

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt – Part I

Transcript

Lata Murti: [00:00:00] This is kind of your life history in addition to your experience being a, a Black woman or however you choose to identify yourself in, in addition to your experiences on the Central Coast in terms of race and identity, we're also going to ask about your childhood and growing up and the other places that you've lived. So. So I will start by asking where and when you were born.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [00:01:16] Okay. So where I was born in a small. Uh, rural area in Mississippi. In 1955, actually December 30th or 31st or 21st, depending upon who you are speaking to. And I was delivered by a midwife. Back then, in 1955, probably through the sixties, most black babies were born at home, not in hospitals, maybe the doctor's office. There was a black doctor in not in our town, but he was in the nearest city. And I do remember several, several aunts later on, would actually go to his office to have their baby delivered.

Lata Murti: [00:02:29] So what was the name of this small rural town?

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [00:02:33] It's called Bogue Chitto. I'm actually sounding it out for you, but B. O. G. U. E. C. H. I. T. T. O. And it is in South Mississippi. So I was born. I believe it was eight days, I'm going to say eight days after Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on the bus.

Lata Murti: [00:03:12] And so you gave several different dates for your birth date. So.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [00:03:17] I did.

Lata Murti: [00:03:18] So is that because, uh...umm...You know, everything is so, like, we had to fill out paperwork for my kids before they were even born in the hospital. But I'm guessing there wasn't such careful record keeping.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [00:03:35] Well, no. And what I, what I've also discovered is that, um. Well, first of all, because you were delivered by a midwife or at the doctor's office, those records were not as efficient as they should have been. For instance, like,

um, I have a cousin. And she always thought her name was. Kara, K. A. R. A, or C. A. R. A, and on her birth certificate, it is spelled K. A. R. E. N. So then when she discovered that after the age of 18, then that's what she uses. So with me, I was delivered, as I said, by midwife. And when I was delivered, those records were not, and it was in the country. So it's rural Mississippi. In the country, um, the nearest city about 15 miles away. So, then, the birth has to be recorded in the nearest city, which is still the same county. So when my birth was recorded, unbeknownst to me, I always thought that my birth date was December 30th. And then unbeknownst to me, uh, when I got my birth certificate, after the age of 18, it had 12-21-55 on it. And I continued to use, um, 12-30. Until I retired and I realized that I was going to have to go with that 12-21 date for official records. And I actually had to go back and undo some things where I had used 12-30. Also, in speaking with my mother, she tells me that, no, you were born December 31st. So that's why I said, 'Well, it depends upon who you're talking to.' But I stick with the uh. So I decided sort of that I would celebrate all three, three dates. Most often I go with 12-30.

Preston Allen: [00:06:26] So those were the the pre memories for you. That was, you know, but when you started to have memories, what were some of the most, first impressions that you remember about your life? As a child.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [00:06:40] Well, um. I can tell you one that was, uh, significant and traumatic. Is um. I was about five. And I was going to turn six. It was in November and I was going to turn six. In, um, December. And my mother's sister. So maternal aunt. She was killed by her estranged husband. And she had three boys. One being seven. One being a year younger than me, and then a six month old baby. And they actually in terms of I look at it now because we lived on what would just be a long, long continuous street. And, um, if I look at it now. I would say that she probably lived. Maybe. Two blocks. Two blocks from, um, my, our home, which was with my grandparents, my maternal grandmother and grandfather. At the time, my grandfather, he worked on the railroad. He had gone off to work. Because he left before dawn. So he was, he was already gone. And I was at an aunt's house. Don't ask me why. I don't remember. But I was at her house. And she actually lived across the street from her sister, the aunt that was killed. And I remember being on the porch. I had on a dress, was red on the bottom, white on the top, and it had a duck with an umbrella on it. And so I think. It was going to rain or something like that because we, we walked to school.

The black kids walked to school. Except for when it rained and, or if the weather was bad, like we had snow or, uh, sleet. And I remember that the bus, the bus came. There was a lot of commotion. At my aunt's house. And I clearly remember seeing my grandmother trying to get to her towel and a whole bunch of people were holding her back and she was, you know, trying to fight them to get to her. And they were holding her back and they wouldn't, uh, wouldn't let her get to her. Then the bus slowed down like to pick me up. But I just stayed on the porch. And so, um, that's still, that was in 1962. And I still remember that now. Yeah.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [00:10:25] Yeah... Um, another thing that I. You know, it didn't mean anything then, um, I just kind of reflect on things now, is that there was a black section of town. And, uh, a white section of town. And they were clearly they weren't clearly marked. But everyone knew what those areas were. And. If you had a home and you were black, then you lived in the black section of town. And if you were white, then you lived in the white section of town. If you were Native American, and I only recall one Native American family. And as our street ended. It was like a T. And on that corner would have been the, uh, Native American family. And they were pretty much, uh, treated just like black people were. They actually, um, played with. Came to our house, like the kids. They came to our house, uh, played with, uh, an uncle and a couple of cousins. The, uh, matriarch, Native American matriarch of the family. I don't ever remember a dad, but, um, she would come up because eventually we had a phone and she would come up and she would use the, uh, telephone. She would ask to use the telephone. So.

Lata Murti: [00:12:36] So, Lawanda, you, um, you talked a little bit about this--having extended family around. Could you talk some more about your family structure growing up? Who was in your household and who else was in the area or the neighborhood?

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [00:12:54] So I grew up and I was surrounded by. Lots of aunts, uncles, cousins. Um, I would call it the colony. And, um. The center of the colony were my grandparents because I actually lived with my maternal grandparents. In addition to myself, there was a. A cousin, a biological cousin. Who was like almost four years older than me. And then my sister. Who was four years. I was four years older than her. And this is my sister who died in 2020 from COVID. And then, um, the three boys. The three boys whose mother were killed. Then they came to live with us. My

biological cousin, my sister and I. We were adopted by our grandparents. And then the boys, they weren't adopted because I guess it was because when I look back on it, maybe they got their mom's Social Security. And I know it wasn't much. It might have been like 100 bucks a month or something like that, but that may have been why they weren't adopted. I don't know. That's what I'm, I am sort of guessing. But in that household by then, because my grandparents had ten girls and two boys. And my mom was one of those ten girls. So, there were like a couple of the younger kids, from their clan, that were left in the household. With the six of us, but everyone else had gone off. They were married and so forth, and most Black people in the south went north.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [00:15:22] To like, Chicago. Um, next door to my grandparents was their son. He was the oldest of the two boys, so he lived next door with his wife and I think about ten or 11 kids. And then, um. I would say there was a, a farm, like a field in between where you can plant vegetables and so forth. So. And then next to that field was the aunt. My grandparents' daughter, her husband, and I think she had about 13 kids. Then across the street. If you went across the street, was the aunt, uh, who was murdered by her husband. And then if you come back down, there was a family, uh, that lived in a house and they were related to the lady who lived directly across from us. And her name was Ms. Ali (sp.?). And she and my grandmother were best friends. So I saw the cousins and the aunts. And the uncles. Every day. Like we were either at their home, we didn't have a TV. Um, I remember when we got a TV, I couldn't tell you the year, but I remember kind of sneaking off to go to um. The aunt that lived on the same side of the street as we did. Her name was Margaret. She had diabetes and that is eventually what killed her because she suffered from renal failure. Anyway, we she had a TV, so we would sneak to her house a couple of times a week so that we could watch like the Lawrence Welk Show or, you know, something like that.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [00:17:39] And "Hee Haw," [laughs] you know, I kind of remember that, that, um, we would do those type things. But every day, um. I saw the um. The entire clan. I would say, they were either at our house, I, I kind of remember, and I don't know how often we did it. But that back in the South. It's breakfast, dinner, and supper. So lunch is considered dinner. And then supper is considered dinner. If that makes sense. I think I said it right. Dinner is really lunch in California. And then supper, would be dinner in California. Anyway, I do remember for, uh, the dinner, for lunch, that oftentimes the meals would be made together. Um, we would have like, especially, like

during the summer we'd have, uh, mostly protein, but in the form of beans, like black eyed peas, uh, some corn bread. You know, I mean, it was like something healthy to last you until you had supper. And we lived in a, um. We didn't have that room, so it was about, uh, four bedrooms. Well, uh, uh, my grandparents' room would be like what you would consider the family room-bedroom because they had, they had two beds in the room. But there was also, it was also the gathering place where we all gathered and we had a, uh, wood burning stove. And there was a heater like to heat, the, uh, the entire room.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [00:20:06] I guess it would then heat the house. I don't remember being cold. And then for the, uh, kitchen, in the kitchen, we had a, uh, wood burning stove. That we cook the food on. And at the age of eight, I could make, uh, biscuits like a professional. I could actually cook like a professional by the time I was eight. And I didn't cook from a recipe. I would just cook from whatever my grandparents taught me because I do remember, um, my grandfather. He would go off to work. On the, uh, railroad. He was a rail man, uh, which is they made sure the tracks, that those tracks were, um, working properly. So when the train came, there were no problems. Uh, so they repaired the tracks every day. Um, and I actually have a photo of that. I don't--in the photo, I only see black men. I don't see any, uh, white men. And I think it was probably pretty hard labor for them. But they made sure the trains did not rip from the, uh, the rails. Uh. Not being, um, um repairable. They made sure that the rails were always in good shape. But my grandfather, what he would do every day that he went to work, he would need lunch. So, uh, uh, he would have breakfast before he would go to work. And my, um, adopted sister and I. Every day we got up. And we would make the, uh, the, uh

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [00:22:06] breakfast. And it would be for the entire clan. But we would also, he would tell us what he would want in his lunch and how to do it. So it would always be something like, biscuits, maybe some, um. Bacon or like the, um, what do they call it, salt pork, which you boil the, uh, the water so that you can get some of the salt out of the, uh, salt pork. And after it boils and you drain that water, then, um, you put it back in the pan and let it fry and it browns on both sides, um. He liked the sweet potatoes. They would be sliced, so we would slice the, uh, sweet potatoes, fry those, and then you sprinkle it with sugar. So I can specifically re- remember some of those things in the lunch box. And then every day he came back with the lunch box, and

he always left something for us to eat. And we were always excited. Um, poor thing. I wonder. Sometimes I think about it and wonder if maybe he was hungry, but, you know, he made sure that there was something in the lunch box. And then I don't know why I think about this now, but my, my sister Essie (sp.?). Um. Essie (sp.?) got the lunchbox and she was responsible for making sure that we all got a treat from the lunchbox. And that was , I, I, as far as I remember, I think it was every day. Yeah.

Lata Murti: [00:23:55] Wow. S-so, Lawanda did you have a relationship with your parents? With your parents, mom and dad at all?

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [00:24:05] I, I did with my mom. My mom went north and. What she, uh, she and her sisters. And this is the sister who, uh, my Aunt Maxine and her daughter, Rose, my, uh, biological cousin, adoptive sister who's now deceased. Um. They were on the phone with us one day. It was my mom. Uh, my Aunt Maxine and then my Aunt Mary, who, uh, is the reason I came to California. She actually brought me to California. She and my Uncle Matt. Anyway, uh, they were on the phone and they were saying, well, they were talking about, they didn't have the opportunity to go to college because that wasn't available to them at the time. And, my mom and my Aunt Maxine apparently were good, good, uh, basketball players. Um, they had dreams and my Aunt Maxine said, "I could have been something. Who knows? Maybe I could have been something." And then, they were talking about how it was that the, uh, the three girls stayed with, um, the grandparents. And then my cousin, Rose, when she was born. She, uh, my Aunt Maxine, she left and she went to live with the next to oldest sister, because she had had enough of the grandfather because the grandfather, he, he, he ruled the family and, um, um, she had had enough, and so she took Rose with her, and he sent word to her to return the baby or he was going to put the white man on her. So she said that she sent her, and she said, "Here! You take this damn baby!"

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [00:26:17] And, so, she sent her. And then, um. Uh, my mom said that, um, our grandfather and I do know this to be true. He, um. He was concerned that, um. That the, uh, the woman. They go away, they get, uh, they get married and they marry, uh, a man and he's not the father of the girls and that the girls were going to be molested. So he. I, I see him. He was far ahead of his time. And so anyway, so, uh, he he was quite insistent that the three girls stay, uh, in the household. And then when we were about. Eight. I remember we went to court and we were adopted, and I

remember the judge asking me some questions like, what do you call them? And my grandmother was Mo, which is what my, my, uh, mom and my aunts called them. And my grandfather was, was Da, d a. And Mo was Mo, you know, short for Mother. Short for Daddy.

Preston Allen: [00:27:36] Mm hmm.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [00:27:36] Yeah. And so, anyway, they. They told that, that, uh, that story, but my mom would come back and the aunt, they would come back every summer. And, uh, most summers they would come back or because my grandfather worked on the railroad, then we would have a, um. Uh, we had a railroad pass and we could take the train to, um, to Chicago. Funny thing is, when we got older, uh, my grandmother, she started to get ill.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [00:28:13] Seemed like around the time that we were going to leave every year. And, um, anyway, I she, she was ill. She had, uh. She was diagnosed, um. I think she was about 42. She was diagnosed with a heart condition. And uh. When she told the story, um, she wasn't expected to live and her, her oldest daughter and her sister-in-law, they came into the house and they took all of her photos and her linen towels. And she never got a lot of it back and I remembered that she was always angry about that. Um, anyway. But as for my parents, my dad went into the military before I was born and so my mom and dad were never married. And then I would see like I look back on it and, uh, I can laugh about it now, but I can my grandmother, my paternal grandmother. She eventually moved to that town. And I would see her. My grandfather always made it a point. He wanted me to know my relatives. And the funny thing is, is that the way that I got to know my relatives, he would take me to a funeral of someone who had died, the, the funeral of a relative. Who had died. And my grandfather. He. He. He rarely, rarely attended church. Uh, usually it was a funeral. And he wore I remember my grandfather wore overalls every day. And underneath the overalls, he'd have, like, slacks.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [00:30:20] They would be like I would call them like a Dockers type slacks underneath that. Uh, uh, a shirt. But for, um, funerals. And when he would take me to, uh, these funerals with these relatives or when it was someone's else's funeral, he would dress. He would dress and he would just have this starched outfit and

he would put on one of those, um, apples. That's what they call it. The cap, it's an apple. He would wear that. And man, my grandfather would be sharp. [Laughs] But that was, that was really like the only time that, you know, that, uh, he would venture out. And it's also how I knew, like, who my paternal relatives were. Um, the interesting thing also is that my dad would come to visit. And I would hear that my dad had come to visit and I'm waiting on my dad. But, you know, you want to see your kid, right? Well, he wouldn't come. So, then, I would go to my paternal grandmother's house and she would say, "Oh, he left yesterday or two days ago." And I just thought that was the weirdest thing. Well, I do now. I think it was the weirdest thing. So, when I, um, at the age of 18. Um. That was before 18. No, I was like 15. My dad, because I had met my stepmom at some point, Juanita. And she's, she's deceased now. Seems like everybody is dead now.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [00:32:18] But I met her at some point, and then she started sending me gifts every year for Christmas so that I always could get, knew I was going to get a gift from her and then my mom, when she was able, she would send, uh, my sister and I, she would send us like a doll, you know, whatever she could. And now I realized how much love she actually put into trying to send us something along with a dress, because my mom was a teacher's aide. And. My stepdad, her, her husband, he was actually a, uh, longshoreman. And he went on to become the, uh, Treasurer of the, um, Longshoreman Union. I think it was national. And a lot of the time my mom was probably supporting, um, my brothers and sisters that she had in Chicago and also then trying to send things to, um, when she could to my sister and I. Mm hmm. Yeah. So, and, and also back then, for a long time, we didn't have a telephone. And then when we did, uh, get a telephone, I do remember that, uh, that she would call also and I can't tell you if it was once a week, if it was monthly or, you know, how often it was. But at 15, I did go.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [00:34:15] My stepmom sent me [?] And I went to live with my, uh, just for the summer. My, um, dad and stepmom and my stepmom actually wanted me to stay and finish, uh, the school in Chicago because they lived in Chicago also. But, um, my grandfather, he retired at the age of 65, and he had worked all of his life, since he was 13, 14, because his dad died. His mom died even younger. And then, his dad died and I think that when I really get to dig in deep, I'm going to find out, uh, probably the horrible truth is maybe his dad was lynched. This is what I'm kind of thinking, um. Anyway, um. So and so I've heard. So it's not just thinking, but having heard that also.

But I. I haven't confirmed that. Um, anyway. So he worked until he was 65. He retired in May. At the age of 65. In June, um, he began to suffer terrible headaches. In July, he was diagnosed with a brain cancer. He had surgery. They didn't tell the family, "Oh, we got it all," or anything like that. And, um. He came home, like in August. And then I went back to Mississippi when I found that out because he was at the University of Mississippi in the hospital. And I went back and that same year in December, he died. Mm. Yeah. Yeah...So I've given you guys quite a bit in that.

Lata Murti: [00:36:29] Yes. Yes, you have. Thank you.

Preston Allen: [00:36:32] Yeah.

Lata Murti: [00:36:34] So would you say then that, uh, that gender roles in your family growing up were, were traditional or not?

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [00:36:45]

Lata Murti: [00:37:13]

Preston Allen: [00:37:14]

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [00:37:15]

Lata Murti: [00:37:21]

Preston Allen: [00:37:23]

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [00:37:25]

Lata Murti: [00:37:29] As in who? Who did what? The men and the women in the family.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [00:37:51] Yeah, pretty much. Pretty much. You know, particularly, um, in those days, you know, like um. Of course. Um, you know, we made the meals. But we also went to the, uh. Went out to the fields to, uh, plant the corn or the watermelons or the okra or the greens. You know, that was the, uh, the boys and the girls. Uh, men and women, we all went. So in that sense, it wasn't traditional. And

when it was time to, uh. Harvest. We went back for that also. And, uh, when, when we needed to do things like we were going to take some corn to the, uh, to the mill so that we could get corn meal. Then we all shucked the corn and did all those things. So, in that sense, yes, but I would say that things like um. Cooking the meal, washing the dishes, um. Those were, basically like assigned, uh, by gender. Um. I, I do remember my, uh, cousins, the, uh, three boys, and we call each other, uh, brother or sister. I do remember that, um, because we had a wood burning stove, we had a wood burning, um, heater, I remember them chopping the wood. And I remember everyone making sure that you put the wood in the wood pallet.

Lata Murti: [00:39:56] So, everyone.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [00:39:57] Yes.

Lata Murti: [00:39:58] did that. So where, where did you first feel a sense of community? Was it in your family or, um, or maybe looking outside of your family? Where did you first feel?

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [00:40:17] Oh, it would definitely be, it would definitely be in the family. You know, growing up with the grandparents, uh, my sister, uh, my biological cousin, adopted sister, the boys, um. The, uh, aunts, um, all the, uh, cousins in the clan, my grandparents, of course, it would. It would definitely be a uh, sense of community. Um, what I haven't shared with you all is that my grandfather had a third grade education. But in spite of that third grade education, he was able to help the, uh, grandkids with their homework by a kerosene lamp. And I vividly remember that. Uh, another thing that I remember about him is that he got paid, and I think it was, like, every two weeks. And he would line up all the grandkids, not just the, uh, six in the household, but he'd line up the other grandkids from going all the way up and, uh, we would get a payday nickel. And, uh, he would give us a nickel and then we would go to the store and, you know, things. I mean, you could get a couple of things for a nickel back in the day. Yeah. And, um, the, uh, oldest boy. Uh, we. We, uh, call him Windy. Anyways, his name is Winston, but he had a habit, he would buy like a. A sugar daddy, uh, but they call it a slowpoke. But he would buy something like that. And we've eaten our potato chips or whatever we had. And he would wait until we, we eat it and then he'd decide that he was going to take out whatever it was that, that, he had, he had, uh,

bought, and he was going to eat it in front of us. And I remember my grandfather every time, making him share it with other kids, and he never caught on. I still tease him now about that.

Preston Allen: [00:42:38] That's great. So you, you have a lot of special memories. I'm just I'm really enjoying listening to all of them and just kind of reflecting back on just some of that, that I had as well. So but when you think about the memories that stand out for you that you still carry today. Uhh, what might some of those be in terms of moments or stories of people, the ones that you, you know, you would think about today even?

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [00:43:13] Well, I remember. And I guess that would probably be. My, well, okay, I can tell you a couple of things. I remember when we, uh, when we integrated. Hmm. Because Brown versus the, uh, Board of Education, uh, won in 1954. But, uh, Mississippi was one of the states that, uh, went until 1970 fightin' it. Mm hmm. Um, I remember specifically several, uh, uh white males coming to our home and talking to, uh, my grandparents and saying, "Would you consider, uh, letting Lawanda attend a school?" And they had a, I don't think they had a k-school then, but they had first through 12th grade there in that town. But we were bussed. So from, from, uh, first through fifth grade. We, there was a school in that town, a black school. And all the black kids went to that school. Um, and we walked. And, in, in hindsight, I don't think it was that far. You know, it's probably, maybe two miles. But we had fun walking, you know, because we walked as a group and we were always doing something. Um, and then sixth through. Well, if you had to be bussed to the nearest town, which was about 15 miles away because we couldn't go to the all white school. But, in 1970, that changed. And I was in ninth grade. Um, I was in A student. And, uh, the first thing that happened is I noticed that the, uh, black kids. Um, I'd have plenty, I mean, all of the people that I knew and went to school with was black.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [00:45:27] But when we integrated. Um, the little towns. The black kids went to the schools in those towns. So there were maybe four or five blacks that would have been, classmates at that point. And the first thing that happened the, uh, first year is that. Those black kids. Maybe one of them did. Um, did not go forward. So they were intentionally in hindsight, they were. Um. Classified as not adequate students. Almost immediately. Which is, uh, something that happened to me. Uh, history

is one of my favorite subjects. And I remember that um. The history. The, uh, first semester I got a D. And I was devastated. By then, my, uh, grandmother, my, my grandfather had passed. He died in 1970 and, um. My, uh, grandmother. She wasn't abled because, uh. Most of the time she was debt ridden. And, um, anyway, but I was devastated. And so I'd stay up, uh. Late, late into the morning to make sure that I'd memorize, talk to myself. And that was the way I memorized the Magna Carta and, and all those things. And so then the, uh, the next semester, um, it improved to a C, and then the next semester was finally like a B-plus. You know? Um, but one thing I remember about that history class, um, Mrs. Hutz (sp.?) Was the teacher. Steve Sasser (sp.?) was the student. And we were reading. I believe it was *Gone with the Wind*.

Preston Allen: [00:47:43] Mm hmm.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [00:47:44] And so every day we went around the room and each student had to read, she would tell us to read. You read to, like, you know, a couple of paragraphs or something. And I remember that when it got to, uh, him, he was reading and all of a sudden his face got so red and he was just laughing and laughing and she was laughing with him and, and she was saying, "Okay, go ahead. You can say it." And it was the N-word. And he thought it was so hilarious. And she did too. So, um. That stayed with me. Since 1970, it's something I've never forgotten, you know? I don't really care now. Um. You know, I just look at it as something that made me, um. Made me stronger and made me more, uh, about the person that I am today. Um. Another thing that, um. That I remember is when we had our um. Was the prom. A class prom. And not only that, it was kind of weird about that, that school. Because I think it was like when I look back on it now, it was, like, it had a religious component to it also. So it had a religious component like a. Um, maybe there was no dancing or something like that. But I remember that we were in the cafeteria. The blacks were, uh, on one side of the room. And the, uh, whites were on the other side of the room. We were served our meal. And I remember green beans. I couldn't tell you anything else. And then, um, we went home.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [00:50:01] But I heard later that they had a big dance somewhere. I don't know if that's true or not, but I, I suspect it is true, and that's what I heard. But, you know, that I don't care about either. Um, I, I was, um, when, when we did. Did. Uh. When we did graduate. In 1973. I was really emotional about that because

I do feel like I had bonded. I don't know how when I look back at it later. I guess I. I have bonded with, um. I don't know who I bonded with, but I had bonded with enough classmates that it hit me because back then they did like a baccalaureate.

Preston Allen: [00:51:00] Mm hmm.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [00:51:00] So we had that and I'm like, "Oh, wow, we're really, like, graduating." And then we had the, uh, grad- graduation. It was only like 32, uh, students or something like that. But then I'm like, "Oh, this is it!" And I was really emotional about that. And, uh, crying. Kind of, uh, crying about it. And. Kind of [I'd run it?], but I was crying about it. And then here it is almost coming up on 50 years later, I've never been to not one reunion. I did, uh, one year. Because I think I'd kind of gotten, uh, notice about a reunion or something and, uh, I'd gotten in contact with my Aunt Mary. And I wrote a letter and kind of sent it to the, uh, the classmates, you know, "Hi," you know, "This is what I've been doing." And I kind of made jokes like "I'm doing investigation. My name is Friday from Dragnets," uh, type thing, and that's about it.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [00:52:14] There is one person online now. Um. Her name is Wanda. She used to be Donaway (sp.?), and she's my Facebook friend.

Preston Allen: [00:52:27] Mm hmm

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [00:52:27] Oh. And, and then I do have another classmate, uh. She's an airline pilot. And, um, she's my Facebook friend. But otherwise, you know, that was, was just part of growing up.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [00:52:47] Another memory that I, I remember, and then I'll stop telling you guys about those memories. But. Um, I don't know how I did it, but I saved up because we were going to the Capitol. And that was a big deal to me to go to, uh, to Jackson, to the Capitol. I didn't realize that they had, uh, the Confederate flag flying over the Capitol, but I was just so excited to be going. So some kind of way. I didn't get an allowance or anything like that, but some kind of way, I saved up money. And I was able to, to, to order these white bellbottoms from Sears, and they cost me \$15. And I just knew I was going to be clean and looking, looking just smashing and all that stuff. So I wanted the bellbottoms to have these creases in the middle. There was a dry cleaners in the, in the town. It was operated by this husband and wife, and they

were both white. So, I take my bellbottoms to be dry cleaned because I want those creases in them. And I get the, uh, the bellbottoms back. And, uh, the bellbottoms. Um, when I go to put them on, they are scorched.

Preston Allen: [00:54:23] Mm

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [00:54:23] You know, they got, uh, these brown marks everywhere where the iron has been too hot. And I am really, really upset. And, so, um. I called the, uh, dry cleaners up. And see, uh, uh, many parts of my, uh, childhood, I now realize was, was really sheltered from me. And I didn't, didn't know a lot of things about racism and, uh, the separation of the class, classes as I recognize now. Anyway. So I just called the man up and I told him that they had, uh, burnt my, my pants. And he says, "Oh, those pants aren't that bad." And I said, "You better get your damn lawyer because I'm going to sue you." And I slammed the phone down on him. But in hindsight, the man was probably a member of the Klan, uh, and he probably really could have had me killed, uh, had me get a lashing if he had wanted to. Um, but he didn't. It just kind of ended there.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [00:55:41] And then one last thing I'm going to tell you guys a. Um, I remember that sometimes we would go to bed. And we would get up, the next morning, and, uh, we go to bed, get up the next morning and. There are these Klan papers. That have been tossed on our yard. And it was said things, like, it would compare, compare black people to, uh, to apes and monkeys.

Preston Allen: [00:56:14] Mm.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [00:56:14] But I remember vividly those men, on our lawn, uh, rolled up with their rubber band on more than one occasion.

Preston Allen: [00:56:25] Yeah.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [00:56:25] So I know that there was definitely a Klan's presence back there. Um, you know. Um. I don't know. Um. All the, uh, the white people, they seem nice, as long as you said, um, "Yes, Sir. Yes, Ma'am." That type thing. So, I, I don't know, but um. Some of them definitely wore those white sheets at night.

Preston Allen: [00:56:58] Mm hmm. Hmm.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [00:56:58] There was, um, the man who owned the sawmill. He was white. And his daughter. She's, uh, one of my classmates, the airline pilot. Um, every Christmas, he gave all of his employees, he gave them a big box of, uh. Because we didn't have much, and I never knew that we were poor. But by today's standards, I'm sure we were really, really poor. But we always had food. We always had meat. We always had vegetables because we lived off the land. So sometimes, you know, like, it wasn't unusual to have rabbit or raccoon, you know, that type of thing. Um, anyway, um, every year he would give the employees, um, several relatives like uncles. Um, either by marriage or, um, blood work for him. So he'd give them a big box of apples, oranges, nuts, candy, and then the, uh, related family, and he would drive it all around, uh, in the back of his truck and he'd just drive through slowly and he'd stop and, you know, he'd give that big box of, uh, fruit to the family. And then for, like, uh, if you weren't an employee, then he had a bag, um, like, um, a Trader Joe's, uh, brown bag. Paper bag. And it was full of the same thing, but it just wasn't as big as the other one. But every year, we looked forward to getting, um, um. To getting that at Christmastime from Mr. J.J.

Preston Allen: [00:58:48] Mm hmm.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [00:58:49] Yeah.

Preston Allen: [00:58:51] Yeah. I would, I would imagine those flyers made a big impact that, that's um. Wa- was there any family conversation around, around racism or the Klan? You know, how we have the talk now, people are tryin' to have..any of that kind of--

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [00:59:08] And in, in hindsight, I look back at it, and I think the way that, that my grandparents that they filtered that--.

Preston Allen: [00:59:18] Mm hmm

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [00:59:18] Is what they did, is they wanted you home before dark. So, you could not be home after dark. If you, if you came home after dark, then you were going to be in for a good whoopin'.

Preston Allen: [00:59:32] Mm hmm.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [00:59:32] And so my, my cousin Rose. Um, she decided that, and, uh, she wasn't doing anything. She was just out with friends. She decided that, that, um, she wasn't coming home until later, and I don't think it was that much later, but it was certainly dark. So my grandfather, our grandfather, he was going to, um, he was going to beat her. And so she ran away, and she ran and actually stayed at my paternal grandmother's house. And she stayed there for several days. And then, uh, her, uh, mother, my Aunt Maxine, sent for her. And so she went to Chicago and she ended up living in, um. In Chicago, and I think, uh, that Robert Frost poem. About the two, two, uh, roads that divert, diverge in the, uh, the woods. I think that was kind of her story because she chose the wrong road. And so anyway.

Preston Allen: [01:00:40] Yeah.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:00:41] Yeah.

Preston Allen: [01:00:44] We're changing gears a little bit. We know how important education is to you. Um, just my sense of you and knowing you all this time. Um, can you tell us a bit about your schooling, like the stages? I know you first to fifth grade and then, you know. So tell me, tell me about the schools that you've gone to, uh, and, and the kind of memories you have about that process of education.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:01:07] Well, uh, my first grade teacher was Mrs. Clementine Tucker (sp.?). Sometimes I use that for my password. Um, I'm not going to let you know on which one!

Preston Allen: [01:01:21] Laughs

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:01:21] And I remember that Mrs. Tucker. Uh, you had to know your ABCs and your numbers and all of that stuff. And she actually taught you, like on the, uh, they had the big tablets where you trace the letters and the numbers and all that. And she did all that with us. And she was really a kind woman, but she meant for you to learn. And so if she felt like you wasn't learning, then she had a ruler. And you'd take your, hold your hand out, and you had to have it in the fist, and she hit you on the knuckle.

Preston Allen: [01:01:58] Hm.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:01:58] And so that was my, uh, first grade teacher. Um, and she used to come to my house sometimes. I remember that. And her husband was actually the bus driver for, uh, the, uh, sixth through 12th grade. He actually drove the bus and drove the kids there. And then I don't remember anything about second grade or who that teacher might have been. I do remember the, uh, third grade teacher was Mrs. Pickett (sp.?). And, um, I don't know. I, I think I was. Um. Um. I'm trying to think of the word that I would use, um. Introverted.

Preston Allen: [01:02:51] Mm hmm

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:02:51] In some ways. And I remember that we had a, uh. Um, she gave us a, uh, fraction that we had to, uh, a problem to solve, and it was fraction, and that was on the board and you had to go up and solve it. And no one could solve it. So I went up. And I solved it.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:03:19] And then the rest of the kids, they didn't solve it. So she lined them up and she had a, uh, board because back then, uh, punishment was allowed for the kids, and she had a paddle board. And she, she went, uh, around whopping all the kids. They lined up and she with whopped all the kids. And I remember getting in that line for her to whop me too. Now why I did that, I have no idea. But I remember my, uh, cousin Gayle (sp.?). Um, we are the same age. And Gayle, actually, um, got in that line and they didn't have much. And that was my Aunt Margaret's daughter. And you could actually, like, the house that they lived in. You could actually, like, if you look close, you could see. Through. The, um. Like the boards, two by fours, or whatever they had up. You could actually, if you look, and that would be where I would, uh, sneak to look at, uh, TV and so forth. Well, anyway, Mrs. Pickett, uh, beat Gayle, and Gayle was wearing a, uh, skirt that my Aunt Margaret had made from a, uh, flour sack. And her skirt fell to the, uh, to the floor.

Preston Allen: [01:04:53] Mm hmm

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:04:53] Now, how embarrassing is that?

Preston Allen: [01:04:55] Yeah.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:04:56] Yeah. And then, um, I don't remember much about fourth, but in the fifth grade, we had this teacher named Mrs. Markham (sp.?). And Mrs. Markham. She was very religious. We were kind of scared of her also. But she was really a, a music teacher. And she would have us sing, and sing, and sing, and, uh, we would sing like the Negro National Anthem and songs like that.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:05:31] And I had a most perfect voice. But that was around the time that the, uh, Supreme Court ruled separation of church and state. And you couldn't do that. But she continued to do it that year.

Preston Allen: [01:05:49] Mm hmm.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:05:50] So, anyway, so, uh, in summary, so fifth grade was that, uh, it was called Lincoln County. Lincoln County Elementary School.

Preston Allen: [01:06:02] Okay.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:06:03] That was the name of it. And then sixth through eight was at Eva H. Harris. And. Um, then 9 through 12 was at the, uh, school in my hometown where we integrated, and that was Bogue Chitto High School.

Preston Allen: [01:06:27] Mm hmm.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:06:27] And then I, uh, moved to California in 1973. My Aunt Mary came to Mississippi, picked me up, and, um, we drove cross country back to Santa Maria.

Preston Allen: [01:06:43] Oh, wow.

Preston Allen: [01:06:43] Yeah, my Uncle, uh, Mack, her husband. I don't know how he did it, but I was enrolled in, this was like in July. And, uh, by, um, September, I was enrolled at Allan Hancock. So I did two years at Allan Hancock and I was really a business major. You know, they didn't talk about career paths and all that when you were, uh, in high school. And, so, anyway, so I just figured, you know, well, maybe I'll be a secretary to the FBI.

Preston Allen: [01:07:22] Hmm.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:07:22] You know, was kind of how I was thinking. And I met this. This guy. Who told me that he was going to be an FBI agent. And I said, "Really?" And he said, "Yeah!" And I go, "Oh! Well, that's great!" And so Hancock had a career, uh, fair. It was a college fair, and Cal State Long Beach was there.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:07:48] So I went over and I talked to him, and I said, "Oh!" I think they were the only one I talked to. And I said, "Oh! Well, I'm going to go to your school and I want to study from criminology." So, I was accepted and I had a, um. I don't know. I don't even remember the year now. But I have a Mustang and it was blue. And I had this huge stuffed animal that, you know, the ones that they have at the fair.

Preston Allen: [01:08:21] Mm.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:08:21] They used to have at the fair. I don't know if they do, but there was this huge dog. And I remember putting the dog, and my belongings in the car, and I drove to Long Beach. I had looked at a place, but I never put down a deposit or anything like that, so I don't know why I thought I'd have the place. But, um, anyway, uh, I went to that place and I didn't have it. So then I had to find another place. And that same day I found one. And, uh, I think I stayed there about. Three or four months because. You know, it wasn't my type of, uh, uh, place that I wanted to live in. And, um. Went to, uh, Cal State Long Beach, the, uh, first semester, I took 18 classes, 18 units, so, 18 units I took, not 18 classes. Um, and then the next semester, I took 21 units. Um. I did real well. Uh, I made the, uh, Dean's list a number of times, but I did get a, uh, I think it was Criminal Justice Planning.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:09:49] I looked at it and I, I got my, um. [pause]. I'm tryin' to think of what they call it now. I did get my, my classes. I got everything. And there's a D on it. So, I'm not interested in, in trying to remove a D off of my, uh, my records at this point. Uh, but most of the classes, they're just A's and B's. Uh, I graduated in 1977. With a, um, Bachelor's. In, uh, criminology. And my plan was probably to do, because, you you had your options of Corrections, which would be like Probation. And my plan was probably to go into law enforcement. So I moved back to Santa Maria because I had kind of worked my way through college and then I had some money from my grandfather's, uh, railroad retirement. So, and it was just enough for me to live on. So I

moved back to Santa Maria with my. Aunt and Uncle. Uh, I lived with them for free the whole time. Never even paid for food, because that's just how your family. That's how your family is. Our family is anyway. And so anyway, moved back to Santa maria and, um, I couldn't find a job. I applied for a bunch of jobs, couldn't get a job. So, I had, had worked at McDonald's for a while, uh, in college. And, to me, it used to be one of the, the safest and cleanest places to eat because they had you wash the same counter a hundred times. They weren't just going to let you stand around and not do anything. And so I went to work at McDonald's. I, so, I have a Bachelor's degree in 1977, went to work for McDonald's, and I was going to be a manager at \$2.75 an hour.

Preston Allen: [01:12:11] Mm hmm.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:12:11] I worked for them, I think about three weeks. And I don't even remember receiving my last paycheck because one of the jobs I'd applied for. It was through C-E-T, CETA[?], uh, came through and I went to work. There was a drunk driving program in Santa Maria called, uh, SMART. And, uh, I don't remember what the acronyms were for now, but it was a drunk driving program and I went to work for them for a year, um, after that. Oh, and around the same time that I was, um, working that program, I enrolled in law school. And so I went to the now defunct Central Coast Law School. And I did a semester there. Um, I was really good, I think I'm not bragging. Um, in law school, but you had to brief. You had to brief every case. Uh. W's. And I just thought, um, I just go, "Boy, I, I can't get behind," because, you know, the professor would call on you."

Lata Murti: [01:13:35] Mm hmm.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:13:35] And, uh, so I thought, at the end of the semester, okay, well, I'll just drop out. And I was living in Lompoc by then, and I thought, okay, I'll just drop out. And then when I'm able, I'll just go back to school. And I did, uh, take a lot of classes when I, uh, enrolled, when I got employed with Santa Barbara County. But I never, uh, tried law school again, because by the end I had a successful career with Public Defender. And, uh, what was the point?

Preston Allen: [01:14:14] Yeah.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:14:15] Yeah.

Lata Murti: [01:14:23] Preston, did you want to ask more about school, or, should, should I move on?

Preston Allen: [01:14:29] I, I think I'd move on, because, I, I've taken some good notes. Unless, Lawanda, if there's any, anyone or any other thing that just kind of highlights where you are right now based on your educational experience you want to share.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:14:45] Well, I, I do think that that was a good, uh, foundation. Hancock. Definitely. Um. I still remember. A teacher there. She was a business teacher and I don't remember her name, but I can kind of remember how she looked, and, uh, the proper way to address your envelope and to place your letter in the envelope. And, so, when they open it. When they open it's like, it's right before their face. They don't have to flip it around and all that. Um, so I definitely got a good foundation at Hancock, and a better, even better foundation at, uh, Cal State, Long Beach. Um, and, actually, um, I kind of think that that is when, um, I began to really, really, um, read my history, because we didn't get in, in, in school. Um. I don't ever remember seeing anything about slaves. There was nothing in my history books. Indentured servants were there, and it just seemed that you could just, you know, like you work whatever you owed, you work your debt. And then, um. You know, after a while, you know, then, you get to go on with your life. Uh, um, and so it wasn't there, but it was at. It was at Hancock that I remember kind of, uh, writing a paper and talking about, um, uh, Native Americans and how their land had been stolen and of course [chuckles] I was the only Black in the class and no one was agreeing with that. At least they weren't saying anything. And then I just became more attuned.

Preston Allen: [01:16:58] Mm hmm.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:16:59] To, um, slavery. Um, oppressions, oppression, um, systemic racism and so forth at, uh, Cal State, Long Beach, because, of course, I had a lot of Black Studies classes there also.

Preston Allen: [01:17:26] Mm hmm...Yeah.

Lata Murti: [01:17:27] So, Lawanda, you went from. Rural Mississippi to Santa Maria because of your Aunt Mary?

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:17:39] Yeah, but, it, it's, it's more than that. Mary's grandfather, Mary's father. My grandfather, who was actually my adopted dad. He believed that education was the key for his clan. And that the only way that the clan could have a better life was through education.

Preston Allen: [01:18:09] Mm hmm.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:18:09] So Mary was the first college graduate in our family. She graduated from, uh, HBCU Alcorn State. And so, she thought when she graduated that she would buy them a house. She wanted to buy her parents a house better than the one that we had. Uh, my grandfather, he really believed in family and he's like, "No, I'm not going to give you anything to fight over there," because he figured if he had a lot of property, a nice house or whatever, it would be something for someone to fight over. And he wasn't going to have any of that. And so anyway, so the next best thing that she could do, is she could bring her nieces, nephews. And that was the same with my Uncle Matt. Um, they could bring their, their clan. To, um, to California and offer them an opportunity to get an education. So there were a lot of nieces and nephews that, uh, came to California from Mississippi. Um, some of them, uh, would, would go to college and actually, um. Finish at, uh. Hancock I think I was probably the only one that went all the way to a four year institution that I can remember. There may have been others, but I think I was, um. I'm thinking I was the only one.

Preston Allen: [01:19:48] Mm hmm.

Lata Murti: [01:19:49] So you went to Han--?

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:19:49] Yeah...My aunt and uncle, though, they, you know, through my grandfather's vision, they were responsible for me coming to, uh, Santa Maria.

Lata Murti: [01:20:03] So two years at Hancock in Santa Maria and then two at Cal State, Long Beach.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:20:09] Yes.

Lata Murti: [01:20:10] And then back up here to Lompoc?

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:20:14] Well, no, back to Santa Maria.

Lata Murti: [01:20:16] Santa Maria.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:20:18] Uh uh. One year at, uh, a now defunct law school, in Arroyo Grande. Central Coast--I think it was Central Coast Law School.

Preston Allen: [01:20:29] Mm.

Lata Murti: [01:20:29] Mm hmm.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:20:34] Yeah.

Lata Murti: [01:20:34] And then. And then, Lompoc?

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:20:38] And then I moved to Lompoc. I was working for the SMART program. I actually met my husband. We became engaged, uh, moved to, uh, Lompoc, an apartment there for about three months, um, got married and moved on the base. Vandenberg Air Force Base, because he was in the military.

Lata Murti: [01:21:03] So what? I mean, what were your first impressions and thoughts about California's Central Coast after growing up in rural Mississippi and and maybe spending a summer in Chicago? What did you think of the Central Coast?

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:21:24] Well, I, I actually, um, I spent more than the summer in Chicago. I was there quite a few summers. Um, I don't think I did much, though, in Chicago, in terms of, like, I, I actually went to the YMCA college. Before I headed, uh, west. I did go there and I took a typing course. I still have the typewriter that my stepdad brought me, Smith Corona. Anyway, um, when I came to, uh, Santa Maria, I liked the pace. Because. Chicago was really, I mean, that's a big city, and it was really fast paced. Mississippi is much slower, and the pace on the Central Coast suited me.

Preston Allen: [01:22:32] Mm hmm.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:22:38] I pretty much knew, um, because when I came to Santa Maria, there was no bus service. So, my aunt and uncle, my aunt was a teacher

at Righetti. My uncle was a teacher at, uh, Santa Maria High School and at, um, Allan Hancock in the evenings, so. My, uh, mode of transportation was walking. So I, I pretty much learned the, uh, the Central Coast. Then my uncle's daughter, Golda. She's like a year, maybe two years, I think I'm two years older than her. Anyway, he brought her a little car, and we used to take that car. And go to the base about every weekend and would go to the nightclubs on the base.

Lata Murti: [01:23:44] So were there any--.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:23:46] But I liked it. It was. It was. It was, uh. And I still like it, obviously, because I'm still here.

Lata Murti: [01:23:55] Yeah. You've been here then for.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:23:59] Almost 50 years.

Lata Murti: [01:24:00] 50 years?

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:24:02] Yeah.

Preston Allen: [01:24:05] With all those places, Mississippi, Santa Maria, Long Beach, uh, Lompoc and Chicago, uh, all those places that you spent quality time, um, what kind of um, um opportunities and, particular opportunities, and to some degree, if you want to say, challenges did each of the different places offer you?

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:24:26] Opportunities and challenges.

Preston Allen: [01:24:28] Well, you could take one, one at a time, if you want, or, about whatever. But, you know, so, for example, Mississippi, what would you say was an opportunity did that offer you or, or a challenge, whatever you would want--

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:24:40] Well. I think that Mississippi and my upbringing, with my grandparents and also with the Klan and, um. The degree that, uh, my mom, dad's, uh, stepparents that they were all involved. That was my foundation.

Preston Allen: [01:25:08] Yeah.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:25:09] So that was my foundation, uh, my values. So to form my values and to, uh, eventually evolve into the person that I am today. So that was that foundation from, um, having those experiences. Um, my family, even though my grandfather didn't attend church. My family was deeply religious. And every time the church door opened, we were at church. So, we attended church. Uh, for sure on Wednesday night for prayer meeting and Bible study. Um, usually there was like a choir meeting or some type of kids rehearsal, uh, something on Saturday night, uh, something on Sunday. A lot of times on Sunday you'd go to church. You go to church at, uh, what was it? It was, uhm Sunday school like at 9:00. And then, uh, you get back home, three, four, five, six. It was about, it was about dark when you would get back home. So that was my foundation. Then, um. Long Beach gave me the skills that I needed to succeed. So, it gave me the educational knowledge that I needed to make it in the world. Back to Santa Maria, to launch my career. And then on over to. We lived longer at, uh, Vandenberg Air Force Base than in Lompoc because my husband was in the military. We got married. And so we had a house on base. So, we lived in on base housing probably for about two years. I didn't talk much about that, but, uh, we lived there for about two years. Didn't have any kids. Um, anyway, um. So I went to work. Lompoc was the, uh, I would say it was the launching of the career.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:27:46] Vandenberg Air Force Base, Lompoc was the launching of the career, uh, because I started working for Santa Barbara County in 1979 for Department of Social Services. And I worked for them for five years and needed to get that experience, so I could really--I'd decided by then I didn't want to be an FBI agent, but I was still interested in, in law enforcement. And I actually interviewed with the, uh. They called it welfare fraud then. And I interviewed with them. At the same time, I interviewed with the public defender's office. And welfare fraud. They didn't hire me. Um. I've since seen that guy, um, who was the supervisor. And he tells me, "I tried, I did everything I could to get you hired. And they said, because she needed to be a police officer," and I wasn't a sworn police officer. And he said, "I knew you were going to make it. I knew you were going to make it." I saw him about two years ago at Cottage, and he told me that. That was really nice to hear. And then, um. So. Uh, Vandenberg Air Force Base, then Vandenberg Village, Lompoc is, uh, where I began my career, with, uh, social services. We moved to Santa Maria, brought a house, moved to Santa Maria, and I think it was the same year that we moved to Santa Maria, I went to, uh, work for

Public Defender. Or, actually my career really took off. And, um. I went on to become Chief Investigator, first African American female in California to hold that position.

Preston Allen: [01:30:07] Congratulations.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:30:09] Thank you.

Preston Allen: [01:30:15] So what were, uh. What would you say were some of the challenges along that migration for you?

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:30:24] Challenges. Well, I was told. When I, um. I'm probably going to have to do that backwards. But I was told indirectly. When, um, I got. I was working at Social Services. And someone told me when I was, uh, received the news that I'd been hired by Public Defender. That the person says, she was sure the reason that I was hired was because I was Black. And, um, I said, Oh, okay. So I, I, of course I confronted her, and she didn't quite deny it, but she said, you know what? You know they got to do. She pretty much said they got to do DEI, um, and maybe that had something to do with it. And I didn't let the fact that I had to start. After graduating. And having a Bachelor's. Um, stop me from continuing to want more, and to want a better life, and to try to advance. So, and even though, um, I had to humble myself after I graduated and go to work for McDonald's for about three weeks. I. I did what I needed to do. I had bills to pay. And I did what I needed to do. And, uh. I worked for a year. Then when I, um. When that year was up. I didn't have a job. And I took a job at Bob's Big Boys in Lompoc. And I was a waitress there. And I think I also sold, um, smoke detectors. And what was the other thing? It was really like smoke detectors and security systems. But, uh, I didn't sell them. I actually, would go out or, and talk to the people or something, and then I would set it up for the closers, I guess you would call it, for them to um, to come in and, um, make the deal.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:33:24] And then they would give me like 100 bucks or whatever for doing that. And I would do that. I think I did that before Bob's Big Boys. Then I went to work at Bob's Big Boys, and, um, you know, here I am. I have a Bachelor's degree, but I'm waiting tables and I did not let that stop me. I just figured that was just a stumbling block. So I worked at Bob's Big Boys. It was less than a year, um, but I worked long enough that I knew how to carry all those plates and glasses and all that on one arm and, uh, in the other hand, always fully occupied. Then, um. I went to,

to work for social services. I don't remember. I, I guess, like the, the challenge would be. Uh, social services did recognize. That I had potential. And I did get, uh, I got a couple of promotions and I applied to be a, um. It was a supervisor. And, I, there was a person who had been there longer than me. She got the supervisor's position. And in hindsight, I'm glad she did, because I think that had I gotten that position. The way I was raised. You get that position and then you just stay in that position. So I would have, I would have been there. I would have just still been at social services all those years.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:35:27] And the best thing that happened to me. Was getting the, uh, job at public defender, because then, the real Lawanda, the true Lawanda emerged. And I began to, uh, to understand and to know who I am. And just really, like the work I was doing as an investigator, and then later as a chief investigator, um, working with people who had made, uh. Who had made a mistake or they just they, they took the wrong road, road in the woods, so to speak. And I often think, but for the grace of God, that that could have been me. And, so, to be able to, um. To work with those clients and to, uh, get to know them and to understand their situation is like, "Gee. It could have been me." So I wouldn't call that, public defender. I, I wouldn't call that a challenge. Of course it was, um. As I advanced. We didn't have enough. People to do the work. We actually. When I became chief, I think at one time I had, uh, a staff of 18 that included some interns and. That was whittled all the way down to about eight. Well, those things still need to be done. The work still need to be done and, um. I actually. I took pride in my work. I cared about the clients. Still care about them. And I wanted to see that justice was served. So I worked, uh, a lot of late hours. Um. The longer I stayed there, it seemed like, uh, my health began to, uh, to decline.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:37:54] I, um, developed fibromyalgia. I would, um, go home at two, three-o'clock in the morning and I'd drag myself out of bed the next day to go in and do what needed to be done. And, so, at some point I also thought about my grandfather. And it was not my desire to retire at 65, and not get to, uh, enjoy your retirement, and die, without having done that. And, so, I made the decision that before I was 60, I was going to retire. So, I turned 60. On December 21st, 30th or 31st, depending upon what, what date, uh, you think is my birth date. But, for, for county purposes, it was the, uh, the 21st. And I, uh, had already given notice that I was going to retire, and I retired. Um, I retired January 16, of 2016 was my official retirement date.

All that said. The, uh, the job at McDonald's in Long Beach. The job at McDonald's in Santa Maria, the Bob's Big Boys job.

Preston Allen: [01:39:28] Mm

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:39:28] I had a dentist stint down in, um, Long Beach, also. Um. Then, uh, social services. Public defender. The, um, Allan Hancock. Cal State, Long Beach. It just, it, it all. Set me up and set the foundation, even my upbringings in Mississippi. It actually, uh, set me up to where I am today. Uh, volunteering with the oldest organization, civil rights organization, in the nation. Uh, doing advocacy and fighting for, uh, for justice. Equality, uh, equity and justice. [long pause] Bet you guys didn't know you'd have, you'd get that much out of me, huh? [Laughs]

Lata Murti: [01:40:44] I had a feeling. I had a feeling we would. Go ahead, Preston.

Preston Allen: [01:40:49] [inaudible] here under your, your, your life's travel, is, just, generally how has that impacted your sense of self and your view of the world? [Lawanda excuses herself at this point, to put her dog out].

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:42:37] So we grew up. My grandfather was an animal lover. He had, um. We had, uh, lots of dogs. He, uh, made, he had us make his, the dog food for them. And he'd tell us what, what to put in it and all that. And so we made dog food for them, I guess, every day. I definitely remember making it. My grandmother, uh, she liked cats. [long pause] But back then we couldn't bring, um, they didn't bring dogs into the house. That was unheard of.

Preston Allen: [01:43:13] Yeah.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:43:14] Yeah. Anyway, you, uh, asked me when we left off.

Preston Allen: [01:43:20] About just, uh, how these things have kind of affected your sense of self and how you view the world? Your...life travels.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:43:30] Well, you know, uh, all said. I, I believe that I have a balanced view of the world, and I-I'm able to see both sides like, um. So even when I worked for, for public defender and I was a fierce advocate for the client. I could see the

other side. Of. What had happened, the crime. And that there was a victim. There was likely a, a victim that was impacted by that. And, I had empathy for the victim, but I also had empathy for, uh, for the client. I think that, um. It's probably how I've known, um, our DA. Uh, she's a life member of the uh, uh NAACP, I'm happy to say, uh, we consider each other, uh, pretty good friends. Uh, I've had DAs, um. And defense attorneys. um, write to me, uh, wish me good luck or whatever is going on. And, you know, even, um, uh, relationships with like judges and so forth. So, and, and, and, I think it's because. I'm able to see both sides. Um. And try to understand. Uh, other people's point of view. Um, and even if I don't understand it most of the time, most of the time I'm willing to listen. Even if I disagree, I can disagree with you. And, at the same time that I disagree with you. Um. I'm not going to be all in your face. And I, I, I believe in, in respecting people. And I believe in treating everyone like I would like to be treated. So. Um. Don't disrespect me though. It's a big deal with me is, I'm going to be respected. I'm going to respect you and, um, we'll get along just fine. [Laughs]

Preston Allen: [01:46:34] Thank you. [long pause]

Lata Murti: [01:46:44] Preston, was there more you wanted to ask?

Preston Allen: [01:46:48] No, I think we covered that, that topic very well. I'm, I'm intrigued and really interested in just thinking about all that. So thank you, Lawanda.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:46:58] Thank you.

Lata Murti: [01:47:03] So where did you first find or make? Oh, wait, that's your question, Preston. [laugh] I'm. I'm in our last section on the Central Coast, um, or given-how, how much time do we all have left? Let me ask that.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:47:29] Well, let's see. How much time do you have?...I'm going to do a little bit. I got to check my emails. Uh, I'll do the Board of Supervisors, oh I got my school board meeting is canceled, so we'll probably have until six.

Lata Murti: [01:47:49] How about you, Preston?

Preston Allen: [01:47:50] That works out fine.

Lata Murti: [01:47:52] Okay.

Lata Murti: [01:47:54] All right, great. So what, um. What set of questions do you want to go to next Preston?

Preston Allen: [01:48:05] I, I think the transition to the Central Coast, um.

Lata Murti: [01:48:08] Ok.

Preston Allen: [01:48:10] And, uh. So that would be the Santa Maria Lompoc. Santa Maria?

Lata Murti: [01:48:17] Yeah.

Preston Allen: [01:48:18] Yeah, for the most part.

Lata Murti: [01:48:19] So, I think we already covered the, the first two points there. So do you want to. I was starting to ask about the third, about, um. A sense of home. Do you want to.

Preston Allen: [01:48:34] Sure.

Lata Murti: [01:48:35] Ask some more about that?

Preston Allen: [01:48:38] Yeah, because that's such, um, an interesting. Place when you get to and you feel like this place is a sense of home for you, um, wherever that may be. So I guess that's kind of the question. When, when did you really feel the sense of. Uh, Mississippi was home, but now this is my new home.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:49:00] Well as, as I, I've kind of, uh. Intimated. I've had quite a few family members die. My, um, grandfather, um, passed when he was. 65. In 1970. My grandmother died in '78. Um, both Mom and Dad are still living, but both stepparents are deceased. Both, um. My biological sister and sister. And, uh. Adopted sister Rose, who actually lived here in Santa Maria, and she followed me to Santa Maria. She's deceased. Uh, she died unexpectedly here. Um...Anyway, um, after the grandparents died, uh, my sister, she stayed in Mississippi. The family was kind of

moving north, like to Chicago. There's still plenty of family there in Mississippi, but the longer you're gone.

Preston Allen: [01:50:24] Mm hmm.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:50:24] Then, it's different. And, I was going back for like family reunions. Um, and sometimes I would go back. I would go back for funerals. And I remember going back for my, um, mother's youngest sister's funeral. And I think at that point, I had pretty much decided that that would be the last time that I would go back for a death. Unless it was like, uh, and she and I, we were very close, but unlike unless it was like, um, my sister or my Aunt Mary or something like that. But people that I'm, um, especially close to because the longer, you don't see like your family members every day, like all the other clan, like the cousins and all that, that you're, you're very, very close to when you're younger.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:51:37] But as you, uh, grow older and you're not in contact with them every day, things really change.

Preston Allen: [01:51:47] Mm hmm

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:51:47] And so, um. When they've had something happen, I've tried to stay in, in touch like if they've had a death or something like that, I've tried to stay in touch with them to, um. To express my condolences and so forth. But it's, it's different when you're there every day because you have that bond. But time. As, as the, the years, as the years pass the, uh, not daily contact. Uh, with your, your family members. Then when you, you no longer have that. And I left Mississippi when I was 17. And as I learned more about Mississippi. And its history. I knew that that was not a place that I would want to call home also. So. um. And. And then as I grow older. And I learned more. About some of the. Um, atrocities and things that have happened, um, in Mississippi, um, in the South. And I am outspoken on those. Then I've realized that I probably can't go back also.

Preston Allen: [01:53:24] Mm hm.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:53:24] So, um. I guess the answer would be, to the question would be, um. When we purchased our home.

Preston Allen: [01:53:38] Yeah.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:53:39] Yeah.

Preston Allen: [01:53:41] That the one on base, or off base? Personal residence?

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:53:44] No. Personal residence. And that was in Santa Maria.

Preston Allen: [01:53:48] Okay.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:53:49] And that would have been in 1984.

Preston Allen: [01:53:59] Okay. Talk a little about that community then. Of your [?]. What, you know, what connected you to that and--?

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:54:09] What connects me to Santa Maria?

Preston Allen: [01:54:12] Well, in terms of your first place, making that first place now, this is now. I consider that to be my home, just, my first residence there.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:54:22] Well, I don't live at that first residence anymore.

Preston Allen: [01:54:26] Oh, no. I mean no. But back then. Back then, what made it so special?

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:54:30] Well, um, it was the, uh, first home that we'd purchased.

Preston Allen: [01:54:34] Okay.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:54:34] Um. And. The neighborhood was diverse, um, you know, and I'm really, I'm big on diversity. And so, uh, it was diverse. I knew, um, I knew the neighbors. They knew me. Um, um, we all got along well. We did things together, like, uh, barbecues, um, you know, little things like that. Uh, uh, visit each other's homes. Um, our daughter, she was younger, so we were the home, uh, where the kids could get popsicles, ice cream, uh, that type of thing. And, and the kids knew it, you

know? Um. So it, it was, it was just a, a, a sense of a good neighborhood. And I've actually gone through there several times to see what it looks like now. It is different. The, uh, homes look more, I guess they call them haciendas where they make carports, the carports become the garage.

Preston Allen: [01:55:54] Mm hm.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:55:54] So they take that garage and make it into, uh, a room, and then they build a carport. Those weren't there when we lived on, uh, it was the northwest side of Santa Maria. It was a new development. [Long pause]

Preston Allen: [01:56:21] So that seems very different in terms of a generational upbringing from what you had to. What was there in Santa Maria.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:56:32] Well, yeah. It was different in the sense that, uh. No one was related. [Preston laughs]. Uh, so it would be, it would be different in that sense. No one was related. And I mean, they weren't, uh, we weren't making dinners, meals together.

Preston Allen: [01:56:51] Yeah.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:56:52] As we did, uh, at the, uh, the family home. We weren't making meals together. Um, but I, I, I think there was still a sense of community because everyone looked out for everyone else.

Preston Allen: [01:57:08] Yes.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:57:10] Um, and I felt like if something was going on, um, my neighbors would let me know. And there, there're still people like from the, uh, that old neighborhood.

Preston Allen: [01:57:22] Mm hm.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:57:22] I've seen them over the years. And, um, we're st-, you know, we see each other and it's a big hug, and we're happy to see each other. So.

Yeah. Yeah. And then my, um. My, uh, biological cousin sister Rose. She actually lived one street over from me.

Preston Allen: [01:57:48] Mm hm.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:57:48] So, uh, her kids. They could come to our house. And then I would stop by her house. Talk to her daily. Or stop by to see what was going on.

Preston Allen: [01:58:13] Did you, did you have any hobbies? The kind of thing that just kind of fills some of the. The space other than the working and all the other space that we've talked about. But did you [have any hobbies?] yourself, or?

Preston Allen: [01:58:27] Do I have any hobbies or did I have any then.

Preston Allen: [01:58:31] Mm hmm. Mm hmm. Oh, well then. And now. Yeah, then and now. Just kind of relax you or give you something else. Yeah. Go ahead.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:58:39] Yeah, I actually am a diehard Lakers fan.

Preston Allen: [01:58:42] Oh, there you go.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [01:58:45] And, um. My cousin Larry was the first. He had season seats when they were at the, uh, Great Western Forum. So he would often. Have tickets but he didn't want to go to a game. And we would go. And then my aunt and uncle, I mean, we were all into it, like really just diehard Lakers fans and. When they no longer had tickets, then we were. Buying, uh, tickets. Probably, you know, at markup, way markup, in fact. Uh, we went to a number of the, uh, playoff games, NBA playoff games, and then, uh, my aunt and uncle, they actually paid like. I think \$800 each for some nosebleed seats that probably cost \$30. When the Lakers, uh, played Detroit and Magic couldn't play in the, in the, uh, final game. Um. But I decided, no, that's too much money. I'm not going to do it. But. But when my aunt and uncle lived in Santa Maria and, and my, uh, biological cousin, adopted sister, we, we did things like we got together at Thanksgiving, Christmas, 4th of July, um, whenever family came up. There was, uh, an aunt, mother, sister and her husband and two kids. They lived in L.A. They would come up and we would, um, uh, go to Lopez Lake.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [02:00:39] We would, uh, uh, do all day, all day trips to Lopez Lake. They would fish, uh, dominoes, uh, spades, blackjack, uh, bid whist. Um. You know, there were a lot of things that, so that family tradition in essence continued. Then my aunt and uncle, they moved back to Mississippi. They built a home back there in the nineties. And I would say like '92 maybe. Um, but in addition to being a, uh, diehard Laker fan, I like to read. I'm um. I'm really interested in history. I like to read. Uh, I got to the point where I couldn't read anymore because I'm too busy. And, so, I took up audiotape books to where especially like on trips where I was going to L.A. or going up north or something like that. I took those up and I had to stop doing that because it got to the point where I would be so into the book, i didn't know how I'd gotten to the point B from point A to B, and I go, "Oh, this is dangerous. This is not good that you're into it like that." So, uh, oh yeah, I have lots of things that I like to do.

Preston Allen: [02:02:16] Mm hmm. Yeah. I can completely relate to the audiobooks. Yeah.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [02:02:18] Yeah.

Preston Allen: [02:02:19] Yeah.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [02:02:19] And I love bingo.

Preston Allen: [02:02:23] Mm hmm. Mm hmm.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [02:02:23] So I, um. On the Saturdays and Sundays, I play Bingo locally. I mean, I spend far more than you could win, like at the, uh, Filipinos. I'm, I'm spending, like, uh, about \$100 and, you know, I might win \$8 on that jackpot. But, you know, it's just the excitement kind of of going. And then on the, on Sundays, I usually play at the, uh, the Eagles. You can win far more. But I haven't won. But I still go every Sunday. Un- unless it's just something that I know that I absolutely need to do, uh, then I don't go. And I love music. In my younger days when I was at, um, Long Beach. I would get together. We had friends, girlfriends, and a, uh, one of my college classmates who took up, um. She was a criminology major. She majored in corrections, but she never worked a day at doing that. She was actually a waitress at Bob's Big Boys. [laughs] That was her career and it's not funny, but I just, I just think about it and laugh about it. Ernie, uh, she and I, we stay in contact, but it would be, uh, my roommate,

Tasha. Ernie. Um. And I can't remember who else but, uh, we would go. On Friday nights. And we might go to, they had a place called Carolina West and, um.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [02:04:20] Inglewood. I think it later became a strip club. It was right, like, you're going towards the airport and, um, late at night, if you got there before 10 o'clock, then it was free and we would go and we would just dance. All night. Until about, uh, maybe 5 o'clock in the morning. Then we would go Norm's or whatever, and we'd have breakfast, and then we'd go home, take a shower and, uh, put on our uniform to go to McDonald's and go to work. Yeah. Yeah. And, uh, I, I love concerts, like I love music, like the oldies. Um, my sister came one year when I was in Long Beach and we went to a concert. It was Chaka Khan, Marvin Gaye, the Brothers Johnsons, Parliament Funkadelics, Bootsy Collins. I mean, we saw it all at the, uh, Coliseum and, um. They announced that Marvin Gaye wasn't coming. And you could smell the cannabis in the air. But when they announced it wasn't Marvin Gaye, I don't know if someone shot a gun or what, but the crowd started running. So my sister and I, we had to run with the crowd and I was wearing these espadrilles. And I'll never forget, one of them came off. And so when the crowd stopped running, I went back and found my espadrille, my, the espadrille.

Preston Allen: [02:06:17] My last question on this topic is, is who would you say are the most influential in your life in terms of you feeling a sense of community?

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [02:06:31] Um, that would have to be my grandparents.

Preston Allen: [02:06:35] Okay.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [02:06:36] And then it would also be my, uh, aunt and uncle. Mary and Matt.

Preston Allen: [02:06:44] Okay.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [02:06:45] Yeah.

Preston Allen: [02:06:47] Yeah. Okay.

Lata Murti: [02:06:55] So, Lawanda, um, how do you choose to identify yourself? In terms of race and gender, what's your preference for how you identify?

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [02:07:09] Well, first of all, I like to identify myself as a human being. That's first and foremost. Then I identify myself as Black and/or African American. And then female.

Lata Murti: [02:07:31] So--.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [02:07:32] I, I think that's important. The identity part of it as human being because. I want people to know that you're dealing with a person. A person. Who has feelings, who has emotions, and all those things that come with it.

Lata Murti: [02:08:02] So, you've been talking about this in terms of specific experiences, but. What does being. A human being who's Black or African American and female. On the Central Coast. What does that mean to you?

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [02:08:29] Well, I, I don't know that it would matter. Where I live. Whether it was the Central Coast or whether it was Mississippi if I was living there. But the one thing that I know. Is I know that. I have an obligation. I have. Some people that paid a big price, a huge price for me to be able to live on the Central Coast. Um, there were a lot of people that fought for me, uh, from the, uh, slave owners, from the, um, the slaves, not the owners, but the slaves and all the, uh, all that they endured. Um, to the Freedom Fighters. And all those who died and are in the cemetery or even maim[ed], even those that had to keep quiet and, um, uh, couldn't say anything because they knew the, uh, the consequences. But someone, what it means is that someone fought for me to be here on the Central Coast or to be, uh, to go to the Santa Maria Inn, or to go to the Radisson some- someone paid a price for me to be there. And I have an obligation as a human being. So, as a black woman. Black person who identifies as female. I have an obligation to continue that fight and continue to do, uh, the things that they did and try to do it maybe a little bit better or differently.

Lata Murti: [02:10:51] So related to that, how did you get, um. Involved with communities of color locally here on the Central Coast.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [02:11:05] So, um. I'm, I'm just going to back up just for a moment and tell you that my grandfather. I look back on it now and realize that he was an activist. He didn't know that he was an activist. But, uh, my grandfather when we did get a TV. He used to look at, uh, Dr. King. Anywhere you could find him on the TV. And they probably didn't have but three stations then. But he would look at them. And then there was a guy named Medgar Evers, the brother of Charles Evers, who later became a Republican. But he was really liberal back in the day. And he's used to be on, like, they had a show called Mike Douglas. And my grandfather would look at that. Mike Douglas seemed to have, uh, like, uh, a lot of liberal. Members, if I remember correctly on this show, and, uh, Charles Evers was one of those people that he had on this show. So I had that, that foundation. Then when I moved to the Central Coast. My uncle. My aunt's husband. He was already in the movement and he was already doing the work, my Uncle Matt. So he had, he was, um, on the executive committee of the NAACP. Um, he was a sociologist, by the way. And, um, he, um. The, the Black people in the community had started an organization called Blacks Recognizing A Goal. B. R. A. G. And they had that, that organization because Black students did not get scholarships to go off to college. And so they started that organization. It was actually still going until the, uh, the, uh, last president he, um. Got, um.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [02:13:29] Lou Gehrig's disease, ALS. Um, and, um. Then it became defunct. But anyway, so my uncle would go to these meetings and I remember when they relaunched the Santa Maria branch. The NAACP. My uncle and aunt actually, and cousins, my cousin Larry, I remember specifically, we all cooked the meal for that dinner that was held at the, uh, Veterans Memorial Building in Santa Maria. That was the big Freedom Fund dinner. And so my uncle, um, would say to me, he would say, uh, "I want you to go to a meeting with me." So I would, um, I would go to the meeting with him and that's, that's really between. My grandfather and that foundation that he set with me. And then my uncle Matt said, "I want you to go to meet him with me." I never said no. Don't ask me why I didn't say no. My aunt was going and I would go to those meetings and it just, you know, it lit the fire. That was already, I guess if you could say it reignited the fire that was already simmering there.

Preston Allen: [02:14:55] Mm hmm.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [02:14:56] Yeah. So all the, um. There were a lot of Black people that they were pretty active then. They're not as active now, uh, with NAACP, um, as I'd like for them to be. But, um, I, I think some of it is complacency and they feel like they've arrived.

Preston Allen: [02:15:25] Yeah.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [02:15:26] Yeah. And unfortunately, as we can see from, um, uh, the Voting Rights Act, sections of it being struck now. That was only the beginning. Now we see, uh, Roe versus Wade. Um, this is just the beginning.

Lata Murti: [02:15:50] So related to that, what have you observed about racial dynamics on the Central Coast specifically, um, San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara?

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [02:16:07] It's not very diverse. Uh, I can tell you that. It's, it's not very diverse and it's like the, um, if it's a few AAPI and they're all grouped together, um, you know, I actually, uh, had some training and I mean, that is just, that's too broad of a category and you should not group, uh, all those ethnicities and, and call them AAPI. That's just too many and you shouldn't do that. Uh, but anyway, the one thing that I've, I've learned and that, uh, with this COVID that I've been working hard to reverse is that. The, um. If you're only 2% of the population. If you're 6% of the population as AAPI, 2% as African American, uh, maybe, uh, 1%, um, Native American. It's almost like you don't exist. You don't exist. And unless you get in there and do some advocacy, you're erased. And that's just the fact. And I think it's the same way in San Luis Obispo County, and it's the same way in Santa Barbara County. Uh, fortunately for us, um, when COVID hit, I was introduced, actually, I called the, uh, Public Health Department. And, I said, you know, we, we're, we want a seat at the table, and the, uh, public health director happened to be Dr., uh, Van Do Reynoso. Um, she's AAPI. And, anyway, uh, it started a, uh, wonderful, wonderful collaboration to where, uhm. She realized a lot of things about what was happening with, uh, the minority communities. And Ashley had the Board of Supervisors sign a ra-, uh, resolution that racism is a public health pandemic.

Lata Murti: [02:18:39] Well, it's a public health crisis. Preston, I'm so sorry I took your. I took your questions there.

Preston Allen: [02:18:50] Well, I'm going to take one of yours because I really like it. I want to ask her.

Lata Murti: [02:18:52] Yeah, please go ahead. Or, or, or ask anything else

Preston Allen: [02:18:57] Okay, yeah.

Lata Murti: [02:18:58] based on what Lawanda just said.

Preston Allen: [02:18:59] I know. So, Lawanda, what do you want the future generations to know about your story?

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [02:19:08] Um. You know, I don't really care if they know my story because. I'm not one. To go around and tell my story. Um, I've known, uh, Supervisor Joan Hart Hartmann, who's the chair of the Board of Supervisors, and I think it was two years ago, I was telling, um, the board at one of the Black History programs, I was telling about my grandfather and my upbringing, and she said, you know, "In all that time, I've never heard Lawanda talk about that, and I never, um, really knew that that was her story." Um, so I, it's, it's not about my story. But it's about our ancestors. And I want, uh. I want. Future generations to know. The, uh, sacrifices and the price that. Has been paid. For them. To be able to be in a blended society. And even though there's all kind of, uh, internalized, uh, racism. For the most part, you have a seat at the table. You. Uh. Voting. They have to, uh, be able to vote. Uh, that was a fight, a fight that they fought for, that they won to be protected. When you go to the polls, because I, I remember my grandmother going to the, um, going to vote, and now I remember that when she would put on her, her, uh, coat to go, there was a hesitancy. Well, I never knew what that was.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [02:21:20] But in hindsight, I realize my grandfa-, my grandmother was probably afraid to vote. You know, she was probably afraid but she never said anything, but, you know. Um, they fought for that right. So that you could be protected, when you went to the ballot box and you could feel safe and that you wouldn't be intimidated and that you could vote. Um, they fought to keep people from being lynching. Lynched. I'm sorry, lynching. I get carried away. Um, anyway, they fought for so many rights, um, to desegregate the schools. Um, to not, uh, have black and white at the doctor's office or own fountains. And, um, you know. They fought against, uh,

segregation. And so all these things, these are things that future generations, they need to remember. They need to, to, to. Not only do they need to remember, but it's important that the story is told. It-it's not critical race theory. But this is our history. This is our story. It needs to be told. Not just my story, but the, the, the all black people, all minorities and the things that they've gone through and the sacrifices that have been made. The stories need to be told because if they're not told, then history repeats itself. And it's important for that reason that history does not repeat itself. Be-you forget. You forget and, and it's just erased.

Preston Allen: [02:23:26] That's. So I, I see we're at our, our time. I'm going to let Lata close us out then, because I'm looking at the clock.

Lata Murti: [02:23:42] Oh, well, I'm just, I'm going to ask Lawanda if there's anything else you wanted to add that we haven't gotten to.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [02:23:50] Well, I don't know if I think of something. [laughs, and all laugh]

Lata Murti: [02:23:53] If you think of something, you know how to find us.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [02:23:56] I can assure you that I probably will, because I, I really like. I tell it, if, if I'm asked or kind of prompted. But it's not something that I, I talk about on a regular basis. And so when, when you all are asking me, me these questions, things are coming up. Like I said, let me back up and tell you more about my grandfather and that influence with, uh, with civil rights and social justice. Um, so there may be some things that will come up that I think are important that I will want to share with you.

Lata Murti: [02:24:46] Just for clarification, you said you didn't have any children.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [02:24:50] I do. I have a daughter.

Lata Murti: [02:24:52] You do. You have a daugh- that's what I thought.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [02:24:54] Yeah, yeah.

Lata Murti: [02:24:54] I was confused there. I'm sorry.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [02:24:57] Mm hmm. I have a daughter. Actually, when I was, when the dog was barking and I was, uh, calling for her, I remembered that she's getting her hair braided. [laughs]

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [02:25:08] Yeah. And so right now, my daughter is actually, um, she's been here with me since October because her condo flooded.

Lata Murti: [02:25:18] Ohhhh

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [02:25:18] In August. And she was supposed to be, when they said they were going to do the repairs, it was supposed to be like a week, five days to a week's thing. And as you can see, it's turned into months.

Lata Murti: [02:25:32] Ohhhh

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [02:25:32] Yeah. Yeah. So I have one daughter. And she's 40.

Preston Allen: [02:25:45] She's young.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [02:25:47] Yeah, well, that tells me, that tells me how old I am. Although I don't particularly feel old. And I, I don't want to be labelled as a senior citizen.

Lata Murti: [02:26:04] Well, no one would know you are. Unless you tell them.

Lata Murti: [02:26:13] Um, Lawanda, thank you so much.

Lata Murti: [02:27:51] Great. Thank you.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [02:27:53] People tell me all the time I should write a book. Um.

Lata Murti: [02:27:56] You should.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [02:27:59] Ehh. My aunt always said she was going to write a book, but she's never written it. You know, I, um. I actually. It was, uh, the article was written by me, uh, about me in the, uh, Independent.

Lata Murti: [02:28:18] Mm hmm. Mm hmm.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [02:28:19] A couple years ago.

Lata Murti: [02:28:20] I remember that.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [02:28:22] And so, um. The, uh, the author. He knew where I was born. And based upon that, he said, um. I, I, I certainly didn't tell him, but he brought up, uh, the three, uh, civil rights workers. Schwerner. Forget their names itself. But the three civil rights workers Freedom Summer that, um. That were murdered there. And so I had to go back and say, well, you know, okay, I know you, you published that, but, um, you should know that that's not my hometown. You have it correct, because it was Bogue Chitto. The river that they were thrown into was Bogue Chitto. But the hometown that I was born in is just Bogue Chitto and not the river. So then my daughter. Uh, looks up Bogue Chitto and looks up that the county is Lincoln, and she looks it up. And, um, there was a pastor, a reverend. Who was, was, uh, really advocating. And he, I believe he was, uh, NAACP, maybe on the executive committee. So he was, uh, telling black people, you got to go register to vote. You got to go register to vote. And this is in either '54 or '55. And he's going to be the first one to go up there and get registered to vote. And he goes up to the courthouse at 10 o'clock in the morning and he's shot dead on the courthouse lawn. No one was ever prosecuted for that.

Lata Murti: [02:30:15] Mmm.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [02:30:16] Yeah...So-

Lata Murti: [02:30:20] You should write a book.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [02:30:22] Yeah, but, you know, and, uh, when I was, it was kind of interesting. I was telling my Aunt Mary, so I was telling her about it and she was fin- finishing my sentences and she knew all about it.

Lata Murti: [02:30:39] Mmm.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [02:30:39] And remembered it. So, um, I know that people, that they know things. But they just don't talk about it.

Lata Murti: [02:36:51] You told me about that archive that I didn't know about for Martin Luther King.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [02:37:19] Yes, it's, it's in Lompoc. But, you know, to me. It's, it's our history. And it's important that our story is told.

Lata Murti: [02:37:32] Mm hmm.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [02:37:32] Um, in Santa Barbara, for instance. There are two, uh, females. Uh, and what they've done is they have, uh, recreated. The, uh, timelines that there were a lot of Black people and historical landmarks and so forth in Santa Barbara, because the, uh, through gentrification, there are hardly any black people in Santa Barbara. Mm hmm. Yeah. And that's supposed to be coming out, I guess in, within months.

Lata Murti: [02:38:13] Oh, I'm so glad to know that.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [02:38:15] Yeah. They're with Healing Justice.

Lata Murti: [02:38:19] I was wondering if they were with Healing Justice. Yeah.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [02:38:22] Yeah.

Lata Murti: [02:38:23] So. Um.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [02:38:26] You know, they had the, uh, museum for a while.

Lata Murti: [02:38:30] Mm hmm.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [02:38:30] And I even thought about it. But, you know, we, I just don't have the capacity. To do all that.

Lata Murti: [02:39:20] Thank you for giving us so much of your time, because.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [02:39:23] Absolutely.

Lata Murti: [02:39:25] I wonder every day how you do it.

Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt: [02:39:31] Well, but. But you join in and try to do things.

Lata Murti: [02:39:37] I try.