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Interview no. 936

Estine Davis

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Estine Davis Interview on November 9, 1998

by Christine Navarro

KN: Good morning. I would like to begin with a couple of question about your background, where were you born?

ED: I was born in Pendleton Texas. The city is located between Roy and Temple Texas. The county seat is Belton. I was born December 5, 1933. My father's name was Clark Hill, and my mother's name was Bulah May Mitchell Hill. My parents were born in Devella Texas. They were classmates when they first met.

KN: When did you first move to the El Paso area?

ED: I came here when I was six years old, with my eldest brother Clark Hill Jr. and my sister's Ester May and Viola Walker along with her husband. I moved to El Paso because of the CCC, which was initiated by President Roosevelt. The CCC chose various people in order to prevent them from being on welfare.

KN: The responsibilities on your brother were tremendous...

ED: My brother's responsibilities were tremendous because my mom passed away during childbirth. Eventually three brothers were qualified to enter into the CCC. I have four brothers, Clark Hill Jr., Tommy Hill, Ezekiel Hill, and Boston Hill. One brother went into the Army, one in the Navy, and one worked

KN: Did you attend Douglas School?

ED: I did attend Douglas School. My first grade teacher's name was Francell Wallace. I loved her. There was always so much

sand and dust it would become bitter cold. My hand would be freezing. She would take my hands and warm them, to make sure I stayed warm. We didn't have gas heating; we had steam heat from the basement. Ms. Wallace was a lovely person because of her compassion. She always encouraged students to learn.

KN: Besides your first grade teacher, were there any other experiences that you can recall that impacted you life?

ED: I was very tiny and I had a sister who was very tall. One day my sister wasn't there to defend me. So children would pick on me because of my height. There was one student who weighed about one hundred and forty-five pounds and about six one. I just tore her up one day. I don't really even recall why. Maybe I was just tired of being picked on. During that time Mrs. McCall was the principal at Douglas. She said, "I'm glad to see you whip her. You've been running and running, so this time I wasn't going to say anything. I'm proud of you!" I loved Ms. McCall. Another experience was with Ms. Minnie Moore; she was my teacher at Douglas. I suffer from asthma and am unable to play in the grass. One day we went on a picnic and one of the students told Ms. Moore, " You let Estine get away with murder, with her bad talking." She replied, "No I don't let Estine get away with murder." They said, "Yes you do, you let her do anything she wants to." She replied, "Well, if that's what I let her get away with then go ahead and cuss

them again." Everybody just fell out laughing. We proceeded to take a hayride, and Ms. Moore asked me, " Do you think you can stand the hay?" I told her I was going to try, however I began to sneeze. The students said, "there you go with your baby again." She replied, " Give them another."

KN: What do you remember about you early childhood experiences with your family ?

ED: My parents and grandparent had their own farm in Devella Texas. We would be taken out of school, while it was in session, to assist our parents. We would go to help our grandparents with the work on the farm. One grandmother had her own store. She sold eggs, ice cream and things like that. She was off highway eighty, in those days it was the main highway. We would help turn the ice cream freezer to keep everything running for her. This is the reason they (Ms. McCall) would let us do various jobs to help our family out.

KN: Did working on the farm aggravate your asthma?

ED: You do what you have to do. You just do it. My grandmother would give me an herbal tea. The tea was made from the hooves of calves. Then she would mix some other herbs in and give it to me to drink. When you drank the tea it caused some type of reaction that made you spit up the mucous.

KN: Your experiences on the farm sounded like they were long days.

ED: My experiences on the farm were filled with long days and hard work. We had fun too. There were ten of us and it was fun. Our dolls came from the flour sacks. You have the prints on the sack and when the flour was used up you would tear it open to make a doll. We didn't have a lot of dolls. My aunts and uncles would use a cream on their face and we would use the containers for our dishes and toys. It was something to look forward to. When they finished with the cream we would take the containers and make our mud pies. On the weekends when we finished working we would go to church. We would have fish fry's on Saturday's. They would cook enough food to take to church and have a picnic. We would put thing together and family and friends would join in the festivities.

KN Eleven years of age, that is so young to have so much responsibility. Did it phase you?

ED I never was the type of person to mix and mingle with other young ladies my age. I don't know why. I was always like that. I was that way with my sisters and brothers. I loved them but I was more loving to my brothers. I don't know why. Maybe because my mother passed away, and I was closer to my father. I got along fine with my sisters but I never was as close to them as I was with my brothers.

KN: Do you remember what the "little jobs" were and who arranged them?

ED: Ms. McCall arranged various jobs for me to earn money for my family. One job I had was shining shoes on Oregon and Second Street, I was around eight or nine years old. My little friend, Austin Tubbs, and I would go shine shoes on Saturday's. I would beat them out and they [other boys] always wanted to get at me. We would catch the trolley and ride down there. There were no buses at that time. I had regular customers. I think they knew what I was a girl. I would act like a boy. I would put my hair up. I felt like shining shoes was a boy's job. I would put a straw hat on my head-so they wouldn't think that I was a girl. So they would come to me even though they were rough-I knew how to ignore that. I thought boys would get more attention to shine shoes. Maybe they thought that boys could shine shoes better. When I learned how, they all knew that I was a girl but they still let me shine their shoes.

KN Your experiences on the trolley car...?

ED When we rode the trolley car, we had to go to the back of the car. We could not stay in the front-we paid our nickel fare and went to the back. My experience on the trolley car I could stand, but I had a little neighbor that I played with-a little Spanish girl-her name was Olivia. We played together just fine until on Sunday when her relatives would come over to her house-then I got to be a "nigger." I was about seven or eight years of age. We played together all

week until that weekend when her relatives would come.

One day I just got tired of hearing that name-and I plowed into her too. She was the only one that would call me that name-her family would not. I think her family was responsible for the name calling-I don't think the child would suddenly change her attitude-to name calling. I continued to play with her. I don't seem to get angry and let my emotions stay that way. I played with her until she began going to Bell School and I stayed at Douglas School.

KN What were the conditions like at Douglas School? I've heard stories about textbooks or lack of books, they were used..

ED The textbooks at Douglas were older books coming from the white schools, there no use calling them Caucasian. We called them white then. We got their books, all books came from them. You could see the various names written inside the books. We would be so glad to get one halfway clean. We would fight over that book. Some of the backs were torn off. They had brown paper then-they would be covered with the brown paper. One of my very beautiful teachers was named Ms.Desboine. (When they first built the coliseum)-her husband Mr. Desboine knew I was good in art-he asked me if I wanted to go into that. Maybe it would help me out with getting a scholarship when I finished at Douglas High School. I said "Yes, I will try." He said if I would try, he would make sure I get something.

I went into Mexico to study art-I was never too afraid-
they said things about Mexico.

KN: What did they say happened in Mexico during those times?

ED: They said that they would pick you up and put you in jail.
Be careful because of your race. My first drawing was of
an old house-I would sit on the sidewalk and draw. The
house caught my attention. It was something for me to do.
Mr. Desboine would come back to check on me, to make sure I
was all right. (Confusion on whether she was discussing
Mexico or the United States) We used to get our shoes with
stamps. Our family would be given so many stamps to use.
We would go to Mexico to get shoes. We would also get our
brown sugar and white sugar from Mexico. It is not as
sweet as the sugar here. We would get a lot of our meats
from there. My sisters, my brother Boston, and I would go
there and get what we needed. I've just never been a scary
cat about doing whatever I had to do. I never paid too
much attention to name calling-we used name too. That was
never a problem with me. The only time I would really be
afraid is when we would go back down through Texas, where
my grandparents lived to help with the harvest and to help
with the store. We would get name-calling from people who
would drink a lot. They would use being drunk as a reason
to use name-calling. As if they were in their right mind
they would not name call. I would think, "Oh, now you did
that because that's what you wanted to do!" That was the

worst experience that I ever had. My grandparents told us-
I had one very famous grandmother and one very famous
uncle, on my grandfather's a mother's parent.

KN: You mention a famous grandmother and famous uncle, what
were their experiences or why did you refer to them as
famous?

ED: One of my aunts-Harrizetta-she led quite a few blacks out
of slavery; she even lost her finger. They [blacks] had
very various names. They didn't have names like we have. A
lot of the names would be after the "boss man." People
don't like to discuss it. My grandparents came out of
Louisiana. (stop tape due to interruption) They [relatives]
go a lot "taken off" of them. My uncle got one of his toes
taken for running and taking food from the boss man's
house-to get them some food to eat instead of the usual
leftovers and scraps. He worked in the big house. A lot of
people would think nothing, but they weren't giving up
their rights to do things. Like to learn how to make
pillows-they would get pillows from the house and take it
to them so they could see how they are made. Somewhere they
go^f materials. A lot of our pillows were made of straw and
not cotton. If we got any cotton, we got the cotton from
the gin that they left part of the seeds in. That would be
very rough, because all the seeds were not out. So we would
pick seeds out in order to make quilts, and pillows.

KN How did this effect your uncle's life?

ED I guess I got some of his outlook-he said that he would rather die knowing that he could help his people do better in life. That's the way he looked at it. I had one aunt on my father's sisters -she had a black husband. She didn't have children by him-she would go into the big house and work for them. Her name was Vivian. The boss man ran her husband off and took her into the big house to help out his wife and his children. He ended up letting her stay there and he went with her as well. She had three girls and one boy by the boss man. His wife was still alive at that time. My aunt lived in the house. My grandmother helped raise the children, they didn't live in the big house. When she passed-I was so young-and I did and didn't want to believe it happened. I was knocked off my feet. She had their[boss man's] color but her hair was like mine.

KN: Why were you "knocked off your feet?"

ED: I just didn't think it could have happened. Your hear stories about these things, but remain skeptical. It wasn't by her choice. Her husband being run off was the best thing that could have happened-because then she had a job. To help herself and my grandmother. Now my grandfather on my father's side-now I don't know how he got to be a heel.

He was a wetback from Mexico. He married my grandmother. Her name was Rachel-she was the one with the store. The one who had the farm was Hattie. Hattie was a very , very sweet lady. I loved my grandmother on my father's side but I don't know what it was about my grandmother in the country-there was a bond between us. That was my mom's mother. I don't know if it was because she was so tiny. I look back now-I am tiny. Most say that is who I look like, my grandmother on my mother's side. She was very soft spoken. She had thirteen kids. She treated all of us so good. I could always picture her a little bit different than I could my grandmother on my father's side. My grandmother on my father's side was in the city and that's what we called her, city grandmother. We called the other one the country grandmother.

Another experience my brother, and my sister, and I had was a truckload of whites-we don't know where they were coming from-they were hollering and laughing, and throwing bottles. My sister and my brother wanted to stay on the highway and I said, "No, we're not. You don't know what they will do to you." "Let's go through the woods," and that is when I learned that there were wild turkeys and wild geese. We put them on our farm. I think that if we had stayed on the highway we would have gotten killed. My sister and I would have gotten raped or something. I was around ten. My dad asked why I did it? I was always told to

beware. I would see the pictures with the fingers cut off. My grandmother always had various pictures of her family- and whatever she could get from her brothers and sisters. She kept those family books. I wish I could have gotten my hands on them but my older sister got them. When she went into the rest home, I asked if she could give me some of those pictures so I could write a book about them. But I never got my hands on too many of them.

My aunt (and I can still picture this) had her fingers chopped off for what called stealing. She would take a chicken to feed her family. They called that stealing. Especially if the boss lady told them, "yes, you can take it." Then when the boss man came in half-mad about something, she would tell him they stole a chicken. The white women had a hard time, people don't believe it, but they did. They did. They (the master) had the mistress-a white lady-and then the maids were the black women. They knew what was going on.

KN You were almost living in two communities, were their tremendous differences?

ED: There were a lot of differences in the two communities being in the country and the city. My teachers told my father that he would have to let us stay here-my brother, and my sister, and I. They said you must let them stay here because taking them out is bad for their schooling. Is there something we can do to help you to keep from

taking them away from school? Then the little jobs started. I missed going to the farm. Going there stopped when I reached the eighth grade. My trips to the farm stopped. I was in the ninth or tenth grade. My brother quit school and went into the army because he didn't want to keep going back and forth. He went to the army to help us out.

KN: How did you make up all the schoolwork that you missed?

ED: We could never really make up all the time we missed at school. After they gave me various little jobs, I put myself through summer school. I did that for three years. I was about fifteen when that began. I would do ironing and work at the nursery. I would do various jobs. I cleaned a lady's house on Hays Street. I'll never forget her. I thought they would feed me. She was a sickly lady and wanted someone to do small chores like cleaning the bathroom and doing laundry. All her husband's things went to the laundry. I don't know why she didn't send her things too. I did that on Saturday's. I began getting hungry so I said, "I think I need something to eat." She said, "Yes, Ill fix you something to eat." She fixed me a lettuce and tomato sandwich, I had never heard of that before. Tomato and lettuce between bread. I'll never forget that.

Then I had an experience getting on the bus.-we went in back- that was when they had opened Ft. Bliss. I got on

the bus and there were two or three white soldiers on the bus. The soldiers-in uniform-told me. "All niggers go to the back!" The bus driver said "I don't see why she can't stay here because she is not sitting anyway. Why can't she just stand?" They made a little song about it and sang it until I got tired of hearing it and got off the bus-on and walked home. Shortly after that buses were integrated. The bus driver couldn't protect me all the way home. The driver was a white man. They could have blamed their actions on drinking and all, so I just got off to avoid their abuse. Why should I have stayed on the bus and get abused? So I got off and walked. Walking wasn't going to kill me. I had walked before. So, I walked.

KN: Do you remember how you felt?

ED: I was hurt. But I was tired more than anything, and eating that lettuce and tomato sandwich didn't help any. I thought walking would be better than taking a chance on something else happening. One time it happened again-I got off the bus. There was a black soldier who followed me. He asked if he could give me a ride and I told him "yes." He asked are you tired? And I said "Yes, I'm pretty tired." He said, "I don't know where you live, can you show me?" I said, "Yes-just continue straight on." I began thinking I made a bad mistake, I should not have accepted this ride. He began talking to me and asked, "Are we almost home?" I said, "Yeah, just about six or seven

more blocks." He said, "I don't think I'm going that way. I think I'm going to take you to the boon docks." My parents always told us to beware of things and situations like this. And to always have a fingernail file. We didn't have emery boards, we had small steel files. I just took it out. When he said that I said, "No, I don't want to go there!" He said, "oh, yes you will." I said, "No, I won't!" He asked, "what makes you think you won't?" I said, "Well, I'll tell you what you do, you just try and turn around." He started turning the car around and I started stabbing him. I don't remember where I hit him. He told me, "Get the hell out of my car!" I said, "Thank you." But I didn't care because he wasn't going to take me anywhere.

In high school once I went to a basketball game with three of my girlfriends. We went to Las Cruces to watch the game. I was in my second year of high school. I dated a young man named Goldie. He had a car. All four of us girls got into the car and went to see the team play. Then we noticed a little leaning of the car, and he said, "Oh, golly we have a flat tire." One of the guys said, "You know what we said that we are going to do?" "All four of us guys and all four of you girls." I said, "No, it won't be this girl!" He said, "Well, you can't walk back to El Paso!" I said, "like hell, I can't." They said, "where are you going?" I said, "I'm going," and we walked all the way

back to El Paso. I was not going to stay out there all night. I was the last one home. I saw everyone to their house because I lived past all their homes. I believe we returned home around five or six in the morning. My sister just did not allow me to stay out like that. I wasn't going to stay there.

KN: Was your sister the disciplinary figure?

ED: She told me that I did what I was supposed to do.

(reflection)

KN: Did you attend Douglas High School?

ED: I went to Douglas for grade school and high school.

KN: Were you able to go to the theatre?

ED: We went to a theatre downtown. We went to a theater on Alameda Street, called the Alcazar. We also went to the Crawford theatre occasionally. Not even the Spanish went there all the time no matter what they said. The Spanish had two schools to attend; Bell and Zabada. Most of them didn't finish high school. They did well, if they were able to finish the sixth grade. They know that they are a different race than white, but they didn't want to be with us, because they knew their complexion was different. They were a class of people who were afraid to get away from their own type of language and the way they ^{are} ~~ere~~ living. They want to keep to themselves-they think that is the best way of life, instead of patterning themselves away from whites. Why not? Like Booker T. Washington said, "Why not

better yourself with their [white] books with the back torn off and their name in the book. Than for you not know how to read or write at all."

KN: What do you think the difference was between Mexicans and African-Americans?

ED: Hispanics didn't see a reason to continue going to school until graduation. We [blacks] saw why we must continue our educational. We count's mingle and mix. There was no communication. As long as we stayed dumb, we knew we would be low on the totem pole-fingers cut off, or thrown in jail or even killed senselessly. The Hispanics are doing that right now. They know it is a "killing process"-you make the money but you can't spend it behind bars.

KN: After high school did you remain in El Paso or did you leave the region?

ED: I got a scholarship to Prairie View-they (Douglas personnel) thought it would help out if I went there for college. But my father couldn't afford to keep me in the dorms. My brother tired to help me out but he wasn't making that much money. Mr. Desboine asked what I could do for myself? He mentioned that I had artistic talent and maybe I should pursue becoming a beautician. He and his wife always stood behind me. Those two people and Ms. Minnie Moore more than anybody was in my life inspired me. I went to a barber college in Tyler Texas.

I went to a beautician school for three months and just hated it because I couldn't stand the gossip. I didn't like that at all. Mr. Desboine said, "Just put up with it. Okay, I've got it. Why not be a barber." So I asked Mr. Morgan and went across the hall to the barber school.

KN: How were you received in barber school?

ED: There were two women in barber school-another older lady and myself. All the time they didn't accept me. I guess it was because I picked up the course very easily. I had never picked up a pair of hand clippers in my life. I had never held a razor. The only thing I held was a razor strap on my behind. I don't know how I did it. I never paid any attention to a man's haircut. I did it and I started cutting hair on Saturdays. Mr. Morgan would pay us on Friday and in the beginning he would take out twenty-five cents for every haircut. But I was able to cut hair at a much quicker rate. He eventually would only take fifteen cents out of every haircut. Mr. Morgan told me that I made him money and so he would make sure I was looked after.

KN: You completed barber school, did you return to El Paso?

ED: Yes, I came back to El Paso and cut hair with my godfather, Roscoe Marlin. I cut hair for them but I couldn't make any money. The black community in El Paso would not accept me as a women barber. Maybe because they were older, I am not real sure. Around 1951, I went to Fort Bliss and cut hair under Samuel McKenzie, who owned a black barbershop. The

guys loved me, they were all blacks. No whites. Once in awhile, you would catch a white captain, or major. Very few enlisted men until 1952 when my white clientele increased.

KN: Did they have a problem with a female cutting their hair?

ED: No. I never thought I made an issue about a woman cutting hair. I had them coming in, because they remembered my name, Estine. Everyone wanted me to change my name due to the fact that I didn't have a middle name. However, Mrs. Desboine and I decided that there was something special behind my name and decided not to change it.