

Marcelle Medford (MM): Can you start by introducing yourself -- telling me your name, age, nationality and how long you've lived in Lewiston?

Phyllis Rand (PR): Yes. My name is Phyllis Rand, I'm 61 years old, I'm African American and I have lived in Lewiston for 37 years.

MM: And where in Lewiston, what neighborhood, what part of Lewiston have you lived in? Or do you live in?

PR: I live in the area near Bates College. It is actually across from Bates College, I go for walks up there.

MM: Okay, you lived in Lewiston for 37 years you said, and in your time there, had you either been in or been familiar with Little Canada?

PR: Yes. I've been familiar with Little Canada and I knew people who lived there and actually I am also a disaster volunteer. And there have been fires down there. So my organization has helped people who were burned out of their apartments.

MM: Okay, I definitely want to come back to that as we as we go through the interview. But one of the things I want to ask you about is your relationship to Lewiston? How and why did you come to Lewiston? And why have you stayed?

PR: My husband, I met my husband in Washington, D.C. We were working at the same place. It's a private research library. He's a native Mainer and we started dating. He took me up to Maine to visit his parents and I fell in love with Maine. I'm originally from North Carolina. I always knew that I wanted to live in New England, just because of the weather and four seasons and that sort of thing and so I really, really loved Maine. They lived in Readfield, Maine. It was hard finding jobs living in Washington D.C. after we got married and trying to find jobs in Maine remotely. Back then was just the beginning of the internet. So it wasn't like we had a lot of googling or anything like that. My mother in law had a friend who was going to do missionary work in Kentucky and she needed a house sitter for the summer and she lived in Lewiston. So that was our chance to get to Maine and when we got to Maine, look for a job. That was how I found a job at WS Libby, which was a textile mill in Lewiston. So I got that job like two weeks after moving to Maine.

MM: Wow. Okay, and so this is the mill that you worked in? Wait. Yeah. Tell me about that. How long did you work there? What were the conditions like?

PR: I wasn't there very long. I was there for a little over two years. I worked in what they call the laboratory. We mostly did process control testing on the material that we're using to make items. One of our big items was fire retardant, vertical blinds. And so I would do things like there are specifications on those vertical blinds. I did something like a burn test. We put a strip of the fabric in a chamber. And then you set it on fire. And you see well, how far up it burned from one to 15 seconds. And that determines whether or not the fabric passed the fire retardant test. So that was one of the sort of things I did. That was on the finish product. We also had raw material that

came in, and we'd have to test to make sure that it was high enough quality to make the products that we were making. We made bulletproof vests and we made fire retardant clothing material, that sort of thing. Some material had to be a certain strength as far as wear and tear goes. So I did what's called a burst test. We actually put a flat fiber on this, it's called a Mullins test machine, you crank it and crank it and crank it and see how much pressure that material can stand before it gets torn. Another thing we did was color matching. If a client says I want my vertical blinds to be this color, I can give you the swatch, okay, then in the laboratory, we had to come up with formulations of how much green, how much red, you know, that sort of thing, and come up with a formula to match that color. And then we on a small scale, that we have fabric in the lab we dipped it in to that material, send it thru a machine and dried it and then check to see if the color match. If the color matched then we would send the formula to the dye house, where they made that on a larger scale, based on the formulations on the small scale.

MM: Was that also in the mill?

PR: Yes.

MM: Everything was in house?

PR: Yes. Yes.

MM: And so did you need any special training before you got the job or to learn on the job?

PR: I learned on the job. And that's what most people did. My boss was a chemist. So, you know, he was the ultimate decider of the chemical formulations, or the colors, that sort of thing. No, I mean, I learned on the job. And I learned quickly.

MM: What were the hours like and what was the atmosphere like? And then did you work with other people or was it very solitary?

PR: In the laboratory, we usually had a total of three laboratory people plus my supervisor. It was a revolving door because people couldn't get along with my supervisor.

MM: Okay.

PR: And so they would only stay less than six months, they just couldn't get along with him. He was difficult, but you know, you just learn to get along with people.

MM: Yeah.

PR: So there was that and then I saw the other people during breaks that went to shipping and scheduling. I saw them during the break. It was very hot. Very hot because we have ovens in the laboratory that we used to dry the fabrics. So they had to be certain temperature and the mill itself is all bricks. So, even in the Fall, you know, it's nice and cool outside you go in there the bricks they retain the heat, the bricks that made up the mill. It was so hot in there.

MM: So how did you stay cool?

PR: Well, I had a fan. (Both laughing) There was one conference room that had air conditioning. But we didn't go in there.

MM: No air conditioning, hot conditions and the hours was it nine to five?

PR: It was seven to three thirty and back in the heyday of the mill, in all the mills everybody got out at the same time because there were several mills in Lewiston. I got to say, little bit of a traffic jam.

MM: Oh, wow. You work there for two years. Do you remember what those years were?

PR: It was [19]87 to [19]89.

MM: And were there other women or black folks who work in the mill or lab?

PR: There are plenty of women. I heard that a black man worked somewhere in the mill but I never met him as far as I knew I was the only black person that worked there.

MM: And so you left after being there for two years. What did you go on to do after that?

PR: My background was water and wastewater treatment technology. There was an opening at the wastewater treatment plant that services Lewiston and Auburn so that's where I started working as a quality control technician. One of the things that the wastewater treatment plant does is because the plant is designed to treat biological wastes that come in with the industries. They just started doing other things, non-biological ways that it's charging ways to have heavy metals in it. So they have limits on what they can discharge, they have limits for like copper, that they can discharge to the last. One of my duties was to go to those industries, set up my sample equipment and collect sample over 24 hours. You'd have to analyze for those companies to see whether or not they were over the limit.

MM: Yeah.

PR: I also did inspections. I went around asking where your wet processes are. Where are your floor drains? What chemicals are you using? Where are your chemicals stored? Let me see your house inflation manifest? To make sure they went to a hazardous waste landfill rather than going to the sewer. Yeah. I did that for like two and a half years. It was right in Lewiston.

MM; And currently, what do you do?

PR: Well, after I left my job in Lewiston, I got a job at the Maine Department of Environmental Protection, where I actually got permits for wastewater treatment plants. I really enjoyed that. It sort of everything came full circle. Because you work in a treatment plant, you don't always know all the rhyme or reason behind why the treatment plant has it this way. Back in the day, when I became a prominent writer, I learned all that it became full circle. I did that for four and a

half years, and then the wastewater treatment plant in Augusta needed someone to manage their laboratory. And so the person, the chief operator called me and asked me if I would work there. And so that's where I am right now.

MM: Okay, so you commute to work?

PR: Yes.

MM: And do you have any friends or colleagues from your days of being in the mills at all? Or since they close down?

PR: No, I don't. I don't see anybody. You know, I knew people. I didn't really hang out with them. I, you know, for the most part, I was treated well, by my co-workers. There was one person who was in the lab who at break time she'd sit at our table and tells black jokes. Yeah. I was just like, am I really hearing this. And, you know, this was, like I said, I just moved to Maine and it was just something I never, you know, down south they would talk about people behind their back. But this person was just straight up. And I was just like huh, and nobody at the table said anything. You know, she thought she was funny. But nobody reacted. And I don't know why I never said anything to her about over to my boss, but I guess somebody else did. Because before I knew it she was not working in the lab anymore. And one time we were the whole mill was doing inventory. And you know, there was coffee or somebody asked this guy how do you like your coffee? And you made a terrible joke. I like my coffee black and strong like my women or something like that. And I just kept moving right. But it couldn't be more than an hour later; he came up to me and apologized. And because I think somebody made him aware. He was very sincere. I don't know. So other than that, I haven't had any problem with people I work with.

They're just good people. I did have to learn a few things. My boss, like, we would have to write stuff on a report to my boss and he had to sit me down and tell me there are certain ways that I cannot write. For example, I wrote something like cubic yards like in a formula and you know, And he said, you know, you have write it out. Because people here are gonna think you're trying to be better them. Yeah, that sort of thing.

MM: Interesting. So I hear that and I think about, you know, like, class dynamics, education dynamics in the workplace, did you? Were those types of divisions visibly apparent or just kind of something that you only notice when your boss maybe pulled you to the side.

PR: The language you know, the grammar, just the attitude is less refine. Should I say? I just kind of want to get on (sounds like mute to ratchet it) back a little bit. Just because I didn't want people to know that I thought that I was better than them. It was the same as the first waypoint you put on like that. It was suggested that I'm not used three syllable words. I mean, we're talking Lewiston people live in Little Canada, you know, that sort of thing. I had one coworker who didn't really know the concept of using a shower. He thought that you turn it on and you sit on the floor. He learned when he was in gym class, I guess and the guys were like, what are you doing? And, you know, that's just, and of course, because he was French he was born raised in this. So there was definitely class distinction. And, you know, I've had some

college, things that I normally would have done because that's what I do. People are conscious and aware of what I was saying how I would say,

MM: okay, and right, so you mentioned right, having a co worker whose first language is French who lived in Little Canada. Did folks speak French in the factory? Was that fairly common?

PR: It was fairly common.

MM: In the lab or not?

PR: Not so much in the lab. Actually, you know, just maybe a word here there. My boss was of Italian descent. His wife was a French descent. Most of the people who worked there were but it was most of the people who worked in like in the Carding Room or where the Looms were spoke French. They were older.

MM: Okay. So, do you have a sense of where you fell when you work there sort of like on the age spectrum? Where you younger than a lot of people you worked with or right in the middle?

PR: I was more on the younger side. I was in my middle 20's. One of the things that I really sort of helped me feel good was one of my co workers Sue her husband worked at the paper mill in Jay. She was working in the lab not as hard as I was. But anyway, we got to work together. I really liked her. My husband and I only have one car. Sue would go right by where we lived. I forgot when the homeowner came back from her mission we stayed in an apartment in auburn for a little while. Sue would go by there. So, we had a relationship and she would pick me up. I would give her five bucks for gas. I remember one time, we were in the lab and somebody said something about someone and she said well, Phyllis, Phyllis (assistant) Coach. And I felt really good about that. Because, you know, you were cool. She accepted me that, you know, I wasn't trying to be pretentious or that I was better than her

MM: Wow okay that's interesting. Are there memories that you have of the mill? Either sort of fond or not so fond?

PR: Are you talking about our shift or hours? Every year, the mill shut down I believe it was Easter, it was not a choice. There was, this is how it is. Because a lot of the people who were there were Catholic. So that was a mandatory shutdown. And then another mandatory shutdown was in July because it was just the way it was. I don't have any bad memories. I just remember it being very hot. And, you know, I did have to kind of police myself to make sure that I did not come across some kind of way, you're being too smart.

MM: Right.

PR: So because I want to do this. I didn't want any barriers because they thought they could not talk to me. One funny thing, I don't know if you know anything about carding. You have a fabric with recycled polyester plugged into this machine. And of course, it stretches to make that ball of a flow into a layout. And then it can be layered on each other to make a thicker fabric, okay. Or it can be put inside of materials. Well, this girl who worked in a different department came into the

carving room, I guess, like almost everybody who worked there, has lost at least one finger because of that machine. Her husband had just relocated from one department to the carding room. And sure enough, he lost a finger and his co workers when they came to visit him, they gave him finger sandwiches and ladyfingers. Yeah, Laughing

MM: So that was just sort of a common thing.

PR: Yes. Yes.

MM: So even before he started he knew that it was a possibility?

PR: Yeah, When people do lose body parts.

MM: Wow. And so it wasn't a tragedy for them

PR: No, No, It was the gallows humor type of thing. Gallows humor here you go lady fingers.

MM: Wow. So those are the conditions were just so prevalent. Everyone knew those were the conditions

PR: They bring in finger food. [Laughing]

MM: Interesting, I think, you know, why? Understanding the culture and the norms of the mill is sort of really important things to understand, historically, right.

PR: She just came down, and she was laughing, talked about what they bought him to eat and welcome to The Club.

MM: Right, that sort of writes us sort of a lot about sort of social norms and expectations of the space.

PR: Now, I did get my head caught in a machine in the laboratory. You see those old tiny washing machines where they put the fabric and then they pull it up? Well, we have one it is called a Pat Dryer. It was hot, it was electric. So, that piece of fabric, we would dip it to color match, dip it into the little troughs, we called it the picnic and we'd feed it to the Pat vat, so the Pat dryer it was two pieces, and it was just easy access through the washing machine

Well, I don't know if I was daydreaming, I'm not sure what happened but I was at the Pat Dryer and I was feeding the fabric in. The next thing I knew my hand was going through the (sounds like shirt). I tried to pull it out but it was still trying to pull it in. I was just so calm, I was trying to get it out that I didn't scream or yell for help or anything but my boss I guess he heard the machine making a weird sound. So he came down and then hit the emergency stop, you know he opened it up. The skin on my hand was raw and these two finger nails were pulled off. Because I was going one way and it was coming the other way and I broke the tip of one of my fingers.

MM: So what happens in those situations did you go to the hospital?

PR: They have a workmen comp clinic Concentra or something like that, where it's kind of like urgent care place that the mills had a contract with that had medical services, so I went there.

MM: So it was in the mill.

PR: No it was outside. I got my hand x-rayed and all that. It was very painful.

MM: It sounds it. Is it accurate to say that people experience injuries in the mill?

PR: Yeah, actually another person who started in the lab, she had been in other departments but I don't know if she didn't get along with people or what. But anyway, she started working in the lab and she got her hand caught in it.

MM: Oh my goodness.

PR: Yeah. So it wasn't as bad as mine, I think it was a pinky finger. I can't remember which one it was. But it was not as bad as mine? I didn't think my nails were gonna grow back. When I first came back in they look like animal nails very thick and rigid and then, you know, they grew out.

MM: Oh my goodness and was this before or after your friend's husband lost his finger.

PR: It was before. I hadn't been working there long. What they said was, my boss said that he's noticed the people who get the most injuries are the ones who just started and the ones who have been working there a long time. But I don't think that women's has been, I mean, she was much older than me.

MM: Oh my goodness, it just sounds like it was so common, so prevalent to have these injuries.

PR: Yeah, it was, yeah, it was like it was not a big thing.

MM: So the next question I have, if it applies to the mill, great, if not, that's okay. But we've been asking everyone that we interview about how you define community. And so it could be if you had a community in the mill, right, but or just sort of generally in Lewiston or beyond.

PR: Oh, I think it is a bit of oil and water. You know, that you've got the people who are descendants of the mill. And then you have the new people, which, you know, and I think I'm in between, because I'm not a recent immigrant but I'm not, you know, white mill worker. I've seen, I'm a colorist with the city I think that you know I was here when we had the first influx of Somali immigrants. My church was actually the church that came up with the idea of having a march to support the immigrants and I don't know if you've heard anything about that. This was after the mayor of Lewiston wrote a letter.

MM: Yeah.



PR: Well, my pastor decided that she wanted to, for our church to have a march through the downtown just to show solidarity with anyone and other pastors heard about it and other people heard about it and it grew and grew and grew so it ended up being huge. There were kids from Northern Maine that came down in school buses for this March because while the schools in Maine have been a white club and so the civil rights club came down. I think there were about 3000 people who came from all areas of the state for this march and then there was a big event at Bates. I was on the planning committee. I was one of the security people.

[Both laughing]

PR: I figured this was my community so I can do what I want to do. It was very heart warming. The interesting thing was the show of solidarity. There were no immigrants, no Somali involved. They didn't come. They weren't there and I don't blame them because there was a concern of violence. I think we've come a long way since then, Lewiston has. And even though I am still seeing ignorance and racism within our community I think that I feel optimistic and I do think that Bates College has a lot to do with helping us in that area. Just having a school of that magnitude like Bates staying in Lewiston is a big deal. My kids growing up there were some issues with some of their teachers that we had. But we stayed. Because this is one of the few communities in Maine that was somewhat diverse. And I felt that was important for my kids to be around other kids who were not white.

MM: I want to follow up with some of that with you. Tell me more about your family and type of activities that you and your family did together. It sounds like you all went to church. Did you have other families that you hung up with or activities you did?

PR: I have a son and daughter and they went through the entire Lewiston Public School system. My husband, who is white, grew up in Readfield, but he had family roots in Lewiston. His father was an orthopedic surgeon at Central Maine Medical Center and lived in Lewiston. They went to church in downtown Lewiston and so where we lived in Lewiston after we got a house, we started going to that church with them downtown Lewiston.

My son did sports in High School but his major thing was the string quartet. When he was in the fourth grade and a couple of musicians from the Portland Symphony Orchestra visited the school and played their instruments. One of them was a Cellist and Danny really liked it. He mentioned that he could play it while sitting down. [Laughing]

The kids couldn't play the cello until fifth grade so he played violin in fourth grade. We did not want him to switch to cello because he was such a good musician on the violin but eventually we gave in. He tried turning a guitar into a cello and I said okay we're done with that. Because of my parents we were kind of an outlook community. My husband and I kind of introverted so we did not go out much but we did support our kids. While I was involved in waste water treatment I became more involved and became President of the Maine Organization of Waste Water Professionals and eventually became President of New England Association and they were very supportive. We got to know people in church. If you do not know what to say to a black person then don't say anything. After a while it got to me. They tried to be nice and everything but it was exhausting. One guy would come up to me and talk about his one black friend and they



would look at me like “do you know him?” Every time he came to talk to me he talked about that one black friend. Like there is nothing else we could discuss. There were a few people like that. It was exhausting. I was in a choir. My husband and I started riding our bicycles a lot and I just found it nice to ride around on my bike so that’s what I did.

MM: Actually you touch up on a good amount of the questions I had but I would like to follow up. Are there any traditions or customs that you and your family practice?

PR: Not anymore. When my mother in law and father in law were alive the family got together. My husband’s family is throughout Maine. Every thanksgiving we would get together and every New Year we would get together and Fourth of July we would get together. Since they passed away no one has tried to organize anything and his uncle who lived in Lewiston he just passed away he was in his 90s. So there is no reason really. We all went different ways.

MM: My next question is about if you participated in politics what role politics plays in your life if any?

PR: I had participated in the Emoge Maine. It’s an organization that encourages women of any political party to love art. I got involved in that and that was the time when Paul Lepage was governor I was just so jaded at that point. I said you know what I don’t think I want to be there so I never ran for public office. I am on the Lewiston Planning board of appeal and I have been doing that for a number of years now and that’s okay. At one point I thought of running for Mayor and stuff. I don’t want people calling me on my phone all the time. Maybe someday I will.

MM: A couple more questions. Role of language in your life: does that play a role in your life?

PR: Language Language? I think it is very important and like I said at the mill you had to know who was around you and try to make that work. I had to police myself in the mill and find myself still doing it now, just because some people didn’t necessarily have the advantage of higher education or whatever.

MM: So this is still something you are mindful off to this day?

PR: Well where I work now it is similar I am not putting everybody down that is different. One of the things I do is write technical documents. I write standard operating procedures and what I try to make sure that I’m communicating with my orders and who are the guys that supervise in the laboratory, to confirm construction and that sort of thing. They don’t have the technical background. I police my language and yet they still say stuff that implies that they think I am very smart. They will ask me questions about stuff they do not know and I also do training. The guys that take State Licensing I’ve been training in house so that they can pass their exams. The licensing for waste water treatment even though I try to hide my initials. The language that I use, again I use to explain things to make sure that I meet people where there at.

MM: You had mentioned this previously but I also like to wrap up the interviews by asking folks how they have seen Lewiston change overtime or Lewiston Auburn change overtime. Just

curious after holding this interview thinking about the stories after you first moved in and what's it like now. What are some of the things that stand out to you?

PR: The biggest thing is seeing people who have the same skin color as me that is huge because I just never saw that. The community is evolving as far as it's getting younger and I think you can't rely what's in the mill anymore. Some people grew up with their parents working in the mill, the kids work in the mill and the opportunities for employment are more diverse and I hope that it is encouraging the younger people to realize that they can't sit back and do nothing and expect to have a job. They have to get an education or an internship or something like that. The community is becoming younger and of course more diverse. People are willing to work to get it not all people and some never will. I think language is a big barrier for people who can't speak English.

MM: I always like to wrap up with the question of 'is there anything that I did not ask that I should've that you think is important to know?

PR: The question would be "how do I fit in to Lewiston?" I feel like I am neither here nor there. I am neither a French Canadian nor a recent immigrant. I am kind of in a no man's land as far as the city it is working very hard with the immigrants to work on the language, education.

I haven't figured out what I need to do to be part of the community. I am not part of the immigrant community nor am I part of the French Canadian community. Now in the past I knew that there were them and there was me.

One of the things I am doing, I will be retiring next month and I am a Red Cross volunteer and I have been a volunteer for thirteen years. Maybe what I want to do because I will have more time is to get out into the community to do more emergency prepare training for the different demographics, older population who are in their home as well as the newer Lewistonian. I think that this will give me a feeling of being part in the community. I am not going to sit back and say "I am not part of the community" I am going to make it so that I am.

MM: I love that.