

PEARLENE OLIVER INTERVIEW, SUMMER 1992, TRANSCRIPT 4

INTERVIEWER: Marjory Whitelaw
INTERVIEWEE: Pearlene Oliver

Whitelaw: What am I going to do? I'm going to identify this tape. This is tape four, side A, of the interview with Pearlene Oliver, who is going a breeze this morning. She's talking up a storm.

Oliver: (Laughter) Yes, she really is.

Whitelaw: We've just had a little break, and now Pearlene is going to - She's just been telling me that along with the work that she did with the women in the black churches - You talk about it, Pearlene.

Oliver: Well, I did everything that came to hand. If I had an extra hour, I filled it. You see, I didn't have many idle moments. Now, the only thing I did for myself was to take a few piano lessons. I did that in order to be able to play for the girls and whatnot. I taught myself everything else about piano. Today, I can take just about any music, any church music and play it. I had a very lovely person in Betty Snow, who would be the daughter of Snow's Undertaking - people.

Whitelaw: Yes, and you're getting off the track. I want you to talk about what you just said to me, that you were trying - oh, somebody at the door.

Oliver: It might be my son.

Whitelaw: Now, hang on. What you said, Pearlene, was that you acted as a kind of missionary to the white people in Halifax.

Oliver: Ambassador, I said.

Whitelaw: Ambassador. I'm sorry, ambassador, right. I'd like to hear about that. Now, you come a little closer.

Oliver: Well, one of the - this was thrust upon me right from the very beginning, public speaking. And there weren't too many women doing public speaking back there in the thirties, you know. So, here I am now, with the nurses and -

Whitelaw: Surely by now, we're in the forties.

Oliver: Yes, but I started in the thirties. And there wasn't that many women going out and doing public speaking. They might have done it in their own little group, but not for conventions and things. So, I sort of got a name

for public speaking because of the work that I did, speaking to anyone that would listen about the discrimination and the problem with getting our girls in the hospital. And schoolbooks, and other things that were bothering us because of our colour and whatnot. So, there were many people who wanted to hear it, and anyone, any church group or any womens group that wanted to find out what in the world was going on, because they didn't, half them, didn't even think about it, didn't know. They called me up and asked me if I'd be their speaker at their annual meeting, or I'd go to a convention and speak. Well then, I would say, "Yes." I travelled around through the Maritimes quite a bit. Sometimes they'd send a car for me. Then I also got on boards where I thought I felt cast a little influence for good. One was the Maritime Girls Workboard. I thought, "Well, that's right in our convention", and where I was busy working with the girls, I thought that this would be something that I could cast an influence and open a few eyes, and maybe make some friends. And then I was asked by the Baptist Convention to be one of their representatives on the board for the girls home at Truro. And it was just to be for two years, but I ended up by doing six. So, for six years, I was a member of the board of the girls home in Truro. I'd go down there once a month, and usually there was somebody from the Salvation Army, or Doctor Cumming then. He was the chairperson, I think, so he would pick me up. And then we'd have a Salvationist, and Judge Hudson.

Whitelaw: Judge Elliott Hudson, I remember him, yes.

Oliver: And so I'd go down there, and then there'd be things I'd have to do as a member of the board. I was doing it, not to promote myself, but to let them know that I'm black, and that we can do these things, eh? And to open their eyes just a little wider because it was pretty narrow back there in those days. And then I did quite - I had a great friend in Abby Lane -

Whitelaw: Right.

Oliver: And whatever, whenever Abby - somebody didn't show up for her broadcasts, not quite, not too regularly, but three or four times I remember, she would call me. And she'd say, "Will you come in today." I would go in and talk with her on the radio. That got me known. Anything - on boards, women, especially if it was for women and girls -

Whitelaw: Abby Lane was a famous broadcaster, woman - Wasn't she Mayor of Halifax at one time? She was an alderman.

Oliver: No, she was the - oh, what do you -

Whitelaw: Deputy.

Oliver: Deputy Mayor.

Whitelaw: Deputy Mayor, yes.

Oliver: She never got to be mayor.

Whitelaw: She never got to be mayor, but she was Deputy Mayor of Halifax.

Oliver: Yes, and she was a broadcaster.

Whitelaw: And she did a great deal of work on public affairs at various times concerning the City. She was a controversial figure in many ways.

Oliver: And she was my friend.

Whitelaw: Yes.

Oliver: Whenever there was an opening to speak on race or anything like that, well, she'd always get me to come and do it. She'd say, "Well, we've got another opening." She made openings for me to speak on that. And whenever she asked me to come on the radio to be interviewed, we'd always - She'd ask me, "How's the racial situation? How are you getting along?" You know, blah, blah, blah.

Whitelaw: Were you considered to be a - You were considered to be an activist, a militant activist?

Oliver: Not militant, but somebody willing to speak out. There were many people who knew this, but either because they didn't think they could do it - which they could if they, once they start - but who didn't want to expose it. See, they, you know -

Whitelaw: I understand.

Oliver: Yes. They didn't want to talk about it. But I felt, myself, once I came to the realization that, "This is not our fault" - I was just a girl when I had to figure that out - because I thought we had done something terribly bad to be so badly treated. You know, like criminals or something.

Whitelaw: The sins of the fathers are visited upon the children.

Oliver: Yes, and I thought, I thought, you know, "Why, why is it no one wants to live near us? Why is it no one wants us to come to church with them?" And things like that. You see, we had segregated churches, still have. "What is

wrong with us? We're God's children, and we're all serving the same heavenly father." So, when I came to the conclusion that it wasn't our fault, then I could always hit, dig!

Whitelaw: Then Doctor Oliver began to work, I think again part time, for adult education, for the Department of Adult Education. Guy Henson, who was the -

Oliver: It started with Guy.

Whitelaw: Yes, who was a leader in that field.

Oliver: Yes.

Whitelaw: In fact, some of the women that I have interviewed, also were working with him. Muriel Duckworth for one, and Evelyn Garbary was another.

Oliver: I didn't do the work, the type of work that Bill did because he had a different approach, and he met a wider audience. I went wherever there was an opportunity, and whenever I was asked. I seldom ever said, "No." I figured if they wanted me, they must know. Some I'd have to work harder than others, I'd have to work on the speech and things like that.

Whitelaw: I'd like to just fill it in a little bit because it's useful information, what he did with the Adult Education Department.

Oliver: Oh yes, he went there when there was nothing, and the reason Bill went on, was because of Guy and because of Father - ah Coady?

Whitelaw: Father Coady, the Antigonish Movement of the -

Oliver: Yes, the Antigonish - They were bringing in Africans and West Indians, you know, and working with them. And I think they were beginning to see, "Well, there are black people in Nova Scotia. Who's working with them?" You know, they were downtrodden.

Whitelaw: This is the famous Antigonish Movement, the Cooperative Movement.

Oliver: Yes, yes, yes.

Whitelaw: Stemming from Saint Francis Xavier University at Antigonish.

Oliver: Yes, and they wanted to get - They weren't doing anything with the Nova Scotian in the field of education, adult education. And they wanted to get at it because they knew it was a raw field. You know, there was nothing

ever done. They asked Bill if he would come in. And what they would do, Bill would take them into the communities, and any time he had to go himself, they would give him mileage. That's all he - he didn't have a salary then, just mileage.

Whitelaw: Oh.

Oliver: But he was glad to get them in there to do this work which had to be done. So, especially Guy Henson, he and Guy were very close and very friendly. All of the men, he got along great with all of them and they all appreciated him.

Whitelaw: You mentioned the other day how many community, black communities there were around the Province.

Oliver: We have 24. When we say black communities, we judge them by the church. See, if there's a black church, we feel the community around them - It might only be four, five families, but if they have a church of their own, we call them a community. At that time, there were 24. Now, there might not be quite 24 today because they've been, they've been -

Whitelaw: Amalgamating?

Oliver: Yes, the blacks have been able to get out and buy homes on a wider scale. They don't have to all just build right around - We have many examples of that, where they're completely integrated in living, but there are little black churches still there, see. And maybe some white people might come to it, but it's still part of the - When we say African Association, it has nothing to do with Africa.

Whitelaw: No, I know.

Oliver: It's the name that the first British and whatnot, settlers in Nova Scotia, when we came here, they just called us Africans, see? So, we had to have our church because we weren't permitted in the white churches. Now, when I grew up in Cooks Cove, we were the only family there, one of two, so we were part of the Church of England. All of - myself included - we were all christened in the Church of England. But then when we moved away from that into a predominantly black community, we didn't go to the Church of England.

Whitelaw: Now, we covered this the first day.

Oliver: Yes. But the community of the black church, why we had the black church, they had to have it because they weren't welcome. But I feel today this is part of our history, but that we should integrate.

- Whitelaw: This is something interesting. You would like to see the black churches integrate with white churches.
- Oliver: I think we have to have a move in the field of integration. We're predominantly Baptist, but this would apply to all the denominations, although they do have a family or two in all the different - Catholics and whatnot. But, what I would like to see is not the black church done away with, nor white churches where made up mostly perhaps of elderly people who would not be comfortable. Let them stay the way they are. But I think we need to organize and integrate a church. Let the black ones stay if they feel uncomfortable and feel they couldn't worship - do the same things. And the whites who would not be comfortable. But I want to see a group like myself, white and black come out, and whether you're Baptist or Church of England or what, let's have an integrated - There are many black people who would like to go to a white church, who would like to go, but they feel they would not be welcome and they don't go. And it's a terrible thing when you have church - and likewise, there are many white people who know of our black churches, they might feel they would not be welcome, and they don't come. I think it's, I think it's, it's an insult to our God for us, after all these hundreds of years, to be segregated. I think if we have a God, and we are one in the creator, we should without injuring the little black church or the white people who are comfortable, let them stay that way, but I think there should be a group that would come out - and I'd love to see that before I leave this earth - a group who believe in integration. Well, I'm saying Baptist because I've been a Baptist, but I think Church of England too. And let us, let us, let people know you're welcome, whether you're brown, you're white, you're black. Come to us. But many black people today who go to white church, go and sit way down in the back. They might say, "I don't know whether I'm welcome here or not." They might say, "Oh, we're glad you came today", or something. But I couldn't, now, and I'm pretty strong, but there are very few white Baptist churches that I could go in - I don't know one - and feel that they would say, "Oh, we'd love to have you for a member." There's not one that I can think of. Therefore, I think it's the same with the whites and the blacks. They feel, "Well, they wouldn't want us there." Therefore, I would like to see an integrated - and let it be known -
- Whitelaw: How do other Baptists feel about this, because I'm sure you talk about it, Pearlene.
- Oliver: No, it's a very delicate situation. I don't even mention it - I'm sure there are many blacks who will be mad at me, angry with me for saying this because they want to stay by themselves. See, that's the one thing they got

by themselves.

Whitelaw: That's their one thing.

Oliver: That's their leadership, see? But I think that they can let them keep that until they understand better. I think there's a need for that, there's a need for that, even today. And there's a need for the whites, especially the older ones, not the younger whites, not too many of them, but the older ones, who are more comfortable just - But I think we need a new system. And let them stay that way. I'm not saying - don't do away with them because God understands. But I feel that we need - and I'm sure the Lord is leading us this way, even for women. There are many of our women who go and sit down and get no office and do all the work, and they never open their mouths. I think it's time for the women to be called into leadership. If I had a daughter - I have a granddaughter, and if she keeps - this little one that I'm talking about - she's very much like her grandmother. I'm going to start taking her to church pretty soon, and I'd like to see her become an ordained minister because she's got the drive, and she's got the voice, and she's only 12 months, 14 months. I'm not kidding you. And she looks at you. As I say. When I come in, she just goes right to me. She'll leave her father, leave her mother. No, but I'm just saying, there's something about that child, and as long as I'm alive, I'm going to try to steer her into spiritual things. She'll have to decide, and God will have to call her, just as I was.

Whitelaw: Has there ever been a black woman minister?

Oliver: No.

Whitelaw: There has been in the States.

Oliver: Oh yes, of course, they're ahead of us in everything. And they have integrated the church, even the States have their integrated churches, and they also have their segregated churches. But they have, you know, that - Yes, in the States, they have many women who are ordained. We have two that graduated this year, an Aretha Borden and Tracy Gross, our first two theologues who have graduated from the Divinity College. Now, they have to do a term of one year, giving leadership in the church. And it's not going to be too easy for women, black women, to get that year. They've got to go into a church, be called to a church under the supervision of an older person, and give leadership there before they can be ordained.

Whitelaw: Do black men tend to be - well, it's an old-fashioned term now - chauvinistic about what women, you know, regarding women?

- Oliver: Not as much as white men.
- Whitelaw: Oh, really?
- Oliver: No.
- Whitelaw: That's interesting.
- Oliver: Well, this is my own impression. I would think that the black men - because we are a matriarchal, the blacks are a matriarchal, and they look towards the women, although there is a need for them to - The women realize this, and they push the men into leadership. And they're glad to do that because they were almost completely destroyed by slavery, eh? Where the female black, working in the home - but the male black was almost destroyed, and we know that. And personally, speaking for myself, if I'm in a church and there's a man and he's got ability and leadership and he wants an office, I'll do anything to get that man in that office, even to getting a woman out. Because our men need to be helped more than our women, I think.
- Whitelaw: One of the things that is characteristic of the Nova Scotia black community is their pretty consistent lack of a leader. They've needed leadership, and from time to time somebody has come to the fore - I'm thinking of Rocky Jones, for example - who looked very promising when he was a young man. And everybody knows Rocky's story. I never thought of your husband as primarily a political leader, he was much more of a religious leader.
- Oliver: Well, he was - now there, you see, we haven't had too many, but for the times in our history, God always raised up a secular leader when the need, when the need was there. Like Mr James A.R. Kinney, he became a terrific leader in the building of the coloured home for children. Because our children weren't permitted into the other homes, they had to go to the asylum. They'd put all the babies, little black babies -
- Whitelaw: There was the Home for Coloured Children out on the Dartmouth side of the harbour.
- Oliver: Yes, now, it's integrated.
- Whitelaw: Now, it's integrated - about time!
- Oliver: Yes. But Mr - they keep the name, historic - but Mr Kinney, to me, was the leader that I recall of that generation.
- Whitelaw: That would be in the thirties, in the twenties?
- Oliver: The teens. He was an accountant, and a very brilliant, a

very brilliant man. He was a mulatto. He took over the building of the coloured home. Now, we are a church led people, you see, from slavery. And our leadership has come up. The church has led the people, the black church. That's why I said, the day now for that need has gone, and we should be thinking about integration. But in the beginning, it was the church who bred the leaders, and who who gave them a chance to lead in the little black church. And brought forth wonderful leaders, most of them became ordained. Many of our early leaders were not trained ministers, like in most of the olden days. They didn't go to the universities to be trained, in fact, Bill was the first one to come out with a degree. Now, that's why he was different. He was not only trained as a leader for his people, that calling came to him, but he was also educated and had worked in the secular. He could work with all groups of people, see, so I would say, he was 50/50. He was called spiritually, but he was also - See, he could talk with, he could meet with anyone.

- Whitelaw: But there hasn't been, other than your husband, in the last 20, 25, 30 years, there hasn't really been a leader in the black community. Or has there? Am I missing someone?
- Oliver: Well, there are leaders and leaders. You know, even amongst whites, you have one that will, one politician that will stand out, eh? Mr Trudeau. I don't know, you're probably Conservative now.
- Whitelaw: I'm not, never been a Conservative. (Laughter)
- Oliver: Well, it doesn't matter. They're good people too. But you take Mr Trudeau, I think it's going to be a long time before the Liberals are going to get anybody like Mr Trudeau, see?
- Whitelaw: Yes.
- Oliver: So even in politics, there are leaders and there are leaders. And in the black community, there has been - I don't think the need is going to be as great for this generation and the new century that's coming, for what it was in the past centuries. Because the church was all we had. Today, our young - you take Rocky now, he's a lawyer -
- Whitelaw: Is he a lawyer now?
- Oliver: Yes, he's got his degree. I don't know whether he's been admitted to the bar, but yes, he's a lawyer. He's fifty, but he's got it. But there won't be this need today because we're getting doctors, medical doctors. My granddaughter's an MD, you know. So, we're - what I meant by that, we're getting leaders now, in other -

- Whitelaw: The need is different.
- Oliver: Yes, and therefore, I don't think the church, the black church - this thought just came to me - I don't think the black church is going to be looked to to give the leadership. When Bill came on the scene in '36, he came educated. Mr Kinney was still here, and he worked with Mr Kinney, who was a lay person. Then when Mr Kinney died, well, Bill was about the only educated person, until some of the newer ministers came in. You know, they didn't have the education, and they just couldn't do the things that an educated person knows how to do. So, I don't think the need, especially in the twenty-first century, I hope and pray to God it will not be, the need will not be there that we're going to have to -
- Whitelaw: But you've also had a number of what I would call, self-appointed leaders, who haven't always worked out very well.
- Oliver: No, the field was vacant, and when there's a vacuum - and the self-appointed ones, I have never had to work with them, but they have to do their own thing, I suppose.
- Whitelaw: Do you want to talk about Daryl Gray, who is the latest of the self-appointed leaders?
- Oliver: Well, I'm not going to talk about him. You know, I'm not going to be - No, I wouldn't do that, but I wish he'd go back to the States. (Laughter) No, I don't believe we need trouble. I think we're out of the woods. We're not lost, we see the road. Let us get on it, let's go. But when we were lost, we needed somebody there yelling at us and telling us, "Come out of that", you know, "You're lost, you're going to get hurt there." But we're out of the woods now, and I don't see the need today for that. I'm talking about integration, complete.
- Whitelaw: Do you think it's achievable in our time? This means mixed marriages.
- Oliver: Oh, I've got so many in my own family now. Oh yes, my son is married to -
- Whitelaw: Is he?
- Oliver: Yes, he's married to an English girl.
- Whitelaw: To an English girl?
- Oliver: Yes, and she's beautiful. That was her I was just talking about. And this little granddaughter, you see, we're compelled to look at this. In my family, I've got interracial children. Lauren, her mother's white, and Nathaniel, my dear beloved little grandson -

Whitelaw: His mother is white.

Oliver: Well, she's the same mother. See, so I've had to come to grips with this.

Whitelaw: Did you have a hard time accepting this?

Oliver: No, not accepting it, no, because we told our sons when they became of age and went to university, we talked to them about girls, what not to do - what to do and what not to do. We said to them, "When you go to get married - when you go with a girl and you get involved with that girl, before you go too far, you'd better make sure that's the girl you want to marry." You see, that's the way we put it to them. Because if anything happens, you're going to marry that girl, so you'd better make sure that's the girl you want to marry. And they realized that we meant business, that we weren't going to have any little children all over the place, running around, you know, calling us grandparents - that we didn't know about. And we told them, you marry. If you get to the stage, whether she's Chinese, Japanese, White, Indian, when you reach that stage where you're into sex and what not - we told them that when they were old enough, they probably knew all this anyway - if anything happens, you're going to marry that girl, if you do it, if she wants you. So, they knew that. We had to do that because we weren't going to have them running around, you know. We didn't want those kind of sons, and all our boys respected the girls they went out with. Now, the only one that's interracial in there - Oh, but my grandchildren! I'm a great grandmother, eh? And I have a granddaughter that's interracially married to a French gentleman, and my three great grandchildren are completely French. That's why I've got - we're compelled to think what I'm saying. Circumstances make you alter old opinions, and when my great grandchildren come - I've got one that's getting married - great grandson that's going in the [C ---], so you can see how old he is. And he's completely bilingual, they're completely bilingual. But when they come here to visit me, English is never on that TV. They just turn that on and it's all French. I have to sit down with them and say, "What are they saying now?" I do that. They listen to that at the French movies. And I'll say, "What are they saying?" "Oh nanny, they said this." They'll interpret it in English to me, then they'll go right back to French.

Whitelaw: Now, [C --] is a community college.

Oliver: My oldest great grandson is going into [C----]

Whitelaw: The tape is at the end again.