01:52:00]

DM: Now, don't misunderstand me, not every African American is here in this neighborhood. But in the neighborhoods that they're in, is there transportation provided? I mean, I know that, but I'm just saying. Either Parks and Rec or the school district, if they advertised it through the churches, through the schools, through the social service agencies, that these are activities that your kids could do. And then you go, as parents say, identify, do you want to learn how to swim? Well, I think I don't want you to drown. We

got 10,000 lakes here, so maybe would you like to take and learn how to do, what is this one, what do they call it? Water Babies? Tiny Tots? Waders? It gets me that I live in a state and in a city that has so many opportunities and nobody's talking to anybody. You know, The Wilder Foundation, right here. I mean, they got a big, beautiful building. What are we doing? What services? They claim they've got nine million services. Who knows about them? I don't know. I hate sharing my frustration, but I don't understand as I look at my kids going down the street aimlessly. I mean, my kids going down the street ain't even got these things in their hands.

KH: Oh no.

DM: So what am I missing?

KH: I wish I knew.

[01:54:00]

DM: But I say that only to say, back in the day of Oxford, we were engaged. I mean, they may not have known at the time when they gave us Bill Peterson, that guy kept us involved in everything. If the city had something going on at Como, that little red station wagon, he's hauling us out to Como. If the city's got something going on over here at Battle Creek, he's hauling us over there. I mean, otherwise we wouldn't get there.

KH: And he's white. We know that, just to make that clear on the transcript. When you were over at Oxford, were most of the kids there African American?

DM: Yes.

KH: And how was it that Bill fit in so seamlessly as a white guy over there?

DM: You know, that's a good question. I don't know. I'm not sure if it was his dad, because somebody Peterson was on the, I don't know if it was the Park and Rec board, or if it was on the city council, or on something. You'd have to find out what his dad did because I don't know if he was one of the Petersons that was on something, his

dad, but he just had a consciousness about him. And I don't know, maybe it's from being in the military that this is his first job, and he saw a bunch of dysfunctional kids with nothing and decided after coming out of the military, which is a structured organization, I'm going to put some structure in here.

KH: And he lived in Rondo also, right?

DM: Yeah.

KH: So he was part of it. It wasn't like they brought somebody and some white guy in from Highland or from somewhere else.

[01:56:00]

DM: And before he got there, Mr. Cotton, who lived across the street, he was always volunteering, especially with the boys, the football team, the boys baseball team and stuff. But he would do stuff with the girls, too. But he was primarily working with the boys. But he kept an eye on us, too, so it wasn't so bad. But Bill, I mean, when you stop to think of the Stacy Robinsons and the Dave Winfields and the kinds of people that came out of Oxford and went on to be successful, Bill had a lot to do with that. I mean, keeping us busy and engaged and getting us tied into stuff.

KH: I think so many of us know a Dave Winfield or a Stacy Robinson, but Linda Roberts, yourself, so many other people who played at Oxford came out and did really great things, not only in sports, but in their careers, in their civic activity, in their professional fields. So, yeah, there's something about Oxford. So you must have been at the U, then, let's see, '64 to '68 ish. But then you have a master's degree. Did you get it right away after you finished your undergrad?

DM: '71 is when I started.

KH: I think the groundbreaking on that new building was in '69. Were you still around in Oxford at that time?

DM: Oh yeah. Yeah, I was there.

KH: And what was your own sports activity when you were at the U?

DM: Well, they didn't have a lot for us. This is before Title IX. They had activities. I mean, if it was activities that they had for girls, I did it.

[01:58:00]

KH: Like clubs or intramural kinds of things.

DM: Yeah, but there was nothing.

KH: Had there been more athletic opportunities for women at that time, is there a sport you would have loved to have played in college?

DM: I was great at softball, and I was great at track. I ran track. I played volleyball. When you were asking about something, something went through my mind, I was going to say at the U. Oh, when I started the U, I graduated in '64, I went to the U in the fall. There were 48,000 students at the University of Minnesota. There were 100 African Americans. There were only five of us in the College of Liberal Arts. The rest were in general college. The majority of them were our football players, our basketball players, so that's where you saw most of the African Americans. I can tell you in my classes in CLA, I'd be lucky to see another person of color.

KH: Now, am I right, too, did I hear or read somewhere that you were part of the Morrill Hall takeover?

DM: I was married at the time, and so all I did was bring food, like an economic engine. So, then I said, well, when I was on the council, I met with the 18 clans. Each clan supported their members. I would meet at 1247 St. Anthony, the 13 Somali tribe leaders. In fact, when they first moved in, I thought it was interesting because I was on the council and the HRA [St. Paul Housing and Redevelopment Authority] is calling me, they're fighting. They had put two warring tribes on the same floor up there, and they didn't

know.

[02:00:00]

DM: I said, “Did you all do any research on this?” But each tribe supports theirs. Because, and this is my assessment, because of slavery, we have broken down the African American families to the point that we don’t support each other. As my grandmother used to always say, “We’re like a bucket of crabs. When one gets to the top, somebody’s pulling you back down.” I don’t know if all this stuff is in your report, but I say that to say, until we can get together and identify whoever it is that wants to start a business, and we all support that business, so that we get there—now somebody will say, “Well, we should be part of everything.” That’s fine. You notice the immigrants that didn’t get part of everything, they stuck together. They came to America, brought their cultures, their language and stuck together and they’re being successful. The Africans have come here and they’ve kept their tribes and that together and they’re being successful. Slavery has broken down African Americans and we can’t get together to support each other. Now, that’s my assessment. Some may not agree with it.

KH: I hear what you’re saying, but you also were saying earlier that Rondo is a village. So, there was that moment, or that period where there was, it seemed like—

[02:02:00]

DM: We had 300 Black businesses that they took when they took down Rondo. We had our own pharmacies, we had our grocery stores, we had our businesses, James Brown typewriter business. I mean, you could go through if you look at the histories and look at all the 300 Black businesses that were here and we supported them. They took all of that down. [We are the only people who aren’t supporting each other].

KH: So there was this moment where the community was coming together despite, or perhaps because it was isolated by redlining and racial covenants, and then

they wrecked that, as well, with the freeway.

DM: Exactly. And we have not built it back up and that was back in the '50s. We're in 2025 and we still don't have an economic engine.

KH: Is there one in Minneapolis?

DM: They're a little further ahead than we are, but not a lot. They got Broadway, West Broadway's got some stuff going on. But there's not a lot. I mean, it was funny because I was just talking about this at some other meeting I was at. I said, "How are we going to identify the Black folks, one, that have money and, two, the young folks or middle-aged people who have a small business, or an idea so that we can support them in getting it set up? Then how do we market it so that we are supporting it and then try to sell it out?" See, these other groups, they're not looking to go out. I mean, if you walk into any of these stores, I say this all the time when I go up to visit my friends on Little Mekong, they ain't hiring us.

[02:04:00]

DM: If you walk in on Little Africa, I had to go up because my daughter took me to Dubai, and I had to get the garb to dress so I'd be covered. They said, "Go up to Little Africa." Somebody sent me up there. If you go in that African mall, if you look at where it says African mall, it just looks decimated, the sign.

KH: What street is that on? Is it on University?

DM: On Snelling. And it's got a thing, it says, "African Mall." You get in there, they got gold jewelry stores, they got clothing stores. I mean, it's like a whole mall inside of this building that doesn't look like anything. And if my friend wouldn't have told me to go in and get the garb I needed, I'd have never known. But they ain't shutting down. They're making money. So somebody's supporting them, which is each of the different tribes. But we're just not getting ahead.

KH: So I taught at St. Kate's for a number of years and often taught about the '60s and about many things in the '60s, but one of them was the Civil Rights Movement and the emergence of the Black Power Movement and this call for Black self-determination. It sounds very much like what you're saying. It's like, we don't necessarily want to integrate ourselves and assimilate into white society, but we need to build our own institutions, our own economic viability, our own banks, our own schools, and support that. That sounds very much like what you're saying and I think the interesting point you're making to me is that it is of necessity in a capitalist economy.

DM: Yes, and it's not to say we don't want to work with white organizations.

KH: Right, no.

[02:06:00]

DM: But if you go to the white organizations, what are they doing for us? I mean, they may give us a few little dollars here and there. In their vision on how they're going to be inclusive, but the world is too big for me to try to change their system. I'm just trying to work on ours. I tell you, trust me, I think about this all the time, and I preach it. Everybody, I'm telling you, MNDOT hates seeing me at a meeting. We go up to the governor's mansion and I talk to him and just think, come on, you don't just need to give me a little money here. I need you to help me with a plan on how we're going to do this. I don't know. But all of this started at Oxford.

KH: I'm just looking at our time here because we're at just over two hours, so I'm going to wrap it up so you can get on with your other busy schedule.

DM: You're lucky I had nothing today, so you had me on the day I have absolutely nothing.

KH: Good fortune. So kind of by way of winding down here, then, I am curious about that. Given all that you have done, from your young years through today, through

civil rights, through the St. Paul Police, the city council, all of these things, how do you think, or do you think there's any connection between that part of your life and your life at Oxford?

DM: I think Oxford just gave me all of this stability that I have and taught me leadership, and taught me how to be engaging, how to gain support, how to uplift my players, my friends. Oxford brought all of that out of me. Everything I learned, I learned from Oxford on that. It was just a place where I could go and to grow, and it had a big influence on my life.

[02:08:00]

DM: I've been very successful in carrying the things I've learned from Oxford to include them in my life. Not only my civil rights stuff, but my political stuff, my social stuff. People always introduce me if I go someplace, "Well, she's a legend." I'm still Debbie, okay? I'm not. I'm just old. But it seemed like, if there was an issue, I always had a point of view, and I wasn't afraid to share it. Usually when I shared it, I had something to back it up, or a suggestion on how we could try to make it better and how to engage in some of that.

You know, getting Oxford turfed. Don't ask me how I met Ed McDaniel, I have no idea, but we ended up becoming friends. And I said, "Look at our field. Nobody plays us. All our games are away. No matter which team it is, we've got to go somewhere else." And so, between him and I, we got a grant together and took it to the foundation over there, the Vikings, and they agreed, and \$2 million later, we got it turfed. But, in the meantime, that's when they found out it had been a dump. If we wouldn't have done that, we still would be playing on a dump. Society has not been good to African Americans.

[02:10:00]

DM: I won't go worldwide, I'm just saying here. Because somebody had to know

that it was a dump at some point, and here they made a rec center. And, like I say, when we grew up, all there was, was that little warming house. We didn't have the big, beautiful building. It had a little place for a basketball court with three swings and a merry go round. So how did that help us physically to develop our skills with the resources that were there for us as we were growing up as young people, when other people had tennis courts and whatever else you have at rec centers, I don't know, because we didn't have it at ours?

Now we've got basketball courts in the building and the swimming pool in the building, and yet you go there and there's nobody there. So, how are we advertising? And then what you'll get from the politicians, Well, we gave you this money to do this building, and nobody's using it. Excuse me? Have you told anybody about how it is, what hours they're open? Does it cost money? Do we have free swimming? I don't know. I mean, it's those kinds of things where there's still injustices done and the leadership has not identified, I don't want to say a crisis, but an issue, and how to better improve it for the betterment of society. I always talk about the betterment of society. I don't want to talk about our people, because nobody cares. I mean, I hate to say that, but if I say the betterment of society, then maybe somebody will look at it in a more favorable action and move on it.

[02:12:00]

DM: But it drives me crazy that there's so much wealth in this state, 35 Fortune 500 companies, and how do we tie that in? Then the people that are in charge, how is the school board working with the city council? Working with the metropolitan council? How are all of these working together to make it better for the citizens of St. Paul? More importantly, I'm looking at the old Rondo neighborhood. But how are we making sure that everyone is being successful and uplifted? And I just don't see that. Like I say, as I read

this, and I think, okay, this is what the school is doing. I don't see anything to tie Oxford Playground, into anything. I don't see anything. Highland Park, Como Park. Nothing's going on in the Rondo neighborhood. What's happening at Oxford? And it's a new building. Well, it was new.

KH: But it's a nice building.

DM: Yeah. Now we got the North End. I don't know what's in it. I'm going to go walk through and see what they say. I don't like to get a pretty book telling me all of these programs, and I don't see my kids in it.

KH: And, like you say, this is so much an echo of what everybody was saying in the '50s and '60s when Oxford was being developed to the extent that it has been. Same thing.

[02:14:00]

DM: Nothing's changed. I was in the struggle in the '60s and '50s, and now we're in 2025. I have the money. I'm not rich, I have a police pension, so that if I had kids, I could send them to programs. Would they be welcomed? Because none of them are here, so would they be welcome? They'd have to make friends in a new area. I don't know what the parents of the new friends are like, or what they've said in their household that may give impressions to that young person that they heard through conversations.

KH: Especially now.

DM: Exactly. You know, so I just don't know. I want to have hope. Like I say, kids are my passion. I want to have hope for our future. I'm still in the struggle, but everybody wants me at a meeting, and I beat the same drum, and I just need somebody to take the leadership and to take some action. I'm the old voice. I need the young voices to speak up and to say, "Here's what I see, and how do we make it better?"

[02:16:00]

KH: I am going to close, because I haven't mentioned this before, that a segment of Marshall Avenue is now named in honor of you, Debbie Montgomery Avenue, and coincidentally, or I'm sure not, that is the street off of which you enter Oxford's parking lot. Am I correct in assuming that they decided it would be that stretch of that street because of your relationship to Oxford, or were there other factors?

DM: You know what? It is so cute. Dai Thao was the city council member at the time. Dai called me up, "Debbie, Debbie, we've got to name something after you." "Why do we have to name something?" "Because you're important, and we need to name something after you." And I said, "Well, what do you want to name? It's your deal." And he named something. I said, "No, that's already taken." Then he named something else. I can't even remember. I said, "No, that's already taken." So, then he says, "Well, let's name a street." I said, "Well, I grew up on St. Anthony." "That's not big enough." "Well, I lived in Rondo. It's taken." I lived in Rondo, what's the other one? St. Anthony. That's taken. Then he named something else, and it was taken. I said, "Well, we were redlined. So there's University, you got Selby, you got Lexington, you got down to the Flats." "I want you to have a major street. I need a major street." So I said, "Well, what do you want?" "Let's name Marshall, Debbie Montgomery Avenue." Okay. So I said to him, "Well, I see Katie McWatt's over on Dayton's, and so-and-so's over here, and it only runs three blocks or whatever. If you're going to name something after me, I want it to cover Rondo. So it needs to go from Lexington all the way down to Western."

[02:18:00]

DM: Since there's a shopping center, I can't go any further than that because we went all the way down to the Flats. So he said, "Fine, that's what we're going to do. We're going to name Marshall Debbie Montgomery Avenue." So, if you go down Marshall, at Lexington and Marshall, there's a sign, Debbie Montgomery Avenue. You get to Victoria;

there's a sign that says Debbie Montgomery Avenue. If you get to Dale, it says Debbie Montgomery Avenue. If you get the Western, it says Debbie Montgomery Avenue. So that's how Dai Thao named Marshall Avenue after Debbie Montgomery.

KH: And it starts right at Oxford. Right at Oxford, Lexington, and Marshall, and Rondo, and it's right at Oxford.

DM: So it's my history. It's the start of my history. It's where I started. I'm glad the rec center is there. I'm hoping they'll take care of it so that it doesn't get torn down, but I'd like to see it used more. Once again, we're back to systems. I say this all the time. Everybody hears me say this. I'm having some concerns about people, whether they really want systems to work. With everything we've got here, and I'm talking about in the state and in the city, we've got Black folks on the school board, we've got Black folks on the city council. Why aren't we tying this stuff in?

[02:20:00]

DM: There were days when I was growing up, we didn't have anybody on it. Now we have people on it, and I'm wondering where their vision is at. What is their purpose? I mean, like I say, when I ran on the city council, I went and asked my community what they wanted. Jobs, economic development, opportunities for our youth and seniors. I identified in the four years I was on the city council, 1,350 new jobs I got in four years and people in Ward 1. I mean, we documented it. So, I kept my promise. Now, I don't know what these other folks run on. I don't know what they're doing. I know that I got—this isn't for your thing—

[02:22:00]

DM: All I can do is just say we got to be intentional. I don't know. I'm speaking to you from the heart on issues that I just think—and all of this grew out of growing up at Oxford and living on a dump and just trying to get to breathe, trying to get involved, to

stay engaged. If you see a problem, how do we have a solution to work on it? You know, we may not solve it, but can we work on it? Can we address it? I'm just not sure what's happening. It's not like I don't talk to them. I try to share. But young people also don't particularly care to hear from old people. They think they know everything today.

KH: I am feeling that more and more myself. Yes, I understand that. This will be my last question, then we can be done. But is there anything you see or what are the things you see that gives you hope?

DM: Well, that's a good question, because every time I look at the data on the achievement level in the schools of our kids, we're at the bottom of the pile. I'd like to have hope. I'm hoping that leadership will look seriously at uplifting everybody in the city, I would say. And that's the same for the community. But give us visions of possibilities and then use people that can help you. Don't be afraid to ask, you know?

[02:24:00]

KH: Is that why you say yes so much?

DM: Yes. I tell them, use me, abuse me. I said, I'm pretty well connected. If I don't know, I probably know somebody that does know whatever that issue is. I'm kind of respected. I didn't fall off the turnip truck. Trust me, nobody showed me when I was on the city council absconding with any money. In fact, I paid more money in than I made. But I mean, come on, use the people. First, identify what it is that you see as a problem. Then let's figure out a solution or an alternative, and then how do we engage? It drives me crazy that none of the systems are doing anything to engage my kids, the kids that look like me. The school system is failing our kids, as the data shows. The social service agencies, I'm not exactly sure what they're doing that's helping. The city, I'm trying to figure out how we're engaging all of the stuff we got.

[02:26:00]

DM: Public works. I just look at the different departments in the city. We've talked about Parks and Rec, but you got public works, you've got the water. People are talking about climate change. Do we have kids dealing with the climate issue? How's it helping in the sewer system going through our neighborhood? I mean, it may not sound big, but is it impacting our water? Has anyone looked at it? I mean, those are the kinds of things. Are people thinking about how we are building a healthy environment to raise people in, or to even have people that are here to live in a healthy environment, both mentally, physically, socially, economically? How do we make that healthy? And those are the things that I think. I don't know. Did I answer your question?

KH: Yes. Yes, you did. Thank you so much, Debbie, for answering all of my questions today. I so appreciate your time, and I know you are in high demand.

DM: Like I say, Oxford was the beginning. That's where I started. And, I mean, that's all we had at the time up here, was Oxford. And so, it was the starting point of everything that I've done.

KH: Wow. That's an excellent closer.

[END OF INTERVIEW]