



Oral History: Bennie Lois Clark-Singleton

Excerpted from:

Measuring What Matters: Neighborhood Research for Economic and Environmental Health and Justice in Richmond, North Richmond, and San Pablo



PACIFIC
INSTITUTE

654 13th Street, Oakland, CA 94612
www.pacinst.org

In partnership with West County Toxics Coalition, Neighborhood House of North Richmond, Contra Costa Interfaith Supporting Community Organization, Historic Triangle Neighborhood Council, Morada de Mujeres del Milenio, North Richmond Shoreline Open Space Alliance, and Richmond Progressive Alliance

With support from The California Wellness Foundation, The San Francisco Foundation, East Bay Community Foundation, The Wallace Alexander Gerbode Foundation, Y & H Soda Foundation, Rose Foundation for Communities and the Environment, California Environmental Protection Agency, Firedoll Foundation, Robert & Patricia Switzer Foundation, and The California Endowment

The full report is available at http://www.pacinst.org/reports/measuring_what_matters/



Creative Commons, 2009. Material can be adapted and reproduced for non-commercial purposes, as long as the author is credited. More info: <http://creativecommons.org/about/licenses>.



BENNIE LOIS CLARK-SINGLETON

"When I grew up in Richmond we could walk down the streets without fear. There was nothing to be afraid of except your parents getting you if you did something wrong. In the early days there was lots of undeveloped land. Many of the new arrivals were from the south, so Richmond was really a country town.

The first week my family arrived in Richmond, we all slept in the same room. There was no place to live because there were so many new people. Somehow my father acquired a trailer in North Richmond and we lived there until we moved to the Harbor Gate housing project. Harbor Gate was built during the war where Marina Bay is now. Once the war was over, the Housing Authority tore the projects down and people had to find places to live again. Some moved to surrounding areas, some moved back to the south, but many remained in Richmond.

After I married my husband, I wanted to purchase a house in Richmond but ran into problems. White-only covenants restricted us to certain areas. Where were black people to live? We could live in South Richmond or North Richmond, and then they built Parchester Village for us. Primarily we could live in the areas where we lived when we were in the projects, and the white people had everything else.

I said, 'Let me get out of this prejudiced town,' and my husband, my children, and I moved to Los Angeles. I found Los Angeles to be worse than Richmond in its segregation, but we stayed there almost 10 years. Then we moved back to Richmond.

When we came back, things had really changed. I noticed people not working, kids not in school and standing on corners. There were lots of one-



parent families. The morals had changed and I don't know why. Even the churches changed, with fewer people attending them.

The Richmond that we have today is so different from when I was a girl. Today people appear to be afraid of each other and don't speak to each other as they pass on the streets. People are afraid to walk down the streets and sometimes afraid to drive down certain streets. It is as though the family has just disappeared. In the old family, if I was seen doing something wrong, anyone knowing me could tell my parents. I would suffer the consequences of my actions. Now people just don't want to get involved.

Things are starting to change. I remember during the sixties when the youth took over this country and President Kennedy was elected. It seems that as we become adults we forget how we are supposed to treat each other. Then the youth come along and say, 'Hey, that is not right.' I like that; I really like that. Now the youth are at it again. I felt this movement with President Kennedy and I now feel it with Obama today."