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Elderly Emergent Readers: A Story to Tell and a Voice to Tell It

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ELDERLY EMERGENT READERS: A STORY TO TELL AND A VOICE TO TELL IT

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

in

The School of Education

by
Laura Williams
B.A., Louisiana State University, 2010
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ABSTRACT

This project involved a qualitative study with life history interviews of Black elderly men and women enrolled with a non-profit organization that seeks to provide education to adults. There was both an observational component and interviews; the observations, with the researcher acting as moderate participant observer, began in spring 2014 and continued through spring 2016. The interviews were conducted over the summer of 2014.

The purpose of this project was to learn how and why the seven participants have been pursuing literacy for the majority of their lives, and how and why reading is important to them. This project began because of the researcher's own love of reading and an interest in how so many adults remain illiterate in this day and age.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

I became interested in adult literacy after I began volunteering with a non-profit in my hometown of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, which I will refer to as the Adult Reading Center (ARC) hereafter. In 2010, I graduated Louisiana State University with a Bachelors in English, concentration Literature, and hadn't the first idea of what to do with my life. I've long known the importance of literacy to me: my greatest passion is writing (poetry and prose) but it is followed closely by reading, which I have been doing non-stop since about the age of ten. People have often suggested I go into teaching but my efforts with Volunteers in Public Schools as a Reading Friend (two semesters, undergrad) taught me that working with children is not my strong suit. However, I still wanted to do something with my degree and my love of reading, so I searched for volunteer opportunities around town. I began working with ARC in July 2010 as both a tutor and an office assistant. I worked with them weekly (always in a volunteer capacity) while still seeking paid employment, and at the end of 2011, I finally ceased being an office assistant, though I have kept up with the tutoring.

While going through the tutor training session in 2010, I realized that adult illiteracy is a concrete problem in need of a solution. At the time, I didn't understand how so many adults could be illiterate in the 21st century. When I was given the opportunity to attend graduate school in 2013, I knew that I wanted to focus on adult literacy in some capacity, so I returned to ARC to speak with the director and he suggested that I work with their elderly class of emergent readers.

Of course, there are numerous studies on children learning to read, and many on English as a second language learners; however, very few studies have been conducted on emergent readers past middle-age, and because of this lack, I found myself interested in what emergent readers of a certain age had to say. I chose to both observe and interview the students of the elderly emergent class, and it has been a very rewarding experience.

I began this study with two research questions:

What role does learning to read play in the lives of elderly emergent readers?

How can the life histories of elderly emergent readers inform our understanding of literacy?

After I began analyzing the data, I added another:

Why did these seven participants never become literate as children?

For this project, I interviewed and observed seven of ARC's students. Each of the participants is a Black senior citizen who has been functionally illiterate for the vast majority of their life, despite various attempts at obtaining literacy. The youngest participant at the time of his interview was 59; the oldest was 89. Five of the seven grew up in the rural south; two of the seven grew up in the urban south.

As the world grows steadily more technologically-advanced, our understanding of what being "literate" entails grows with it. A brief list created by the National Writing Project includes:

1. Digital Literacy- Cognitive skills that are used in executing tasks in digital environments
2. Computer Literacy- Ability to use a computer and software
3. Media Literacy- Ability to think critically about different types of media
4. Information Literacy- Ability to evaluate, locate, identify, and effectively use info
5. Technology Literacy- The ability to use technology effectively in several different ways

6. Political Literacy- Knowledge and skills needed to actively participate in political matters
7. Cultural Literacy- The knowledge of one's own culture
8. Multicultural Literacy- The knowledge and appreciation of other cultures
9. Visual Literacy- The ability to critically read images
(<http://digitalis.nwp.org/resource/5066> retrieved Oct. 2014)

Not included on the list is the traditional text-based literacy that focuses on print documents, which is what this project focuses on, as it has been evidenced in the participants I observed and interviewed. Perry (2012) explains that

Lexico-syntactic and graphophonic knowledge consists of knowledge of vocabulary, syntax, and how a given language is encoded and decoded in print. Cultural knowledge includes beliefs, values, and expectations. Genre knowledge includes knowledge of the textual features, uses, purposes for use, and organization of given genres... the usefulness of viewing literacy as a set of social practices, because it shows that cognitive skills are only one part of what it takes to be literate. In addition, individuals must have a great deal of context-dependent knowledge to engage in a literacy practice. (p. 57)

Literacy, and what is necessary to be fully literate in a society, changes over time; today, there are as many kinds of literacy as there are people. "Multiliteracies," Perry continues, "do not reject print literacy, but they view it as only one form of representation," and a kind that is still "privileged above other forms in schooling," (p. 59).

This has been a qualitative project, utilizing life history interviews and observations; life history differs "from biography in which the subject is quoted, but which seldom presents long block quotes of testimony from his or her life account," according to Yow (1994, p. 169). What I like best about life history is that the majority of the story remains the participant's—I have not interpreted the story but am presenting it (mostly) in full, though arranged in what I hope is an aesthetically pleasing way.

Rationale

First, of course: *what is reading?* I asked each of my participants this question and received seven different answers that, at their most basic, held the same meaning of freedom. I, personally, define *reading* as *the ability make sense of what is placed in front of a person*. Merriam-Webster defines reading as

- 1 : the act of reading
- 2a : material read or for reading
- b : extent of material read
- 3a : a particular version
- b : data indicated by an instrument
- 4a : a particular interpretation of something (as a law)
- b : a particular performance of something (as a musical work)
- 5: an indication of a certain state of affairs.

This project focuses on elderly emergent readers; what do I mean by that? Well, an *emergent reader*, as per Sulzby and Teale (1986) and Clay (1966) is someone who is learning to read, generally at a young age, when a great many people do. Therefore, an *elderly emergent reader* is someone aged 60 or above learning to read.

Reading is my chosen focus: what do my participants consider reading to be? How has being unable to read affected them? What do they hope to gain from learning to read? Most of them can make their way through simple sentences at the moment, though actual meaning of the passage may escape them if any of the words are unfamiliar.

According to White (2011), "Reading words requires readers to decode unfamiliar words and to recognize written words," (p. 237) while "[s]entence comprehension involves several linguistic processes involving lexicon, semantics, syntax, and even the larger discourse... readers may read all of the words accurately yet fail to capture the meaning of the connected text," (p. 238). Also, "[r]ather than read an entire text to find the answer to a

question, adults commonly search text for the needed subset(s) of information within a larger body of text,” (p. 238). White explains that “[t]o infer meaning is to draw conclusions based on information presented in written text,” (p. 240) and that “[t]o apply information is to use information that has been gained by inferring meaning, performing computations, or searching a text to accomplish a goal,” (241). All of this is knowledge that I possessed prior to reading the article but had never consciously considered. Reading and understanding what I read is an unconscious process for me, when the content itself is not beyond my grasp. When I encounter a new word, a quick search (via the internet, or my dictionary app on my phone, or Microsoft Word’s synonym feature) usually reveals that I know at least one synonym for it. Because this is my experience, I often (unconsciously) take vocabulary and literary skills for granted.

When I began my literature search, I wanted to find studies that focused on elderly emergent readers. I finally focused on adult literacy studies that included elderly participants. Because of the quantity of research on young-to-middle-aged adult learners and the numerous projects focused on children learning to read, I hope that my study on Black elderly emergent readers from the rural south will provide a new voice on reading. Working with my seven participants has broadened my own understanding of what reading can be and I hope it does the same for those who read my participants’ stories.

Going into this project, I could not fathom living without literacy. Learning how these seven men and women have done just that has taught me that while literacy is still important, and should not be a privilege, it is possible to have a good life without it.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

I began this project because literacy is important and I am astounded by my participants; they first amazed me as a newly-graduated 22-year old with a Bachelor's Degree in English and they continue to amaze me as I strive for a Master's Degree in Education. For me, literacy is a vital component in the various aspects of my life and to see that these elderly men and women have gone the vast majority of their lives without—I wished to know more about their journeys and what those journeys can teach those of us who have never experienced it.

According to Jacobson (2011), some scholars “have described reading as having four components: alphabetics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension,” (p. 132). The problem with this approach, Jacobson continues, is that “comprehension is simultaneously identified as the goal of reading and a component of reading. How can something be both the end and the means to achieve that end?” (p. 133) Further problems into how to measure literacy echo what was mentioned in the introduction: what definition of literacy is being measured?

This literature review will contain an overview of adult literacy at a global level before scaling down to the United States and then Louisiana. Also, the racial identity of Blacks in the rural south will be discussed, though it is not an exhaustive examination. Studies on emergent readers will be examined and finally, there will be a short summation of a few local adult literacy programs in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

Panic after first literacy report. Quigley (1997) explains that there was a panic in 1975 after the United States Commissioner announced that over 50% of the nation's adult

citizens were basically illiterate. This sparked a great deal of effort in “fixing” the problem; however, despite nearly two decades of attempts, as The National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) showed in 1993, nearly half the adults still had basic skills in literacy and not much else. In an interesting twist, no reports on adult literacy (or the lack thereof) has elicited such a strong reaction as the first. And forty years later, in 2015, there still is not much change at all. It is seemingly no longer important.

The Importance of Literacy

According to Smith (1993), “Reading is assumed to be an activity that helps individuals stay in touch with the world, provides an avenue for leisure and enjoyment, and is critical for effective functioning in an information-driven society,” (p. 418) while White *et al.* (2010) explain that “an average adult engages in reading on a daily basis,” (p. 281). There are, of course, different kinds of literacies, and sliding scales of each. The act of reading can mean sitting down with a thick tome, or searching a database on a computer, or scouring a map. Adult illiteracy is neither a new phenomenon nor simply a local one.

Global. According to The Institute for Statistics (UIS) Adult and Youth Literacy National, regional and global trends, 1985-2015, published June 2013, “In absolute numbers, 774 million adults lacked basic literacy skills in 2011.” According to NAAL, as of 2012, 16% of the world’s population is illiterate. Both report that two-thirds of the illiterate population are women: 493 million. (LAMP, p. 9)

The term *literacy* as defined by NAAL is “using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential.” NAAL looked at the way adults use textual information to exist in society, including both their home lives and their workplace activities. In NAAL’s report, there are seven skills

involved in total literacy: text search, inferential, basic reading, application, language, computation identification, and then computation performance.

The UIS of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) implemented the Literacy Assessment and Monitoring Programme (LAMP) in 2008 after five years of development and fine-tuning. It was created and conducted so that a new methodology would be available to examine literacy and numeracy amongst the nations of the world. LAMP focused on three particular kinds of literacy: reading of continuous and non-continuous texts and numeracy. Adding statistical analysis, LAMP recorded each respondent's socio-economic background and familiarity with written materials in the context of everyday life. UNESCO initiated LAMP because education is considered a fundamental human right. Literacy itself is a basic tenet in the education process—the building block of all the rest.

The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) was implemented in the mid-1990s and has had revisions since. The second was the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (ALL) in the early 2000s and next was the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC). The IALS conducted testing in the United States (U.S.), Canada, Ireland, the Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland, Poland, and Germany, though two further rounds added in more countries. When it was found that large swaths of the tested populations had literacy deficits, these results caused a bit of controversy, with multiple countries conducting retests. Regardless, literacy programs were given an immediate overhaul and deemed critical.

On the IALS, prose literacy (the focus of my paper) was ranked in five levels: Level 1, where most of the tasks required the reader to locate one piece of information in the text

that is identical or synonymous to the information given in the directive; Level 2, where the tasks tended to require the reader to locate one or more pieces of information in the text, but several distracters may be present, or low-level inferences may be required; Level 3, where the tasks tended to direct readers to search texts to match information that require low-level inferences or that meet specified conditions; Level 4, where the tasks required readers to perform multiple-feature matching or to provide several responses where the requested information must be identified through text-based inferences; and Level 5, the highest level, where some tasks required the reader to search for information in dense text that contains a number of plausible distracters (Statistics Canada, 2008).

National. In the U.S., according to the U.S. Department of Education's National Institute of Literacy, as of 2013, 14% of the total adult population is illiterate. That is 32 million US citizens. Seniors and the elderly over age 65 had the lowest average literacy scores of any age range, with 64 percent performing in the Basic and Below Basic levels. (Tolbert, p. 2-3)

Returning to NAAL, the levels of prose literacy are: below basic, where the person has no more than the simplest and *concrete* literacy skills; basic, where a person can perform simple and everyday literacy activities; intermediate, where the person can perform moderately challenging literacy activities; and the proficient person can perform complex and challenging literacy activities. In 2003, NAAL found that 26% of those aged 65 and higher in the U.S. were below basic in prose literacy; so were Black adults. Considering my project's focus, I find this statistic interesting because all of my participants are elderly and Black.

For 2003-2004, the Office of Vocational and Adult Education for the US Department of Education found that 54% of those enrolled in federally funded adult education programs were women; for the same year, 4% of total students were aged 60 and above. The greatest number of students were aged 25 – 44 (45%) and then were those aged 16-24 (39%). (Tolbert, p. 2-3)

Louisiana. In 1992, the State Adult Literacy Survey was conducted in twelve of the U.S., among them Louisiana. It was prepared and administered by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and the Division of Adult Education and Literacy. About 1,200 Louisiana adults (aged 16 or above) were chosen, intended to represent the statewide adult population.

According to Jenkins and Kirsch (1994), each survey participant was asked to spend approximately an hour responding to a series of varied literacy tasks as well as questions about his or her demographic characteristics, educational background, employment, income, reading practices, and other areas related to literacy. Based on their responses to the survey tasks, adults received proficiency scores along three scales, each ranging from 0 to 500. The score points along these scales reflect varying degrees of skill in prose, document, and quantitative literacy. To provide a way to examine the distribution of performance within various subpopulations of interest, five levels of proficiency were defined along each scale: Level 1 (0 to 225), Level 2 (226 to 275), Level 3 (276 to 325), Level 4 (326 to 375), and Level 5 (376 to 500).

Unsurprisingly, the findings revealed that around 26% of the surveyed were at the lowest level of the document, quantitative, and prose literacies. Around 30% were in the second-lowest level, and 30% again on the third level. Around 15% of the adults surveyed

were on the two highest levels of literacy. The report found that “The average literacy proficiencies of adults in Louisiana (257 to 263 across the scales) were comparable to those of adults living in the South. The average prose and document scores of adults in the state, however, were lower than those of adults nationwide. In all three populations—the state, region, and nation—average scores were in the Level 2 range (226 to 275),” (Jenkins&Kirsch, 1994, p. 2).

What I find to be the most interesting part of the survey are the results regarding older adults in Louisiana, as according to Jenkins and Kirsch (1994), they “were more likely than middle-aged and younger adults to demonstrate limited literacy skills. Nationwide, for example, average prose scores rise from 271 among 16- to 18-year-olds in Louisiana to 289 among 35- to 44-year-olds, before declining across the older age groups,” (p. 2). Also interesting, regarding the survey, are the results for variations in race:

On average, the literacy proficiencies of African American adults in Louisiana were lower than those of White adults. On the prose scale, for example, the average score of White individuals in the state was 280, which lies in the low end of the Level 3 range. For African American residents, it was 223, which lies in the high end of the Level 1 range. These differences in performance are accompanied by differences in years of education; on average, White adults in Louisiana had completed more years of schooling (12 years) than African American adults (11 years) or Latino adults (10 years). (Jenkins&Kirsch, 1994, p. 2-3).

Racial Identity

In the late 1920s and 1930s, there were three separate projects to interview surviving ex-slaves (all of whom were either advanced in age or approaching advanced age): The Federal Writers’ Project for the Works Progress Administration, Charles S. Johnson at Fisk University, and John B. Cade at Southern University. There were, of course, limitations with each (the greatest being that all interviewers of the Federal Writers Project were White); however, there are now nearly 2,500 narratives of slavery archived from the

slave's point of view, given by the last generation to endure it. Several of them also include pictures of the interviewee.

Yetman (2000), who compiled an anthology from the Slave Narrative Collection, states that "The recollection of the past is always a highly subjective phenomenon, one continually subject to modification and distortion. The alleged untrustworthiness of slave narratives has therefore been a frequent and not inconsequential objection to their use in historical research," (p. 3-4). Despite this limitation, he goes on to say that "The Collection has relevance to literary as well as to historical and social-scientific analyses. As sensitive literary scholars have increasingly recognized, the narrative represents a unique literary style and a once flourishing cultural form that is today rapidly becoming extinct under the impact of modern mass communications. The former slaves interviewed by the Federal Writers were among the most able practitioners of this style," (p. 4).

Of course, these projects were not the first collections of slave narratives: thousands of ex-slaves had narrated their stories for distribution starting from the 1700s; according to Tackach (2001), "between 1700 and the mid-twentieth century... More than one hundred book-length slave narratives were published," (p. 13). Of course, the narratives published prior to the Civil War had a different intention from the ones published after it—they were usually adventure stories combined with a parable, and often were used in the abolitionist movement as an inspiration tool. Many people believed that descriptions of slavery within the narrative were exaggerated for effect. Most of the pre-War narratives contained an introduction from a white person who verified that the contents of the narrative were truthful, and the vast majority of the narratives were from a male

perspective. The narratives published post-War did often include parts about their life during slavery but they also described what life post-slavery was like.

According to Anderson (1988),

Blacks emerged from slavery with a strong belief in the desirability of learning to read and write. This belief was expressed in the pride with which they talked of other ex-slaves who learned to read or write in slavery and in the esteem in which they held literate blacks. It was expressed in the intensity and the frequency of their anger at slavery for keeping them illiterate. (p. 5)

He adds that “Being educated and literate had an important cultural significance to Afro-American, and they pursued these goals in opposition to the economic and ideological interest of the planter-dominated South,” (p. 31). This same aspiration is presented in *Sweet Words So Brave*, written by Curry and Brodie (1996) from the perspective of a parent-figure explaining African-American literature to a child,

These slaves were forbidden to read and write. If they were caught writing, or teaching others how, they got punished. It was brave man, woman, or child who picked up a book in those days. But people picked them up, anyway. They stole away at night after chores. Their classrooms were moonlight hiding places, their notebooks were made of slate. They used chalk stone to write. They remembered the stories from their lives in Africa. They held those stories firm in their hands like delicate glow flies. Their closed fists lit up the night and their voices carried lovely songs from deep in their throats over the night breeze. Those folks pooled their different traditions to make one. They created new lives—new songs, new customs, new stories—out of pieces of their old lives and pieces of the lives they had now. (p. 9-10)

In the post-War years, after slavery was abolished, the Jim Crow era arose.

According to the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia,

Jim Crow was the name of the racial caste system which operated primarily, but not exclusively in southern and border states, between 1877 and the mid-1960s. Jim Crow was more than a series of rigid anti-black laws. It was a way of life. Under Jim Crow, African Americans were relegated to the status of second class citizens. Jim Crow represented the legitimization of anti-black racism. Many Christian ministers and theologians taught that whites were the Chosen people, blacks were cursed to

be servants, and God supported racial segregation. Craniologists, eugenicists, phrenologists, and Social Darwinists, at every educational level, buttressed the belief that blacks were innately intellectually and culturally inferior to whites. Pro-segregation politicians gave eloquent speeches on the great danger of integration: the mongrelization of the [W]hite race.

Anderson (1988) explains that

the region's slow development in education was in substantial part the result of the planters' stubborn adherence to a set of values inconsistent with democracy, modernization, rapid industrialization, and free schooling ... the South's slow rate of educational development and the planters' particular opposition to black education sprang from their clear economic and ideological interests in preserving the racially qualified system of coercive agricultural labor. (p. 25)

He further elaborates that

For the profitable growing of cash crops, chiefly cotton and tobacco, planters considered a cheap labor supply as essential and regarded black agricultural laborers as the mainstay of their exploited work force. Many planters, believing that schooling actually spoiled a good field hand, preferred their laborers illiterate or at best semi-literate. Moreover, the labor needs for growing cash crops and the rhythms of economic life were inherently opposed to formal schooling. (p. 149)

Many of my participants grew up on farms in the rural south; see Table 1. According to Hurt (2003),

African American tenants usually farmed about fifty acres, settled their accounts at the end of the year, and remained in debt and bound by a continuing contract that required them to remain on the land and work off their debt to the landowner or furnishing merchant. Their lives differed little from those of their parents and grandparents who endured slavery and the pre-Civil War plantation system...

Discrimination was a fact of life for black farmers who attempted to purchase land or acquire loans for operating expenses. Most African-American families still resided in unpainted houses that were little more than shacks. Virtually all lived without indoor plumbing or window screens. Few of these farmers had more security than an annual oral contract with the landowner. (p. 1, 3-4)

This description matches up with what three of the participants of my study described of their childhoods. As two of the participants who talked about farm life were women, I found this passage from Tolnay (1999) particularly apropos:

Southern farm women were the glue that held families together. Not only did they bear the children and shoulder a disproportionate share of child care and household duties but they also worked in the fields alongside their husbands. Farm children were considered by many to be an important economic asset because they could increase the size of the family work force, thereby increasing family income. Conversely, some farm couples eventually came to realize that too many children, especially if they attended school, could place a heavy burden on family finances. Still, the rural South was largely a patriarchal society, so farm fathers and husbands must also figure prominently in a portrait of southern farm households. (p. 1)

Most of my participants were only one of many children, and most of their siblings did not go to school any longer than they themselves did.

In 1970, Rutgers University with the help of the Friendly-Fuld Neighborhood House collected the life histories of elderly Blacks in Newark, New Jersey. These interviews were published by Faulkner *et al.* (1982) in *When I was Comin' Up* and the interviewers explain that "There was a certain urgency attendant upon gathering these life histories, for we could hear the ticking of the clock. With the death of this generation of blacks, the best source of knowledge about the historical period within which they lived will disappear, never to be retrieved," (p. 14). The interviewees were southern Blacks who had moved to northern cities; according to the authors, the interviewees were referred to as 'historians' while the interviewers themselves were called 'listeners.' These 'historians' "were born, for the most part, in the thirty years between 1880 and 1910... more than three-fourths were born in the Southeastern part of the U.S., with Georgia, the Carolinas, and Virginia heading the list," (17-18). These 'historians' were still within the Jim Crow era, which the authors explained by saying

Blacks who grew up in the South at the turn of the century learned a bitter lesson from their earliest years. In order to survive, the lesson went, you must give up your rights. In addition, you must accompany the sacrifice with a bland expression turned toward the outside world. Only by understanding this compelled behavior, the cornerstone of black existence, is it possible to understand the attitudes and actions of that generation. (19)

My participants, the oldest born in 1924 and the youngest in 1955, are the children of the same generation as these “historians,” so these are also the lessons they learned.

Purcell-Gates and Dahl (1991) conducted a study that focused on why young low-socioeconomic status children often have difficulty in the classroom; though their participants were kindergarteners and first graders in a Midwestern city in the early 1990s, the majority were Black, and the findings seemed familiar. Purcell-Gates and Dahl reported that they found “four distinct learning paths” that “reflected cross-site groupings of learner responses to skill-based reading and writing instruction across time,” (p. 14). There is the Independent Explorer Path, children who understood that print has meaning and began seeking it out themselves without guidance; the Curriculum Dependent Path, children who did not understand that letters and number vary in meaning, and who could not work independently; the Passive Non-Weaver Path, children who put in minimal effort and did not seek out any extra work; and lastly the Deferring Learner Path, a child who spent kindergarten as an Independent Explorer but faltered in first grade and began leaning on others for answers. According to Purcell-Gates and Dahl, these four kinds of paths “demonstrated that reading and writing instruction was interpreted differently by the learners themselves” and that “the children who were the most successful at reading and writing” had a “more highly and broadly developed schemata about written language as compared to the children who were least successful,” (p. 26). The children who did well

understood that “the little marks on the paper signified—carried meaning—and that meaning was coded linguistically rather than ideographically,” (p. 27). Comparing Purcell-Gates and Dahl’s data with my own experiences with my participants, despite the time and place differences, is very intriguing. Though I don’t wish to speculate, I can situate the majority of my participants into one of those four categories, though of course the added years do perhaps skew the results.

Emergent Readers

Because my project examined elderly emergent readers, I searched for previous studies that focused on this subset of literacy students. Clay first used “emergent literacy” in 1966 to explain how children emulate adults in the practice of reading. However, adult emergent readers remain an understudied field, especially *elderly* emergent readers.

In their assessment of adult literacy studies, Comings and Soricone (2007) give an overview of various studies in the field while discussing the strengths and weaknesses inherent in the research. They state that the

adult literacy population is often treated as a homogeneous group, but, in fact, it is diverse in many ways that might affect research findings. A treatment that works for one group may not work another, but a study might show an average effect across a population with wide diversity. Even when research is restricted to a specific population, important differences within the population may not be identified (p. 26).

I read the document searching for an elderly literacy study but that is a project that Comings and Soricone never detail. They analyze multiple adult literacy studies and programs and conclude that while “the field of adult literacy only has a small foundation of scientific research” the current lack of numerous studies is an opportunity for burgeoning researchers. Other advantages of the field are the ability to measure the outcome of

programs a bit sooner than is the case with children and that adults are easier to obtain for research.

However, the challenges in the field of adult literacy research are abundant. I shall quote the Table of Contents for Comings and Soricone: lack of theory-based models for instruction and services, informed consent, incomplete and inconsistent data, inaccurate data, lack of valid and reliable tests, multiple populations, lack of program resources, sampling, shortcomings with existing data sets, and lack of research resources (p. iii, 2007).

It is the multiple populations I want to focus on because there is a great deal of data for adult English as a second language students, young adult literacy students (around 18-24 years), and middle-aged students currently in the workforce—but a dearth for *elderly* literacy students. All of the literature mentioned that far more studies have been conducted on children's literacy than on adults'. This has held true for decades, as even articles from the 1980s discuss how little literature exists about studies on adult learners.

Heisel and Larson (1984) studied elderly Blacks in New Jersey as part of a larger longitudinal research project that examined the lives of a Black elderly population. The participants were aged 60 to 94, with 44 men and 88 women, who had been selected randomly from the larger study. Interviewers (who were also part of the larger study and also Black) held structured interviews with questions that included a series of literacy prompts, and that resulted in widely varying results. The majority of the group was fully literate while 7% self-reported that they did not know how to read at all. Most learned to read in school or were taught by friends/family while still young; many also explained that they read less than they used to for health reasons. However, eight of 132 participants proudly explained that they had learned to read as adults (p. 69).

Mellard *et al.* conducted a study in 2013 and have this to say about ‘adult learner differences’: “Adults with low literacy developmentally and experientially differ from young readers...” That *experientially* is important; another thing most of the literature mentions is how adult learners have a wealth of life experience children just *do not*. As Mellard *et al.* continue on to explain, “Another difference between children and adults learning to read is life experience that contributes to prior knowledge and vocabulary,” (Mellard, Fall, & Woods, 2013). In another study conducted in 2010, Mellard *et al.* state that the “breadth and depth of an adult’s reading vocabulary is thought to contribute to his or her ability to comprehend the meaning of texts,” which also comes from life experience. Whether or not the adult learner can spell every word they know, chances are they know thousands and use them (more or less) correctly. Mellard *et al.* add that “[a]lthough these basic reading components [alphabets, vocabulary, fluency, comprehension] may be similar for adults and children, the relationships between the components may differ” (Mellard, Fall, & Woods, 2010).

Lipnevich and Beder (2007) used a survey to answer the following questions: 1) Are there differences between the global (entire self-esteem) and academic self-esteem of adult literacy learners and highly educated learners? And 2) Is there a relationship among self-esteem levels of adult learners and reading and math achievement? The study took place in New Jersey with 219 adult literacy learners aged 16 – 67 and with 44 doctoral students who filled out an online questionnaire. The searchers concluded that neither of the self-esteems measured differed greatly between the groups; they suspected that this surprising result was because the adult learners not only joined the literacy organization thinking

they would be successful but because they compare themselves to others of their same racial/class group instead of to a different group.

As explained by Hughes and Schwab (2010) in *Teaching Adult Literacy: Principles and Practice*, part of the problem with applicable materials is that “[a]dult literacy has only recently been identified as a field of social policy and education in rich western countries,” (p. 15). Another problem with adults learning to read is that their life experience “can be both a resource to draw on and a challenge” because most of them did attend ‘traditional’ school up to a point (p. 155). They have also become masterful at hiding their illiteracy from the world. The materials for learning “may be any text that is interesting and relevant for the learner ... texts that they want or need to read ... any genre...” (p. 160-161). Hughes and Schwab, like the researchers before, mention “authentic texts” — “newspapers, leaflets, manuals” and so many more examples (p. 161) of things that are relevant to the adult learner, things that are factual and concrete. According to Lesgold and Welch-Ross (2012) in *Improving Adult Literacy Instruction: Options for Practice and Research*, “Developing readers need to confront challenging texts that engage them with meaningful content but they also need texts that afford them the practicing of the skills they need to develop and systematic support to stretch beyond existing skills,” (p. 26-27).

When children learn to read, they are still in the process of discovering themselves and the world. They have no experience yet. When looked at altogether, the research clearly demonstrates the importance of the life experience that adult learners bring with them. According to *Teaching Adults: A Literacy Resource Book*, developed by the organization ProLiteracy (2003),

Adult learners bring a wealth of knowledge and experience to the learning process. Each adult learner is a unique individual with his or her own needs and interests. This idea is at the core of teaching adults. In order to ensure success, the tutor or teacher must work with the learner to tailor the program to the learner's long-term goals and short-term objectives. [p. 8]

ARC provides both classroom instruction and tutoring. Many of the students utilize both. In my experience, I know of at least two participants who bring their classwork to their tutoring sessions to continue working on it, which validates this trend.

Some people do best in a classroom setting where there are many people focused on the same task. Others do better one-on-one with a tutor focused only on them, or perhaps in group tutoring, where there are multiple people but still a smaller group than in a classroom. Still others utilize both methods. Then there are the differences in learning styles: some need visual aids, others can learn through listening and hearing the information spoken aloud, and a third group needs hands-on experience. Understanding how the student works is vital in teaching. But adult learners have one more component than most children: their life experience. Dewey advocated for experiential learning, where the focus is on learning by doing and bringing in knowledge from the outside world instead of keeping everything separated. According to Dewey (1915),

From the standpoint of the child, the great waste in the school comes from his inability to utilize the experiences he gets outside of the school in any completely and free way within the school itself; while, on the other hand, he is unable to apply in daily life what he is learning at school. That is the isolation of the school – its isolation from life. [p. 46]

When I compare my experience to Dewey's claims, I remember being a student in middle and high school, even as an undergrad in college, wondering what value the various subjects would have in my life; I was a child with very little life experience. How, then, must adult learners feel? Their vast life experiences must be brought in to show the

importance of what they are learning. Often in the class I observed, the teacher read a paragraph aloud and then asked if any of the students had something similar happen in their lives. Usually, at least one of them would agree and then go into the topic before we returned to the article.

Dewey (1915) continues that “Experience has its geographical aspect, its artistic and its literary, its scientific and its historical sides. All studies arise from aspects of the one earth and the one life lived upon it,” (p. 55). Children do not appreciate being condescended to and informed their knowledge does not matter; for adult learners, this is even more so. Freire (1993) also discussed this: “contents which are detached from reality, disconnected from the totality that engendered them and could give them significance” are useless to students (p. 71).

Similarly, Saal and Sulentic Dowell (2014) utilized a phenomenological case study to examine the lived experiences of an adult literacy student to answer the following questions: 1) What factors or experiences motivated or demotivated one adult’s persistence in learning print literacy? and 2) How did prior experiences and literacy skills impact an adult’s ability to learn print literacy? The researchers collected data from interviews, including a reflective dialog interview, tests administered to the participant both prior to his work with the researchers and after the work, observations, and film. All of the research took place in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, with one participant, a Black native to Baton Rouge who is an adult education learner. After months of work with the researchers, the participant was able to successfully deliver a package, which he relayed would have been impossible prior to the project. The researchers conclude that teachers should offer

multiple chances for applying students' prior knowledge from authentic situations and all language skills to foster print skill development.

Likewise, Greenberg *et al.* (2013) sought to form a better understanding of the adult literacy students who achieve literacy versus those who do not by answering the following questions: 1) Do the profiles of adults who enroll in a reading program differ based on whether they do not continue to the midpoint, attend until the midpoint, or complete the program? and 2) Based on model predicted group membership, which characteristics are associated with the participants who 'best' represent the three completion groups? The researchers utilized students from 23 adult literacy programs who were given various test measures. The researchers concluded that this study confirms that older adults persist longer in adult basic education classes, though further research needs to be conducted.

Even before I interviewed the participants and learned just how much they know, I did not believe myself better than them because I have so much more schooling. I may be fluent in many of the nine literacies listed above, but my participants are fluent in others I haven't the first idea how to navigate. Knowledge for knowledge's sake is a privilege often taken for granted by those who have it. Knowledge that is linked to some aspect of the learner's life seems more important and is easier to justify. For the articles read in the participants' classes, the teacher chooses important, familiar topics—the history of various holidays, things like smart shopping and fire alarms and seat belts. There are also small biographies on people of interest.

Local Adult Literacy Programs

Beyond ARC, there are other programs in Baton Rouge. An exhaustive examination is beyond the scope of this project (especially on their success rate), but I will present a

brief introduction on a few here. I have chosen these programs in particular because the East Baton Rouge Parish Library system references them regarding adult literacy. I felt that it was the least-biased method.

First, the Christ's Way Academy of Learning and Career Center, which provides "students a small, challenging, fun and non-traditional learning environment." According to their website, they "strive to educate the mind, body **and** spirit." Unlike ARC, Christ's Way Academy also works with children and their programs include: kindergarten-high school tutoring, Saturday Academy, HiSET preparation, and reading intervention.

Next, the Family Values Resource Institute, Inc. (FVRI). According to their website, FVRI "provides educational and counseling programs in predominantly urban areas to empower families with resources, skills, and principles for generational prosperity" and "envision[s] self-sufficient, cohesive families that fully experience life, liberty, and prosperity." Their belief is that "Strong families that value life and learning are the keys to creating generational health (mental, physical, emotional, social, and spiritual wholeness) and prosperity (in the spirit, body and soul)." Initially founded "to provide pregnancy related services and support to women facing unintended pregnancies," programs were later added "to include adult literacy and HiSET (formerly GED) test preparation, vocational training, and an afterschool program for elementary students," among others. It has since expanded further.

The Literacy Information and Communication System "is a national leadership initiative of the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (OCTAE) to expand evidence-based practice in the field of adult education" that offers a variety of services to adult education learners with both online courses and

classroom opportunities. Beyond adult education learners, they also provide instruction for current teachers who seek to become more effective in the classroom.

Finally, there is the St. Paul Adult Learning Center, “a holistic Adult Education Program... located in one of the largest poverty pockets in Baton Rouge and has offered poverty intervention services since 1983.” The program offers courses for basic skills and HiSET preparation, life skills instruction, job skills instruction, financial literacy, leadership development retreats, counseling, volunteerism, athletics, and entrepreneurship training.

Conclusions of Review of Literature

Obviously, there is a dearth of knowledge about elderly adult literacy learners. It is my understanding that a great deal of effort is given to teaching *children* how to read. Once a certain age is passed, it becomes the child’s responsibility to learn if they have yet to. The age varies, based on context: once in middle school, is it up to the child that has been passed from grade to grade? High school? As adults who have left school, that responsibility is magnified. Once a person reaches a certain age, they are their own problem and no one else’s. There is far more research into children’s literacy, adolescents’ literacy, and young-to-middle-aged adults’ literacy than there are on the elderly.

Elderly emergent readers are a somewhat invisible population but there is much to be learned from them. They have such a valuable life experience and can broaden our understanding of what literacy is or can be. I was in awe of the participants before I interviewed them for this project. I am far more in awe of them now.

CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

Introduction

I chose life history interviews because of a very basic idea, stated by Sommer and Quinlan (2002) as this: “the actors are real people, each with a unique perspective on the past and present,” (p. 1). I wanted to capture the voices of a certain subset of adult literacy students and this project is the result.

My project involved seven interviews supplemented by nearly two-years’ worth of participant observations, as will be detailed below. Per the confidentiality agreement in the IRB, every name provided in the following pages is a pseudonym, not only for the participants but also the staff of the non-profit organization where the research was conducted.

Research Questions

The research questions that focus my project are:

- *Why did these seven participants never become literate as children?*
- *What role does learning to read play in the lives of elderly emergent readers?*
- *How can the life histories of elderly emergent readers inform our understanding of literacy?*

Entrée

Since July 2010 I have been an active volunteer at ARC in Baton Rouge, LA, in multiple ways: as a tutor, as an office assistant, and as a classroom assistant. ARC is a non-profit that, according to their brochure, “helps adults in the community achieve personal, work, and family goals by improving their literacy skills.” ARC was founded nearly 50 years ago and continues to work with the community through the help of funding and donations, as well as federal and state grants. All of the staff are part time and there are

dozens of volunteer tutors for the students enrolled to work with. ARC has adult basic education classes, adult intermediate classes, HiSET preparation classes, English as a second language classes, and Senior Scholar classes; my participants are in the latter.

ARC is located in downtown Baton Rouge, almost within sight of the Mississippi River. ARC shares their fairly small building with other organizations, though I've had no interactions with anyone from them. There is the front hall, where turning to the left leads to ARC, turning right leads to one of their building-mates, and so does going up the stairs. There is a front desk beside the large window, the director's office, the main classroom for my participants, the small nook for the library, which also has two cubicles for the staff, and the larger classroom which shares space with the computer area.

During my time as an observer, we were mainly located within two rooms, one a small classroom that barely holds the students, the teacher, and myself. The other room is a larger conference room, which we would move to if all of the students showed up for class; however, it has since been given to one of the other organizations. The teacher, Jane, has rearranged the set-up of the main classroom multiple times during my months as a classroom assistant/observer, always seeking the perfect arrangement.

Depending on a student's score on their placement exam, upon enrolling with ARC, they will be placed in one of the classes. When they are retested (after having attended 40 hours, either in the class or with a tutor, their schedule permitting), if their score has risen enough, they are sent to the next level class. Once attaining their HiSET (an equivalent of a high school diploma) they are considered graduated. ARC's mission is about their students meeting their own, realistic goals, based on their skills, time, and willing effort.

In November 2013, I emailed the director, Mr. Matthews, to arrange for a meeting during which we discussed my return to the front desk and then this project. I obtained permission to sit in on classes so that the students would come to trust and be comfortable with me in the months before the interviews. I tried both of the classes; at the time, Tuesday was taught by Jane and Thursday was taught by Dana. I chose Tuesday, as it was more convenient with my schedule.

Both classes start at 9:00 am and go to 10:30. At the start of class, Jane puts the date and agenda on the board while everyone trickles in. She starts with the local newspaper, where she scans the headlines to look for something of interest and then will either read the article, summarize it, or have the students read it paragraph by paragraph. After the paper, a chapter of the Bible is read aloud, with each of the students taking a series of verses or Jane reading the entirety of it as they follow along.

Jane will have an article she has found with questions to answer; she wants the answers in a complete sentence, which she puts on the board after the students have discussed it so they may copy it down if they have trouble. There is usually a word game of some sort, like a word scramble or a word search.

The last few minutes are devoted to math, time permitting. The major focus of the class is reading, but basic math skills are taught as well. During the months of my observation, the class has moved from subtraction to multiplication.

I was a moderate participant observer; in the first few months, I mostly kept detailed notes of the class activities and the students, but as time went on and I became more familiar with everyone, I began to act more as a teacher's assistant in class and was often unable to keep notes because the students required my help with the worksheets.

Jane also occasionally asked me to run errands, such as finding something she had left on her desk or to the copier. I attempted to remain somewhat outside of the classroom dynamic, but utterly failed and the participants have come to treat me somewhere between a teacher and a grandchild. My months in the classroom with the participants provided me with a better understanding of how much each of these men and women love to read, and who they are as people, adding an unmeasurable amount of knowledge to my interviews with them.

Participants

The participants of my project are a group of seven senior citizens at a non-profit in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, where they attend a literacy program twice a week, and have done for a number of years. All seven of the participants are Black, natives of Louisiana or Mississippi, and over the age of 60. I interviewed six students of a class for elderly learners: Sarah; Elizabeth; Georgia, who attends whenever her health allows her; Alan, who at the time of the interview was new but has since attended nearly every class; Carl; and John, who is always late and is the oldest. There is another student in the class, who I did not interview because she was too young to meet the criteria of age 60 or above.

At the request of the director, I also interviewed Mary, who is not actually a member of the class but is a member of the program and meets a tutor once a week on the premises; so I will have no observations on her.

Table 1 presents demographics on the participants; it is organized in the order they were interviewed, as are the interview chapters later in this document.

Table 1
Participants

Name	Age at time of interview	Race	Gender	Highest level of Schooling	Birthplace
Alan	59	Black	Male	Graduated HS	Louisiana
Sarah	68	Black	Female	11 th grade	Louisiana
Elizabeth	79	Black	Female	5 th grade	Louisiana
John	89	Black	Male	1 st grade	Louisiana
Mary	85	Black	Female	None	Louisiana
Carl	76	Black	Male	9 th grade	Louisiana
Georgia	70	Black	Female	2 nd grade	Mississippi

I utilized convenience sampling (Marshall, 1996, p. 523), as my familiarity with ARC provided me with access to the participants, and whose own familiarity with me had them more inclined to agree to be interviewed.

Interview Protocol

I spoke to the director of ARC in November 2013, obtaining his permission for both the observations and interviews. I then spoke to the teacher of the class, Jane, and began sitting in on classes in January 2014. I obtained IRB approval and gave copies of the questions and consent forms to the director, the teacher, and then the students themselves in June 2014. The tape recorder used for this project was borrowed from the T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History at Louisiana State University, where the tapes have been archived.

Mr. Matthews spoke to the students in late June 2014, giving them an overview of the project; at his request, I was not present. The very next class, Jane went over the questions one at a time, explaining what was asked by each; I was present. I explained the project, both how and why I intended to do it. I then asked for volunteers and set up a schedule; everyone agreed to be interviewed and the first was arranged for July 10, a

Thursday, at 9:00 am. The final interview was conducted on August 28, also at 9:00. For the students' convenience, most of the interviews were held on Tuesdays or Thursdays, as they would already be present for class, with two exceptions: I interviewed one of them on a Monday and another on Friday, for their convenience. All interviews took place in one of two classrooms used for ARC's classroom instruction. Please see Appendix A for the interview questions.

The most important question, I believe, is the last I asked: *How do you define reading? What is reading to you?* Each of them loves reading as much as I do, despite the fact that I grew up in home saturated with literature and have been reading incessantly for nearly two decades. The fact that they all love to read so very much is a vital component of this project, as the entire purpose is to better understand the importance of literacy.

Analysis

During the interviews, I noticed that many of the participants were saying basically the same thing, albeit in slightly different words. Most of them grew up in rural areas during the same era, so their experiences were very similar. As they've all joined ARC out of their own personal desire for literacy, their answers to the literacy questions were also similar.

My recording equipment failed once; after I realized the recording device was about to shut off, I quickly pulled out my iPhone and activated the voice memo application, while also using my notepad and a short-hand to record what the participant was saying. The rest of the interview was recorded on my phone. I took both the borrowed recorder's tape and the recording on my phone to the T. Harry Williams Center, where they were spliced together.

Once the interviews were transcribed, I used a hybrid between emergent coding and *a priori* coding (Stemler, 2001) by copy-and-pasting the answers to each interview questions and pulling out everything that seemed similar to each other. Through this process, I developed two over-arching themes: 1) why the participants never became literate as children and 2) how they are now attempting to obtain literacy, each with their own multiple sub-themes. For the first theme, I noticed that most of the interviewees were citing very similar reasons why they were unable to go further in school and why they weren't successful while they did, so I divided those into categories that are explained below. For the second theme, I noticed similarities in the participants' literacy journeys and the reasons why they're pursuing literacy now, at this stage of their lives, also discussed below.

As I began examining my data, however, the themes coalesced differently, especially after I realized a third research question emerged from the first theme. Because of this, I arranged my Findings chapter based on the research questions as opposed to the themes themselves.

Ethics

I had some difficulty with this project because of my position as a middle-class White woman in my 20s. I felt uncomfortable with some of the questions because of not only the vast age difference between me and most of the participants, but also because of my lack of understanding in what they have experienced and endured.

I also struggled with how to actually write the interviews chapter because of how emotionally invested I feel with the participants' stories; I did not want to overwhelm their stories with my own words and it was difficult to step back. Beyond my own emotional

investment, there is also the consideration of the interviewee/interviewer relationship, as explained by Minor and Pitts (2010): “Narratives recorded by interviewers inherently raise questions around the narrator’s voice and textual interests, particularly when we consider the racial and gendered dynamics between interviewer and interviewee,” (p. 29). Hirsch (2003) adds that “Both an interviewer and an interviewee appear in these narratives. The methods, assumptions, compulsions, and goals of the interviewers shaped and became part of the interview,” (p. 152). I’ve tried to keep that in mind while working on this project.

ARC’s own confidentiality agreement did not allow me as much detail as I wished about the participants’ literacy levels prior to joining the program. While, through my own experiences with the participants in class, I know most of them have improved, I am unaware of any learning disorders or disabilities they may or may not have, which would affect the data, though I do suspect that at least two of them do have a disorder or disability. I also do not have access to the participants’ testing results so the true efficacy of the program (in relation to this project) cannot be measured.

Limitations

I was unable to do in in-depth exploration of the historical context of African-Americans and literacy in the U.S.; I think further investigation of that could be rewarding. Another possibility is matching the race of interviewers and participants, as I remain unsure how much my race affected the interviews. Perhaps even exploring the various organizations that provide instructions for elderly emergent readers and how the context of that influences their progress; ARC is non-religious, but there are many programs throughout the region that are religious-based.

One obvious limitation is my very small participant pool; all seven of the interviewees are from around the same areas, so that is probably reflected in the analysis. Men and women of their same age from different regions of the country may have had different experiences.

Interviews

As was mentioned earlier, all of my interviews took place in July and August 2014 in one of two rooms at the non-profit. The interviews were semi-structured and one-on-one, with only myself and the student present. The following chapter presents the pertinent interview excerpts in chronological order of when the interviews took place. For all but one of them, I met the interviewee at the front of the building and escorted them to the room where the interview was held. Once the interview was done, I jotted down final notes while the student either joined class for the remaining time or went about their day.

Of the participants, 90% have shown improvement in their reading proficiency since they began working with ARC. Confidentiality (on ARC's part) prohibits providing more detail. The transcripts of the interviews in their entirety are provided in Appendix B. I do not provide analysis with the interviews, preferring that the participants tell their own stories. To that effect, I present the participants own words with but a bit of formatting. All of my analyses are presented in the Findings chapter.

CHAPTER 4. ALAN

“You went through all your questions? I don’t think I can add too much.” - Alan, 2014

The first interview of my project was conducted on Thursday, July 10, 2014, at 9:05 in the morning with Alan. Alan is the youngest person interviewed for this project, being only 59 at the time of the interview. He has also been at ARC the shortest amount of time: our interview took place during his second week at the program. In the months since, he is a regular attendee of the class. He is a very gregarious, tall, and kind man, who jokes all class long.

Going into the interview, I was very nervous. I wasn’t sure how to phrase things beyond my scripted questions or what to write down and what not; I also wasn’t sure what I was looking for or what was important. In general, I am more of a listener than a talker. I usually let conversations flow as they will, allowing others to steer it. One thing I wanted to be sure to do was ask every question, though I had yet to figure out how to elicit all the information requested.

Our interview took place in the larger classroom at the back of the building. At the time, I was unfamiliar with the room. It isn’t as personalized as the smaller classroom and the clock on the wall doesn’t work. I was also unfamiliar with the recorder the Harry T. Williams Center loaned me for this project, though I had practiced with it to ensure I knew all the buttons.

Alan’s family were from Greensburg, LA, and his mother “was a school bus driver.” She “went to like the fourth grade and she, after that ... she was a school bus driver, and she always, you know, you know, didn’t have no Head Start at that time, in the 50s, she like, you know, kept [laughs] raised us on the bus, me and my sister and my brother, but they

were the older kids, the two older, you know.” Alan and both his siblings attended school; his sister “she went to college.” Of all my interviewees, Alan is the only one who graduated high school. When he was growing up, Alan says that

...my uncle was like my father-figure; my grandmother was my other, what they call it, she was the boss of the—My mom, my auntie. It was just, it was just fun, you know, just to be around was peaceful, all the, you know a little couple, and everybody could raise you. [He] had cousins, we were raised in you know, like my uncle had like 10 kids, we were like raised up as like, you know like, wasn't no brothers and sisters, you know what I'm saying, we was raised up. But as we got older, we started you know we start going you know their separate ways and but we, I lived the law was my grandmother, my uncle, then my mom and my auntie. And whoever in the neighborhood, you know, we didn't have no phones back then so if you messed up [chuckles] well, how, anybody there could take a, take a shot at you. [laughs] Like just you know in the, you know neighborhood took care of the kids.”

He said that his “auntie, she used to read to the kids a lot. You know, the older kids read to the, you know read to us, but my mom and grandmother... those were the pillars. My uncle couldn't do it, too, neither. But those were the patriarchs.” Alan and his friends

played basketball, baseball, softball. Started you know, that's basically all we did, you know, go to your friend's house, and stuff like that. Like I said, I had the luxury of riding around in the school bus. Like most kids, they were all mad because you were riding around in the school bus and we can't, don't even have a car at home [laughs] and you rubbing it in by driving a big old school bus almost everywhere you go [laughs] Got my license at 15, at 15 years old... I did my driver's test in, the school bus... After you get, you know - the distance and stuff, and all that. My uncle taught me to drive, my mom did, too. That's all we had, two school buses, a tractor, [laughs] and an pickup, old 66 pickup. It was, uh... [chuckling] ...all of them was fun. But the school bus was more of a task because you always, you had to find a place to you know, park it.

More than, like my uncle asked me to drive, when he, when I first learned how to drive, well, he told me to, "How are you gonna get out of this situation?"

I said, "Well, I can back out."

"No. " Showed me I could back up and get out and he said, "Hmm, that's, I didn't, wasn't expecting that from you."

Alan's "grandmother used to always cook tea cakes for, we even had cookies, or the moon cookies. I know you don't know nothin' about moon cookies... It's a big ole cookie which is like, got, you know, a cookie. That's the first, before you know the cookie, after the tea cakes. She used to cook a whole cake, two cakes, cornbread in the morning. Really, it was all day, that was our snack, with milk and cornbread."

Alan never married but he does have "Four kids, four grandkids. Right now, that I know of."

[Alan's] brother, he had moved to Detroit in 70, 62. And he come and you know, come and go in Detroit, come back and visit, you know, somehow I, so in 96, that's when I went to stay for a couple years, 16 years. But beyond that, everything was, was the neighborhood... It's still the same but it's the people around, you know; you might see your cousin and friends, and then they, the next day, they uh, you know, it's not, it's different. To me, it's different. 'Cause you know it's only, everybody wants something from me. And I moved to Detroit in 1996 and spent 10, 16 years with my brother there before he passed. And then, coming back home 3 years ago; I just moved back home... I remember one time, my mom used to, we was in Detroit, visiting my brother. She made, didn't have no food in the house, she said, she's like, 'Y'all leave the kitchen now, I'll get this.' She made a whole bunch of cans, you know vegetables, potatoes, she pulled all that together and made a, she called it 'every soup'—everything in the kitchen."

Alan "worked at the firewood plant here, I mean in Holden, and then I worked at a water pumping, you know, poured wells, right in the [name] center, and then what else? I worked at the hospital for about a year. Beyond that, you know, we had, we had a turn-around in Greensburg that was our plant, I worked for like two years there, and then I went to Detroit, moved to Detroit after that."

He enjoys traveling and said, "I would like to go to, on my next trip, I'd just like to go to Niagara Falls. And see how high it look. That's my, that's my biggest thing I would like to do before I get old. To have a class reunion. 40th anniversary class reunion is coming up next Friday. That's my, you know, sums up my whole scenario. But beyond that,

everything, it happens like I said, sitting around the house, I start to make walking canes.

That's something, you know, kept my mind off a lot of things. I like to, I work with wood, I like to paint a lot. Walls and stuff like that, you know, anything paint it."

His uncle was a major influence on his life:

Oh, yeah, you know, he used to tell me you ain't got but one friend and that's, you know, you're your own friend because everything else is gonna cost you. I think I told my son about that.

He wanted a pair of shoe, he told me, "Dad, I want you to buy me some shoes."

I said, "You get half, I'll get the other half."

He said, after I told him, he got a little job, he went to buy his own. And then he went to the army and everything else, he told me he thought about all the things I used to tell him like that. Well, it was, you know, it was great life. I've had a nice life for 59 years.

Alan's uncle

would be 99 years old. If he was... and my mom would be 101. She was born two years before him. Yep. Yes indeed. I was just thinkin' about if they were still around, you know, just to see 'em. Like I said, all three of them died. I got to see all three of them.

The only person I didn't get to see pass was my grandmother. She died on my birthday when I was 33 years old. And I said to myself, she told me, you know, she told me "Go on out, go celebrate your birthday," but I, if I still, if I would've been there that night, when she had her little seizure, she had like a diabetic seizure. I always, she didn't have teeth in her mouth, but I always put my fingers on her tongue to calm her down. And I feel like, if I would've been there, I know what to do for her. But Mom didn't know, and everybody else that was around didn't know what to do. But it was just her time. At 89 years old, I think it was her time. And then... my mom, she passed at 89, too. All them days, just thinking about her. And my sister called me, she called me the, the uh, encyclopedia of the family because I could tell her what was going on in the family, whoever was coming...

You know, because my sister, she asked me, I told her last, this year, Mama's birthday was on Easter Sunday. That was the Sunday. We buried her the Saturday before Easter Sunday. But Easter Sunday fell on last year, on the day we buried her. And my sister, "You know all the things?" C'mon now, we lost her, we lost Mom you

know 14 years ago today. Wow. The memory. Grandmother, I could tell the day she passed. All, you know, little mind things. I just, I don't know what it is. I'm just programmed my days, whatever going on, in my... important the things I call it.

When I asked about any experiences Alan had with desegregation, he said, "You know, I remember like the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington. I was 8 years old when the March on Washington happened, but I really got, these last couple years, I've been listening to what the March on Washington really was all about... And while the stuff that my, you know, we used to try to go in, when we was young, as kids, and they didn't want you to come in the front part, you had to go in the back. That was the, my first encounter of you know the segregation. I didn't feel it before then. I was like 10 years or 12 years old, something like that. That was a long time."

All of Alan's children "graduated out of high school. And uh my son, he went to the army. My oldest son went to the army. My daughter she worked at uh, one summer in Baton Rouge. The two little kids, the younger kids, like 17 and 18, I think they uh 17, no 18 and 19, when I get home. And uh, they alright, everybody alright."

As said before, Alan "finished high school. I went to trade school for a couple years. When I was in high school. Beyond that... that's it." His "family knew but my mom didn't," about his lack of literacy. His sister "went to college. She helped me through school. That's my person who helped me through school, you know, my schoolwork, stuff like that."

I asked Alan why he's chosen to join ARC and work on literacy now. He said, "It's hard to ask a person to do somethin' for you. You know, and then you got a lot of people that come with a price. And it's like, look at just like right now, I've had this phone [gestures at blackberry] for 8 years and last 3 years since I've been home, I've started to really learn how to work my phone, text. A little, not a lot. Send a little few texts. Right

now, small things like a picture or something. A little statement. But for me just making one up, I can't do it." He elaborated that,

Sometimes, just like, say for instance. I remember we was goin', me and this girl, we were driving from Detroit, she wanted to come to her sister's funeral. And detours, you know, you got to follow the detour about 8 miles out the way, then you've got to, if you don't do it right... You got lost. Then you gotta come back to the same place, start it all back over again if you don't do it right then the second time, you know two or three times, now you can't, you've burned up a lot of gas. You got to go on with the little gas you've got left. You know, it's done got a little harder. That's what I seen in the problems. I just like to sit around and read. You know, just, wow, take the newspaper and sit down and read, start looking at the TV, read what went on.

I just want, I would love to read, you know, it's just like, just to know, to love to be able to take a book and just go to myself 'cause I like to do a lot of stuff by myself. I don't need to be, you know, just like right now, my whole day if it's in cool outside, I take a cane, one of my walking canes and go out there and just whittle, bout two or three hours. I'll put something, there, I like to just to print a lot. 'cause I'm working with a little piece of wood, a little area, but it's got to come straight down. You know what I'm talking about? You gotta stack the letters down on a cane cause you aint' got that much room. You're looking at a circle sure enough. You've gotta circle, but you gotta be, and then you 're working with a little space. And I'm infatuated with a lot of small things. You know, just like wood and it's just, I just like to do little things. Next thing I would like to do would be draft, you know how you call it, just what they call it, sketching. I'd like to learn how to do sketching, the next thing I would like to do at my age. And everything else is beautiful.

For Alan, reading is "the tool that helps you to look at the world in a different, like, and it ain't gotta look at the face, you look at the word, put the words together. That's about the best way it can be explained... And it opens up a whole 'nother world to, to man."

He added, "Only thing I dislike, you know, I didn't think about it back then, like I'm doin' now, you know, it was different world to read. And then when you, you know, someone had to read for you. I don't want to do this for you, stuff like that, then it's like, you look at, you look at beyond your name, you can't make a sentence. Stuff like that.

That's the, that's the, you know, look at a book with words and no pictures, you don't understand. It's weird."

Another reason he's attending ARC, Alan explained, is that

I feel like I got two true friends in my life right now. One is a preacher and back in the day, what we was tight. You know I told him [laughs] he brought it up to me, he said, "You made a statement to me on the phone one day, you called me and you told me one day you wasn't coming home till I'm a preacher. You told me that when you, I left to go to Detroit. You told me you wasn't coming home till I'm a preacher. I've been a preacher for 8 years. It's time for you do what you told me." I ain't saying I, you know, it's just a friendship attitude we had with each other. And he said "I ain't get to be a preacher because of what me and you said, but you did make that statement." He made, held me to it.

Now he's sick a lot. We talk every other day, every time we can get a chance. 'cause he got a lotta sick. I look at him different. We sit around and talk about the bible now, compare it to what I used to do more. And I'm you know, I look at it differently, what Cain and Abel. I understand what changes they put each other through, two brothers.

... Me and my buddy, you know the guy, he read it to me one day. He said, "I never thought you would come ask for something like this. Out of all the things that we could do, he said he 'preciate me comin', that I ask him to, to go to the bible. He said he learns more when I ask, when I make him talk 'bout it.

Alan wants to learn to read so that

I could go places and see names on the street but for me just pronouncing the name, that's out, that's another thing. I'm good at goin' places but just, like I told you. I can't really, can't make a sentence right now. And I can't do none of them, you know, just go pick up a book and read like the paper there [gestures at the list of questions], you know pick up and read it. That's another thing. That's the, you know, like [sighs] the dark side to everything. But you know, I deal with it. I can deal with it. I've been dealing with it this long. But I'm looking at that old guy that was in the reading class Monday. Wow. Looking at—if he could think about to do this now, I need to.

At the conclusion of the interview, I felt excited; I thought it was a good first interview despite offering perhaps too much of my own story to prompt Alan to continue his. I wasn't sure how to steer conversation towards necessary topics or how to elicit more

information, and treated it a bit too much like a conversation instead of an interview.

Though Alan's interview was first, and I still had to navigate six more, in hindsight it seemed the easiest, because of Alan's talkative personality. Even though Alan was only 59, I'm glad he was one of the participants because he offered a different perspective than the others.

CHAPTER 5. SARAH

“Now, put that down in your paper ‘cause you know that's true. And make sure you introduce that, okay. ‘Cause you know I'm not lying.” – Sarah, 2014

On Monday, July 14, I interviewed Sarah, who wears the fanciest clothes every week and brings God into everything she does. In class, she is the first to volunteer an answer, though not usually the correct one. She is very loud with quite a forceful personality and very free with her opinions, which is why I was bit nervous for this interview.

Sarah is the daughter of one of my other interviewees, Mary. She was born in Baton Rouge in 1946. She's an only child and attended high school, passing “11th grade, ten, I got out of school, okay? ... I dropped out of school in 11th grade.”

“When I was a teenager,” Sarah said,

I had friends, girls I would hang out with, you know. And we'd go to the parties and stuff, you know, like that. And sit around the house when we wasn't in school, stuff like that. We sat around the house all day and do nothing... That's all we did. That's about it. We hung out 'cause there was nothing to do, just like now there's nothing to do. You know, we hung out 'cause there was nothing else to do. Lets' all sit on the porch, look at TV. You know just mess around, that's all. Wasn't nothin' to do. *Young and the Restless* was around. And that's what we were doing, *Young and the Restless* and *Wheel of Fortune*. Uh, what was the name of it—yeah, *Wheel of Fortune*. It'd be on every morning at 11 o'clock. That's what we really was into, the *Young and the Restless*. It comes on at what, 4? Yes, it comes on at 4 but we were into *Young and Restless*. Now, I don't even like it. I don't watch it now.

I asked about discrimination and the desegregation process, and Sarah said,

Oh, god. I can't remember what happened, but I remember how they marched in Montgomery when they, I seen it on TV, okay, I seen it on TV. I remember that, how they marched. Then I remember Martin Luther King being, I seen how they shot him in the back on Texas. That was on TV, okay. Now, I remember, what else I remember? They didn't, now, they didn't have it here. Like they said we had oh, they said, it wasn't in Baton Rouge, it wasn't here. Like, we had to sit on the back of the bus and the white on the front, that never did happen here. We satted where we wanted to sit. That never did happen here. But it happened upstate where the black people had to sit on the back and the whites in the front. That never happened in

Baton—not, as I remember, it didn't. Maybe it did and I was too— 'cause I didn't ride the bus. I always had a car. Okay. And like it said you couldn't drink out of this fountain - well, my daddy told me that was true. So we had to go to the back of the restrooms or something, if we wanted all the food or something. I don't know. And I don't know why I don't remember that. I was old enough. But I just, I don't know, I just wasn't paying attention to it. But this is what they say. You know. We couldn't drink out of the same fountain that the whites we could, and we couldn't, uh, eat at the front of the restaurant and eat. And look at it now. We go in the front, we sit where we wanna sit. The whites are sleeping with the blacks, the blacks are sleeping with the whites. What's the difference? We all the same, baby. Ain't no difference. We all sleeping, having babies, having babies for the white and the blacks are having—You know, we all sleeping together. All that happened for a reason. Martin Luther King made it so that our black kids and our white kids would join together. And we together, ain't we? That's all I can tell you about segregation, baby, and that is the truth. You know I ain't lying. You know I ain't lying to you. That is true. Now, put that down in your paper 'cause you know that's true. And make sure you introduce that, okay. 'Cause you know I'm not lying.

I moved on to the wars that took place during her lifetime, if Sarah remembers being affected by them, and she said,

No, no, no, not Vietnam, none of that stuff. None of that affected me. Only thing that really affected me, really did, really got really nasty everybody, Martin Luther, no not Martin Luther King, when John F. Kennedy got killed, that changed the whole world. The sky turned black. I'll never forget that. That's the only thing that really kinda, you know, for his politics' concern. You know what I'm saying? That was the only thing that really affected me. And not affected just me, it affected a lot of people. 'cause we lost a good man. But the rest of that stuff, I don't care nothing about that.

At the beginning of the interview, Sarah misunderstood my intentions; she gave me an overview of her life, saying,

I dropped out of school in 11th grade and then I went to, uh, Sacramento, California. I stayed there like a year and six months and was gonna join the navy when I was there, but I didn't have enough education to pass the test to take for to go the navy 'cause it's a test you have to take before you even go in there and I didn't have enough education for that. Okay, so that was in, uh, what year was that? I can't even remember what year it was in. But anyhow, I went there to Sacramento, stayed there for a year and six months. Then I came back to Baton Rouge, okay, and that's when I started taking, uh, [classes], with my, uh, I have teachers. I've been with this program for like, I'd say about 4 or 5 years. Um. What else? One on one, okay.

[classes], okay, then I did that. I been into this, so, and then I got a job working as a cook on the airline for [name], but she's dead now. And I stayed there for like, I stayed there for like, I'd say about 3 years working there as a cook. Okay. And then from there I got married. Okay and I had two sons, two sons. They like, one of them was, and then the, my last, and then I got one who was 10, my last baby was ten years apart, ten years apart, the last one. So I have three sons. I have three sons, 3 grandkids, I got two girls and one boy. And uh, what else? And I love going to church. I love God. I really love Him, I can't leave Him out. I love Him. Okay? And, you know, it, uh, what else? And my husband died at 48 years old with cancer. He was 48 when he died from cancer... I got married 19, 1990... 1991. I think. I think.

I was very curious because my impressions of Sarah didn't have room for the military. I

asked why she'd wanted to join the navy and she explained,

Because I was single, I didn't have any kids then. I just wanted something, you know, to get into. That's why I wanted to join. I wanted to get into the Navy when I was in Sacramento. I stayed out there. That's what I wanted to do. But I had to have enough education to pass the test. And by me didn't have the education, I didn't know how to read that well, I couldn't take that test. So that's why I couldn't get into the navy.

When I asked if Baton Rouge has changed much in her lifetime, Sarah laughed and said,

Ooh, my god, you poor baby. Oh, baby, everything's changed. You know, not the world hasn't changed. It's the people what I'm associating with. I kinda stay to myself. That's where I live, to myself. You know things have changed. All these drugs and stuff. Oh my god, when I was a girl coming up, we didn't have no drugs, all those drugs and boys wearing their pants on their booties. They respected their body and girls dressin' half-naked, we didn't have that growing up. We respected our bodies. And kids having babies at 12 and ten and fifteen, we respected our bodies. When a child, a girl got pregnant at 15 or 13, when I was coming up, she was ashamed to come outside. But now they don't care, you know. No respect for theirselves, you know what I'm saying? I didn't get a baby till I was 27 years old. 27, I wasn't no child. I was grown, see? But the world it's not the world, the people. The world. And we're having, we're having babies having babies. And that's on both sides, your side and my side. Young white ones and young black ones having babies and not taking care of them. That's why they're killing them. And I know you hear that on the news, so it's not the world, it's not the world. It's the people in it. You know what I'm saying? That's all. But I stay to myself. I really do, and I deal with my mama and my children and I got a friend that I associate with, with him and, and we go places, but other than that, I stay to myself. I'm, you know, that's the way I live. So that's the world have changed the way I see it. You don't know, you just got here. You know. And you don't, you go to class and home and that's it. You know

what I'm saying? But as you get older, you'll see. And if you got , and if you got so-called friends, you just say to your friends sooner or later, you'll say that's your friend and they'll turn away from you, they'll become to be your enemy and then you didn't nothing.

Sarah is one of the more religious members of the class and

was brought up in church. That's where I would come from, church. I got baptized when I was 5 years old. I was brought up in church. That's what I wanted, that's where my mama wanted me, and that's where I came from. Since I've gotten older and older and older, as I got older on, I learned what love was about. It's not loving a boy or a man or your husband, that ain't no love. You got to love him because God says to love him. But I learned where love comes from when God said that your first love is him because he first loved you. So you have to give God that love back, you understand what I'm saying? So I learned that as I got older. Well what is I learned about loving my husband for or loving my boyfriend for? He didn't love me first. God first loved me. God is the one who, who loved me so well he died for me. My husband ain't gonna die for me. My boyfriend ain't gonna die for me. So I learned how to love God. And I mean, I don't hate nobody, I don't care what color he is or what race, I love you. That's my heart. You understand? Because Jesus loved you. Now how could I say that I love the Lord and hate you? I'm telling lying. I'm telling a lie 'cause God said "How could you say you love me and I hate you?" He said, "You lied the truth, man" so I love everybody 'cause I love the Lord. You know? ... I mean, you can't, I mean you, have, to have to love every—even you, don't put no personal love, even if you're married, don't love your husband first. Love him the way God told you to love 'im and do what you're 'sposed to as a wife. A person, he won't care if you've been married for years, he may decide to walk away and leave you.

When asked what role reading has played in her life, Sarah said,

Oh, beautiful. I love it. I love it. And I think the more I study, um, that's a funny thing. I see, when I'm in church, I can sit there and I can read my bible. Isn't that strange? That is real strange... When I'm in church, I can open up my bible and, like we, I go to bible study on Tuesday, and we have to go to different chapters, and I sit there, and when it's time, my time to read, I stand up and read my bible and don't miss a word. So I say well God is helping me with this, you know, why when I'm in Bible study because he knows I wants to read this bible. You know what I'm saying? And so I sit there and I read. And then, no it's not, God does it. I've been praying, baby girl, and ask God to help me with my reading. Please. And he does that. And that's every Tuesday when we go to Bible study.

Of course, due to having already scheduled my interview with Mary, Sarah's mother, I knew that Sarah's mother is illiterate, so I asked if anyone from her school had helped her during her childhood, and Sarah answered,

No. Well, yeah, I had a teacher, she was uh, she was a tutor to me when I was in 8th, I think 9th grade, I had a tutor then, in 9th grade. After school, she would try to help me. You know, like, she said, "Sarah, you can read, but you have a block." She said, "The block is keeping you back from your reading." "It's a block," she said. She said, "You can read, but it's a block."

I said, "I don't understand that. What you mean, a block?"

She said, "Something blocking you, blocking your mem—brain from remembering your words." You know I was young then, and so I'm older now. She said, "You can read."

I asked if Sarah thought it was a mental block of some kind or some kind of a learning disability/disorder, and she explained,

No, it was a learning. You know how, you, let's see, how can I put it? You know how you wanna, let's say for instance, you put down something and you forget where you put it. So you can't go back right then but soon, later on, it'll come to you where it's at. You know what I'm saying? That's what I think. It's not a memory, it's just a block, it's just something I have to, like if I see a word more than one time, I'm gonna remember that word. 'cause you know why I did it? In bible study, somebody will always read before me, okay, and that same word gonna be in my scripture. Now if I pay attention to that word, when I get ready to read it and it's in my scripture - you see what I'm saying? It's a memory, a memory thing. You see what I'm talking about? So I got to remember my words and what I done learned. You know what I'm saying? So that's me.

She continued, shaking her head with a sigh,

Oh, I can write. Baby, I can anything, I can write and I can print. I can write beautiful. It's just for reading. I can write, I can write anything. Yeah, I can. See, I'm being at home, I have a tablet that I have. When I'm at home doing nothing, I get my Bible and I go to my scriptures and I see something that I know how to read. If the words don't mix me up, I read it and I write it in my little box. I call it a bible tablet and I sit there and I write. You know, so that's what I do at home."

I asked how she found ARC and Sarah answered,

Now they don't do it, they don't advertise. How did I—I think that's how I came, I think that is how I came about it. I'm not sure because when they first started out, it started off here, that's where I first started off at. And I had, I had a tutor from LSU, oh I had a big girl that I had, I can't think of her name. She come from LSU. She was my tutor. Oh, she, she was so beautiful. And you know, she put everything, all,

everything she had into me. And I was doing good. And then about two weeks after that, she left. And that really hurt me because I had got used to her. She left, she went back to California—no, Texas. And then I met another tutor and we used to meet on [street name] library because that's where she worked on. And I remember her but I forgot her name. So I had 1, 2, I even had a man tutor. I used to go downtown to the library for my man tutor. Let's see, 1, 2, and he belongs to that church, [church name] over by the interstate. Uh, three with [name] she's my angel, she's beautiful. And then three with [name], that's like five of them I've had. You know, and [name] and [name], you know [name] she had to go to another school and that's when me and [name] started tutoring. But I think, if I'm not mistaken, I may be wrong, but I think they announced [ARC] on TV, but that's been oh lord, so long ago. I think and I don't know. First my daddy started coming because he's a pastor so he needed to know how to read the bible, so he started going and got his reading words together. And then I think my mama started going and she still comes up here on Fridays with [name] and then she told me about it. I think that's where it gone, I can't remember. It's been so long, I think I've been here. They've moved from place to place.

I asked Sarah if she really was pursuing literacy; she said, "I'm really and truly pursuing if God says yes to me getting a GED, I want that. If he only says yes, it helps me. That's what I'm aiming for, a GED. I'mma get it. I'mma get it. I know I'm gonna get it, I guarantee I'm gonna get. It may not be this year, but if I live, I'm going to get that GED. That's what I want."

Sarah told me,

[Reading is] something I like to do. Well, with my reading, I feel like if I come every Tuesday and uh Monday, Mondays and Tuesdays, by me sitting and paying attention, I'm feeling that I get more out of it than me just staying at home. I was late this morning but I had to come. But I get more out of it. I love sitting there reading my bible. That's my main, that's it, boo, if I had—that's the main, if I've being honest with you, telling you the truth, that' the only reason I'm interested in learning the words because I want to go from Genesis to Revelations. Now see, I can read some words in Revelations but some words I don't, I don't know 'em. When my Bible tells me if you don't know, if you don't know the word, don't know how to read Revelations, don't mess with it, don't mess with Revelations. But I be trying to get the words because I want to read from Genesis to Revelations, all the way. All the way. And I'm gonna do it.

I asked if she remembered the first thing she truly read all by herself and she replied, "The first thing I remember reading to myself? Was, I tell you, um, a few things, what I really

learned how to read, the first thing that really have to read was the 23rd Psalm and the 24th Psalm. Those are the things I know how to read. I know those words. Maybe by me memorizing them, but I know them. But still I know how to read because I memorized what the words said. And I know that word when I see it. 23 and 24.”

Our interview ended with Sarah saying, “How do I define reading? ... Everything. It means everything. It's very important to me. Very important. I want to get that—it's very important to me. Really it is. Very important to me... I love my Bible. That's my biggest thing to read. Nothing else matters. The Bible.”

Sarah, as I knew from my weekly observations, is a very talkative and frank person. Throughout the interview, she had very open body language; she talked to me like we were friends and she was just telling me things I should've already known. She didn't seem to censor herself that much, though I'm sure she must have.

Frequently throughout the interview, she mentioned that she was in a hurry and had to go. It was a bit off-putting, though I did my best to keep us on track.

CHAPTER 6. ELIZABETH

“I said, ‘I ain’t ashamed.’ I said ‘Y’all take me; I’ll go.’” – Elizabeth, 2014

My next interview was on Tuesday, July 15, with Elizabeth, who is the most successful student, according to Jane; when Elizabeth is the only student present in class, Jane will give her harder work than the entire class receives. Elizabeth is quite petite and often wears denim dresses; she also walks to class and usually only misses because of truly terrible weather. She enjoys math the most of everyone in class and has a history of volunteering her time at various places, currently with children in the afternoons.

Prior to the interview, I spoke with Elizabeth for about ten minutes; we’d both arrived at ARC early that morning and had to wait for the building to be unlocked. I explained the interview process in more detail than I had previously and we also discussed other things, including her daughter’s health and my little sister’s absentmindedness. I do not know if our prior discussion led to Elizabeth’s openness in the interview, but I figured it couldn’t hurt.

Elizabeth was born in St. Landry Parish in 1935, the fourth of twelve children, though “my father had three sons before he married my mother. When the first wife passed, he married my mother. And he had 12 kids with her.” She “was the one did most of the caring when I came along, when I was big enough, so. I ain’t liked it, but uh that’s where I fell in that line. To take care of the ones under me.”

[Elizabeth] went first through fifth grade, but there was just something... at, at that time, they didn’t uh, didn’t have no tutorings and stuff like that, so you just was on your own if you didn’t, uh, keep up. You was just in, you just stayed behind. So then they just slide you on through. They didn’t hold you in the in the class. You’d go on to the next grade. If you weren’t learning, you’d still go on to the next grade. So,

right now, you know, I learned more since I been with the, the program than I did during school because I have someone to help me now. But before, I didn't have anyone to help me.

Of all of her siblings, Elizabeth said that “my baby sister and baby brother ... finished high school and my baby brother went into service, well, he finished in the service, but my baby sister, she, she finished high school and she went to different college and stuff, uh. She was the last one.”

About life prior to de-segregation, Elizabeth remembers,

Okay, on the city buses, like us, we had to sit in the back of the bus and I remember we was living in Churchpoint, LA, and we got on the bus from uh Churchpoint to Appaloosa, we was going to the parade, and one of my sister paid her fare and she had to stand up all the way to the uh to Appaloosa without sitting down at all and she uh, that, you know. Anyhow, they had seat and the driver wouldn't let you sit down. She like u, said they had a sign saying "WHITES ONLY" and then after, those seats were filled out and they still had white people, comin' getting on the bus, they'd made you get up out of your seat and let them sit down. You had, at the restaurants, you had to go, you couldn't go inside, you had to go to the window, and get you know, order your stuff on the window. And bathrooms, you couldn't use the same bathroom. You couldn't drink out of the same, same water fountain, stuff like that back in the day. Couldn't go to the same school and you couldn't ride the school bus, you had to walk. We had to walk 3 or 4 miles for the school, back and to school and back home. And they was, they were riding the bus and spitting out of the bus window at us. And stuff like that. I'm trying to remember. I remember that much.

For fun as a child, Elizabeth “played ball, baseball. Swiftball.” I was unfamiliar with swiftball, so Elizabeth grinned and said, “It’s real rough. We played stuff like hopscotch, hide and seek, stuff like that.” When she was young

there was like shortening the food and stuff, you know, they was rationing, and uh, we had to buy, had to have stamps for the, I remember that. We had stamps for like to buy, uh you had to have stamps to buy your shoes and uh stamps to uh buy certain things like, some was growing, like you know groceries. And the larger your family was, the more stamps you got. So I remember my daddy was farming for white guy and he would uh buy some of my daddy's stamps, gave him cash money so he, certain things you could buy with cash money, other stuff you had to buy with the stamps. So he would buy some of my, my daddy had a big family so he would buy some of my daddy's stamps so he could buy what he wanted with the stamps and my daddy would buy what he wanted with the cash.

Cause back in the day, it was kinda rough because we used to have to go and get, we had to go get, we was mostly eating beans and rice and had to go get that from the boss where he was working for the man, the farmer. He was the farmer and he was working under somebody else. We planted the corns and the cotton and the potatoes and all that stuff. And then he went to fertilize, he had to buy the fertilizer and all that stuff. And then we had to go there, he had the beans and the piece of salt meat and the rice, we had to go over to his house to get that. And I hated that, I had to go stand by the fence and then they would come and give it to you in the sack and you had to go bring it home. And back in the day, you could buys, buy 10 cookies for a nickel. So... That peppermint candy that you used to get like 5 for a nickel, you have to pay maybe a quarter for that now. So that, that was something.

I was just telling my daughter, like, loose, they used to sell shrimp loose instead of in a little bag and you could get a big bag about this big [holds hands apart] for 10 cents and my mama used to send me to the store to get the stamp, I mean the shrimps and sugar stuff you get by the pound. IT was loose, it wasn't in bags. You'd put it in a bag. And you'd go get a dime of sugar, 'bout this big, big bags of shrimp. They tied a little string around the bag and I'd open the little bag and eat some of them shrimps and tie it back, come on home. It tasted good then. It don't taste like that now... We had field peas. We had... watermelon and cantaloupes, tomatoes, cucumbers. Um... Okra. What else? Green beans, you planted your own green beans and stuff like that.

Elizabeth's first paying job outside her home was "private home work... other than working in the fields. You know, we was farmers, my, my father was a farmer." Other jobs she's held include working at "the Piccadilly downtown and the one right at [road] that just closed. Then, after that, I worked in private homes. That's when I—apartment complex, I cleaned them up and stuff like that."

She remembers that Hurricane Audrey (1957) "took the top off our house... Yeah, we were sleeping and the top was off our house, it was raining in our house, on us in the bed. That was an experience, we were still sleeping, my mom had to come get us out the bed, had to go stay at our next-door neighbors."

She left St. Landry Parish for Baton Rouge in 1957 and met her husband when she "was working at Piccadilly downtown and he was working at another restaurant further

down. And we met there, there was donut shop I think on the bus stop and that's where we first met while I was standing at the bus stop, waiting on the bus. And then he had to pass by my stop for the, to go to his place. I think his car was parked around the corner or something." Her husband also "worked in the beauty shop, you know, washing towels."

She married in 1962 and had one daughter, who "finished high school, then went to LSU, I think for two semesters." Elizabeth has an "adopted grandson" because her daughter "lost her baby, her own child, she lost him and it scared her."

I asked Elizabeth, "What's the furthest you've traveled away from home?" and it led into this interesting segue that I'm keeping in its entirety:

Elizabeth: Houston, I think.

LEW: Really?

Elizabeth: Houston or Dallas. I wasn't one to travel so much. 'cause our church be going to different places a lot. I just... don't go with them. But I think the furthest I went is to Houston. We went to Houston and Memphis. Houston and Memphis, that's about the furthest from Baton Rouge I went.

LEW: So you just... aren't a traveler kind. You're like, you're a homebody. You just want to stay home?

Elizabeth: Most likely. Didn't like to, I just don't like to travel that much. My daughter—I've never been on a plane yet.

LEW: You've never been on a plane?

Elizabeth: My daughter done been there a couple of times. She went in the marines. Yeah, in the marines so she, that was her first flight out. And she's been going to New Orleans and different places on a plane.

LEW: Wait, your daughter was a marine?

Elizabeth: She didn't complete it, though, but she went in there, went in the marines and stayed in there like um, stayed in there for graduation but she didn't graduate because she was being sick most of the time with a foot syndrome. So she didn't

graduate for, you know how they graduate from that program and then stay in there 'til they complete whatever they're doing?

LEW: Complete their—what is it?

ELIZABETH: She uh just—she went to...

LEW: Tour.

Elizabeth: Hmm?

LEW: You do tours in the marines, I think. You get sent out and then come back.

Elizabeth: Well, she had to, she did uh, like them soldiers on guard? She had to do that. Had to be on guard duty and stuff like that and she was writing to me, telling me she didn't want to go but she went anyway. She was the one that uh wanted to try anything. To prove, to prove that uh that she could do it. To prove it to somebody that uh she could do that. She was willing to try anything to try to prove something to somebody else that she could do it.

When asked what she remembers of the desegregation process in Baton Rouge, she answered,

I know um, a boy got killed not too far from my house on [street] back in the day and uh somebody shot him, just. They had a sign on the building where they shot him on the street there, that's was in a riot or something. But that's about, the Reverend Jemison and uh 100 black mans they uh, you know marched, I think from uh Baton Rouge to uh on Southern campus and stuff like that. They marched, they marched like that. They uh, they all gone, Reverend Jemison and Martin Luther King, and all. Stuff like that.

Elizabeth walks to ARC twice a week for class; I asked if she has ever owned a car, so she told me an amusing story that took place in either 1973 or 1974 (she wasn't sure):

I had one but before I learned how to drive it, I, I wrecked it. I was sitting with somebody, a boy next door. See, I worked at, I did uh, whatcha call it, working with the driver's ed. I did that with the driver's ed at [school], too, did that, that was in the program, too, you could take driver's ed lessons. So I uh, I bought me a, I bought my own car. I paid like \$850 for it. It was a good car, it was an old lady had uh had the car. She was an older lady and she um sold it off her yard, you know, she bought her a new one and sold it. And you just turned the key in the ignition and that thing kicked off. It had a real good motor. That was all that mattered. She had just bought new tires but uh I went down in the evening time and it got dark before we got back,

come back home. She uh, I mean, it had like you know side of the street, it's not a street but you get off the highway and turn into a little short, like a driveway but it's no end, like a dead end. I was trying to turn in there.

The boy next door was supposed to be helping me to get my license; you have to have somebody to drive with you with license. I had my little permit, I didn't have my regular license, I was trying to get it. And then I had passed all of the little tests except the road, I was trying to get to the road test. Well, I did on my road test, but I didn't go over the bridge, I didn't get that experience with the driver's ed teacher.

So I was driving on [road] down there by, down towards LSU and um turning on that little short pathway and I thought that was my street and that boy started hollering that wasn't a street so after I bust up my car I realized what I had did, so I was going like that [pounds hand on table] when I was stomping, it would jump and it hit that pole, that telephone pole and it would jump back. Then I put, when I realized what I was doing wrong thing [pounds hands on table] this foot here on the gas, that foot on the brakes, but after I had done bust my car up, I realized what I had did.

It was too late then. Knocked off the front end of my car. Came back home, the bigger older brothers were standing there. They'd known we left with the car in good shape. When we come back, the front end was hanging down. He said, "You take that one in," told the little boy "you take that on in."

Brought it home. By the time he pulled into the driveway, the thing flopped down. The whole thing fell down. Couldn't go nowhere. Was sitting on the wheels, the front end. So the man went and got a piece of a part to do it, didn't know what he was doing, but he called it fixing it. He went across the river and got another part for \$80 or \$85 to try and put on, and he said, "I got the wrong part."

But I said, "I'm not putting another penny into this thing" and I didn't. So.

I know the name was an 88 Oldsmobile, it was in the 70s. I know I never tried to get a new one since, I was gonna go to driver's, you know American driving school? I was gonna go to that, I 'd already registered and somebody was supposed to pay for me to go, I mean pay for the class, you know how you take a classroom test and then a road test? The classroom test was \$25. The road test was \$110. And they paid the \$25 and then decided they wasn't gonna pay the \$110. So I just left it, I didn't worry about it no more.

Elizabeth "moved into my house in 1970 ... I bought it, buying it, and uh, I've paid it off." I clarified that she's been living in that same house since; she has been. When asked if the neighborhood has changed much, she said,

Oh, yes. It was, well, it was kinda rowdy at that time 'cause they party all night right across the street from my house. They had a lady over there, she had a young teenage girl 'bout the age of my daughter and she had all the mens over there just partying all night, drinking and cutting up. But all them moved out and died out. Took the houses, most of the houses been, you know, torn down. Torned 'em down and build new ones where, there was supposed to be new houses when I moved in all down that sight was new houses and on the opposite side was the older houses. Most of them gone, the houses and the people. Them that ain't died, they, they moved away.

I asked if any of her neighbors are still the same; she said

Some of them didn't, no, some of them didn't stay. Some of them moved out, didn't stay. I remember a year or two and they was gone. They went up on the mortgage or something and so they moved out. But I'm still there, and my neighbors on both sides of me. They ain't never moved away so we're still there. Some of them put up on the street, we still there on both sides, some of them, talked to the movement you know it was like a 235 loan. The more money you made, the more you had to pay. But I was working private home at that time, so my note, if I like, if they paid me, I'd get some more days, I'd get a little more money that note would float up and down. When I get less money, I paid less on my notes. The governor or somebody would pay part of the note and uh then I paid the rest. They paid more than I did. You know, I paid it on time. That's about the size of it.

When she attended school as a child, Elizabeth's favorite subject was "math, that's what I'm pretty good in now." She continued,

That's what I—I spelled pretty good then, I mean, the problem was, I didn't understand it myself. When I was standing spelling, you know like they'd put you in the line, and I could, I would mostly be the last one to get down because I was spelling, you know, I spelled. I was the last one spelling when they pulled you down, you know they'd go around and get in the front the line. And then when everyone was out, you'd be the last one standing, most of the time, that was me. And so, but the problem was, when I had to write it on paper, couldn't do it. Because my spelling wasn't too good in writing it, writing the words down. And that's, I didn't understand why, and the teacher didn't, she wanted to know why I was, uh wasn't, I couldn't, why I could spell it standing there but couldn't on the paper. But some big words I can't spell it to write it on the paper.

She has been trying to become fully literate for years and has attended several programs. In one of them, "I went to the night classes... but it wasn't, it was like we're doin'

here. But it was a night and they had, they had the little machine, tape, and we sit at the right side of the walls like they had little tapes, you know, and you'd read along... I enjoyed that."

Elizabeth said, "But every time I would start learning real good, I had to quit. And it was the same in regular public school when um I was going, 'cause we was on the farm and farming. So I had to go to school a little while and when I start learning something like that, then I had to get out and go to work in the cotton fields and stuff."

Of another program, she said,

I went there, it was, you could there in the daytime, all through the day, cause I just leave work and get off the bus, and go to work, I mean, what I was in about an hour or so, and get back on the bus and come home. So I was enjoying, you could work on your own and if you had questions to ask, you could. Anything you wanted to work with, you could work on your own and if there was something you didn't understand then you'd get somebody to help you, they had people on duty to help you out if you wanted to. Needed some help. So I liked it. I enjoyed that. I used to go to work, get off at 12 o'clock, 1 o'clock, and get on the bus and then you know... Like at noon and then leave and get on the bus and then get off at [road] and go to [school]. Walk across and go there. Study a little while, and then get back on the bus and come home. So that was real nice.

About ARC, Elizabeth said, "... right through here now, I enjoy more reading cause I understand better than I did back in the day. And this sorta, some of the people say, I don't know if it's teachers or what, I'm older, they thinking when you young and foolish, you wasn't thinking 'bout no lesson. Something like that. I don't know what it is but I know I better now with my reading stuff. I'm learning more, how to read better."

Elizabeth's "mama didn't know how to read. My daddy did just a little bit. I don't know if she ever had went to any school, but my daddy knew a little bit and none of them could help us. So that was a problem there. But when I came along, like my daughter, some of the things I couldn't help her with 'cause I didn't know but I did the best I could with her

and tried to keep her in school. She did, she did finish, graduated from high school and went two years to LSU, two semester." Elizabeth explained that when

[I] was sitting down one day and looking at the TV and had an older lady, she was in her uh 80 or something and she was graduating from college, she had gotten her degree, her diploma or whatever from college and she was marching across the stage with her cap & gown, and I was sitting down looking at that one day in the summer time cause I was working for the foster grandparents, that was the last thing I did, working for the foster grandparents as a volunteer where they give you a little thing, but uh -- she uh, that old lady was walking across the stage with her cap and gown, got her little diploma, I think that was at [college name] or wherever she were, but I said, "She uh, doing that," I said "I can do that." That's when I started coming over here.

I kept on trying to get to this place and this lady was coming over here, she coming to the Y but she couldn't tell me where to come. She didn't know. She said such and such street, but she couldn't tell me an address or nothing. She was coming over here and they was giving her, she had some little books and they was giving those out when I first came here, it was for the ones that's wasn't as improved as I am or whatever.

I said, "She can do that, going to get her diploma old like she is. Getting her diploma for college, she had done went to school, something she had missing, she had gone to get her diploma, so she was walking across stage. If she can do that, I can go improve my reading and my writing. And uh get a better understanding of what's going on." So she uh, so I finally found one of my cousins from Ville Plat, he came to the Y, to the brother center an aerobics class, so me and him start talking, so he gave me the address. He had the card from [name] and them, and he told me to write it off his little card because he wanted to keep it. So I wrote it down and he ain't ever come here, he didn't want to give me the card but I ain't ever seen him over here.

So I was working at, I was going to the little kids at the school for foster grandparents, I was going to them on Monday Tuesday Wednesday and Thursday, and I didn't work on Friday so after I start coming over here, I was enjoying it. I met [name] and her sister and her husband, and I had already knew them because we had went to class at the other school, I mean at the YMCA they was teaching too, I went there, too, the Y was at night. But after they told me I coulda maybe got my GED at LSU because the little books they have gave me, I had read all of them, Book 1 and Book 2 and Book 3 and I think Book 4 and then they gave me a test on the spelling. All of it what I had read from the book, back of the book had all of the spelling words, all of that was in the back of the book and I had to write all the spelling words down, spell them, and they said, "Well, you ought to go get your GED, go to LSU, that's where you're gonna get the GED, take the test for the GED."

I said no, what I'm looking for, I still don't have it yet. So, 'cause I still need to improve my writing. That's the big thing I need to do right now. But I understand the spelling better some of the words I can spell better, mostly. Um, I'm still pretty good in my math. Uh, what else, reading, I'm reading better. So but my biggest problem now is uh handwriting, I need to improve that more.

But uh I wanted to learn how to uh help the kids, you know, the little kids I'm working with. Some of them you know was, they could be teaching me some of it. You know, some children is uh gifted? They know all that stuff and they wanted, I passed a little girl, she said, she looked at the stuff what we got over here, she said "I done passed all that." I took care of her when she was a baby. I took care of her when she was a little baby and she telling me what I'm doing now she, she 9 or 10 now, she telling me "Oh, I done went through that already." That made me feel bad. She had done finished what I'm doing and I done take care of her...

Sometimes I had a ride because it was at night. Like when I first started going to [school]... Well, when I started, it was a bunch of us, a bunch of ladies, I don't know where we were. We was talking and it was three sisters and a sister-in-law and a niece, and they, they said they wanted to go to school to, you know, some of them had went to 11th grade and they wanted to complete. Some of them had a few courses to finish the 12th grade but they ashamed to go because at their age.

I said, "I ain't ashamed." I said, "Y'all take me; I'll go."

So that's how we all started going. And we went there and uh, the sister-in-law she, they was carpooling. I didn't have no car so I couldn't pool none of them, but they was bringing me. And then some of started dropping off and uh me and one of them still kept on going, but uh the last one was going, she uh, she had a car, she picked me up and dropped me off. And then she started working so she said, "Well I won't be able to get you because I uh leave straight from work and go straight to the class." So I said okay. So that's when I started hopping on the bus after I leave work and start going to after hours, half an hour or something you get on your own and do how many hours you want or minutes, whatever. I wanted 15 minutes I'd go and do a couple of math problems and get back on the bus and come on home. So that was there for that.

Elizabeth shook her head, saying that she has

nobody helping me at home. Just here. Sometimes, some, like at my school, if there's something I want help with or something, like at the school, an aide at the school, sometimes she'll have a little spare time you know if I ask her a question or something. But they busy on doing their paperwork and stuff so they don't have too much time to uh, get with me. Like, they wants to do it for you. You know, like if you ask for help, I don't want you to write what I want down. I want you to tell me what, how to do it, not you write it for me... just explain it to me and then if I don't know how to spell it, then you spell it for me and I'll write it down.

Like you writing that down now, now I might ask you a question and you gonna go write it all down for me. Just like when I was going to computer class, the man was supposed to be teaching you. He'd do all the work. You know, he'd be doing the thing but uh, I want you to show me how to do it, not do it for me. Show me how to do it. Now, if I ask you, Well you write that down for me and I'll copy it, but you did. But no, don't go on and do it for me and I want you, I want some help, but I don't want you writing it for me. If I don't ask you to do it. But that's what some of them want to do. Let's go on and write it up for you. But if you asking them for help, but they gonna instead of taking the time out to help you, they just go on and uh write it out for you or something.

I asked Elizabeth what reading means to her and she said,

Well, it helps me like if I need to write my letters and stuff like that. Write my bills out. I mean, that's what I, I have, I can do some of the things I couldn't do before. Like I write my own bills out, I tell my daughter well your handwriting is better than mine, so you write it. I do all my billing, I write all my bills, she don't be around so when she there, I let her do it, I ask her to do it. But other than that, I can do my own, write my bills out, whatever I like, bills. I don't do the water bill because it goes direct deposit, so I don't have to do that. Insurance. You know. I write that. Whatever other bills and stuff.

She'd like to read

The Bible, religious books and some good storybooks that are interesting to me, you know, when I read it, if it's interesting, I'll read the whole book or somethin'. Some of the words, if some of the words might be big, I understand. I'm proud of my own self now. I am. 'cause I'm reading much a whole better, big words when I can pronounce now oh I'll be surprised that I can pronounce this when I didn't before. I didn't know how to pronounce them but now I can. I can do it now. With the help of the good lord.

During the course of the interview, Elizabeth mentioned doing a previous interview with a news channel, where she answered almost identical questions; I followed up with Mr. Matthews, ARC's director, but he couldn't find the details. My own search proved fruitless.

CHAPTER 7. JOHN

“I never did learn to read because I had to go to the fields all the time... I wanted to.” – John, 2014

My fourth interview, on July 17, was with John, the oldest of ARC’s students. He is very small and frail, hunched over, and is tied as my favorite, though I know I shouldn’t have favorites. He drives himself to every class and a tutoring session, always wearing a light-weight jacket. He also always has a story to tell and is quite positive about things. When I was first volunteering with ARC, I used to arrive at the office before the door was unlocked and so did John; we would sit out front together and have conversations about whatever caught our fancy. Prior to this project, I once asked Mr. Matthews (the director) about John and he informed me that John’s literacy level will never get higher, due to health issues and possibly an undiagnosed learning disability of some sort. He’s reached as far as he can get. The others have all improved during the years I’ve known them, but John hasn’t and he won’t. And usually, Mr. Matthews said, they wouldn’t have taken someone at John’s level into the program, but because he’s so old, they did. And he shows up to class nearly every time and he loves it, and I just wanted to cry.

John was born and raised “up around Ethel, Clinton, Slaughter, Jackson... Well, I tell you what now, my home was up in there, that was my hometown up in there.” I found this confusing, so John explained,

What happened was it was Jackson, Ethel, and, and Clinton. What it was, it was a town, it was a town, had Jackson, Ethel, and then Clinton. That was the way it was. They was all in a row [drags hands along table to demonstrate] It was, it was uh, Jackson and then it was Ethel and this was Clinton. It, Clinton was in a row, all in a row.

He was born November 21, 1924; he was 89 when I interviewed him and is 91 as of this writing:

JOHN: I was born 19 and 24. The, the uh November 21st. How old do that make me be?

LEW: Hmm?

John: How old do that make me be?

LEW: That means you will be 90.

John: 90? How, do that make me 90 now, right?

LEW: Mm-mm. I'll check that. [goes to calculator on phone] Yup! You'll be 90 this year.

JOHN: [laughs] 90. And I was born in November the 21st.

LEW: Mm-hmm. Wow.

John: If I'll be 90 now, it'll when November comes for I'll get my 90.

LEW: That means you're 89 right now.

John: 89? That's what I thought.

When asked if he knew when, where, or how his parents met, John said, "Now, I couldn't tell you that cause I wasn't there. I couldn't tell you that 'cause I wasn't there." Both of his parents worked "Back on the farm. It was farming." He is the oldest of five, with two younger brothers and two younger sisters. None of them went to school because it was "Way up there which whatcha call it, um, on [road]. We'd be, we had to about 8 miles... Me, I was, I would go and I never did get out of first grade 'cause we had a long a way to walk to school. What they [his siblings] learned, they never get out of school. That's reason why I'm trying to get education now. 'Cause when I was coming up, I was working on the farm

and the fields. So we didn't get the chance to go to school at all." Neither of his parents were literate so there was no reading to him or his siblings.

When he was younger and not working on the farm, John said that, "What I's doin', the only thing, the only thing we did, we used to shoot marbles. Get on your knees and shoot marbles. Play marbles." Because "the houses were kinda in a little row like 1 2 3 4, about how far, the neighborhood was way apart, [drags hands across table] about like this round the neighborhood," John would mostly play with his siblings as opposed to neighborhood kids, but "on the weekends, we'd get together and we'd go to Clinton and Ethel."

John's first job off the family farm was in Jackson, LA:

What happened, now, let me explain what happened. I was a little boy and I was, I was, went to Jackson and they was building sidewalks that people walk on in town. And I, I rolled a wheelbarrow. I didn't know how to roll a wheelbarrow and they, and they put all the load, pile the wheelbarrow up with everything they could put on it, and they put it all on the wheelbarrow. When I get the wheelbarrow, I pick it up, over the wheelbarrow I go. It failed to the side and I fall with it, I fell over it, trying to hold it." He was still a teenager then but what he really wanted to do, he told me, was become a cement finisher "because that was where the most money was working at. The most money was a cement finisher at that time. I wanted to be, I wanted to work where the most money was working at. I was a young man.

I asked if he did become a cement finisher and John explained,

No, I come to be a cement afterwards, but we was working at [company]. At the power plant rolling, rolling, um, shells in that plant. But putting light things, up with power. Back at old [company] is where I was working. And we'd be, go there on a Monday morning and then we'd stay there from Monday to Friday, Saturday. Friday stay 'til Monday. And Friday evening, then we'd come home, back to Baton Rouge. After that, the next morning, we'd go back to, back to [company] over there to work.

So that weekend, I'd come home and a guy was down in [city] fixing tires. And I went down there and they had overhaul, there was cement all over. And I said, "Mister, you a cement finisher?"

"Yeah, I'm a cement finisher. Why?"

"Well, I've been trying to get in with somebody to show how to do cement work."

He said, "Tell you what."

I said, "What?"

"I tied up a friend of mine poured a whole subdivision out on [street], a whole subdivision. He said he's going in the army the next three weeks and you want to be a cement finisher."

I said, "Thank you, thank you so much." I was so happy, I was glad because that was what I wanted, to be a cement finisher.

Sure enough, he said, "Where you livin' at?"

I told him where I was livin' at.

"You married?"

"Yes, sir"

"You got a family?"

"Yes, sir"

"How many children you got?"

I told him.

"You got a wife?"

"Yes, sir."

He said, "Tell you what? The next three weeks, I'm going in the army. Give me your telephone number. If I go in the army, I'll call you."

Just like he told me, he called me when that man went in the army. So I was happy as I could be 'cause I got to be a cement finisher now. Okay. Where we be, when he called me one evening, I was sitting at home. He said, "Mr. [Smith]."

I said, "Yes sir."

"You ready to go to work?"

I said, "Yes, sir."

He said, "Now, look, the one thing I got is a Sanger Carpourer. Nothin' but a Sanger Carpourer. You gonna go help me to pour it?"

I said, "I sure will."

He said, "Come on to my house." So I went to his house. Then I got there on [street]. "See all the houses right here? Yeah, we poured all of this, yeah we did."

Okay. That sounded good. After we got there, just like he told me, we had a Sanger Carpourer to pour. He said, "Let me show you something" and everything he took out of his truck. Then uh, I can't think what the name was. The thing with uh, you mash the rocks out with, he showed that, he showed me this is a rail, this is a pull through, and this is a hammer, this is a pad, everything he took out, he showed me what to do.

"Okay, that'll work on." Now he said, "I'll tell you something else. When the truck gets here," he said, "you don't pour it out cause all this is a brick wall. Don't go past the brick wall because before I get my money, I got to clean that wall off. You gotta clean it off. When you get to the wall, ease it up like that and then you take that and pat it down like that. Go around that wall. Keep going and you'll ruin the bricks. Clean the bricks off." That worked out. After it worked it, and then, he told me, he said, he called me, I got called up, "[name], now, after I do that, can I get you a pull through. After you go around the wall, then he gets a trial, he eases up to the wall like that, don't go over it, pour all around."

The next couple months, the old man up there, we was pouring concrete and uh the boss man said "[name]."

"Yes sir."

"You see, that young man you got there, he says, the next couple months he's gonna make a clown out of you."

"He's doing that now. He's doing that right now." So I rocked on and rocked on. So we all got to be friends, something like that. He called me *baby boy* and I called him *dickie boy*. I said "dickie boy!"

"Yes sir, baby boy!"

"Look," I say now, I said "it's uh, it's odd to come back here, and they pouring concrete. I'm enjoying this. You need another man?" He said he'd come let me know. He never did come let me know.

"Baby boy, so you see what I'm doing, they see you working with me. Every time I'm not working, I've got a job." He'd be calling me. He called me just like he told me, that's what happening. Every time he had a job, he'd call me. "Y'all working today?"

No.

"Y'all want to work [with] me?"

Yeah.

"Come on."

So I started working there. So things worked on, things worked on, so I was doing so good. Until, until, until he drive away, back down to [street] down there. We was in town working on this driveway, coming up to people's houses and the water line, there was a little water line in front of this building, about this wide. [holds up hands]

"Why'd you go down there?"

We couldn't go down to the water line, he told us, we couldn't dig it up but we could put stuff over it so the car wouldn't hit it. Waterline in the driveway. So that man by the name of something [name], I can't remember what it was. He worked for the city. He called me [name]. He said, "[name]."

I said "Yes sir, we have one truck. We only have one truck."

We took one truck out. We had to go back to the shop and get another local truck. By the time I go and come back, they broke the waterline. I dug it out and washed it out and stuff like that. And we started pouring again. So, so, so bout before that run out, they called me [name]. He said, "[name], whatcha gonna do now?"

I said, "I'll find something to do."

He said, "You got a crew?"

I said, "No sir."

He said, "Can you get a crew?"

I said, "I can get a crew because I can go to the whole, I can get a truckload and load it down with me and the boys." Sure enough, that worked out and so, so when the man called me, I was sitting at home. I do, my thing at home is sitting at home outdoors. I love outdoors. I like being outdoors.

The phone rung. Someone said, "Telephone!"

I went in the house and it was the, he, his friend was from out of town. He said, "You a cement finisher?"

"Yes sir."

"You [John Smith]? "

"Yes sir."

"Look, I got a canal coming up down [street], down there. I'm gonna be sitting on [street] halfway to the light. And you come out there and hit [street], I'm driving a big Buick with a big hat on, sitting on the side of the road waiting on you. Come on down there and then I'm going to take you down into the woods. I'm digging out a canal to pour. You ever pour a canal?"

"No sir."

"You got any men?"

"No sir."

"Can you get any?"

"Yes, sir."

Okay. That worked out. Sure enough, when I went down there, there was a man with a big hat on in a Buick. "You [John Smith]?"

"Yes sir."

"Follow me." That man led me down there to the woods down there, turned into the woods down back there, and I went down there and looked. That man had tore up all the trees cause we was digging out a canal and pouring the sides.

I come down and tell the man, "Mister, this is too big a job. I can't handled this job. It's too big a job."

But I had a mind and I could handle it, I wanted to learn that job. So I come back, I asked my buddy "[name]," I said, "[name], look, the man offering me a job pouring a canal. You ever poured a canal?"

"Yeah, baby boy, I done poured it."

I said, "You like it?"

He said, "No."

I said, "Why?"

He said, "Too much hard work in it. See here, see here."

It's too much but I wanted it. "I'mma do it," I said. "look, what you gotta do?"

"I'm gonna stay with you till you get through it. You gotta pour the bottom first. Got a big drag in there. Pour it here with that bucket. I'mma, after that, stick it out. Then I'm gonna stay with you till you get started out on it."

Sure enough, he did. That big guy got me started out and then I went to the hole in a white pickup truck. I got that pickup truck.

I said, "Y'all wanna work? Yeah. Yeah come on, follow me." That truck was big time, full of men on that truck. So I showed up and the man told me what to do.

He said, "Now, get the men and bring them out there." He said, "Them that don't want to work, don't worry 'bout that. Just bring them out there. They don't want to work," he opened the door of that car, "them that don't want to work, let them go. Them that want to work, write them a check and let them go."

Sure enough, that's what he did. So them that wanted to stay, he wrote a bunch of them new clothes. How 'bout that? That boy was [name]. Friends and neighbors, stuff like that. Okay, some of them sat by the phone, some of them whining, some of them dig the bottom out, but the rest, they go down in there and pull em out. They'd pick me up at the bottom. That worked out, so.

From then on, I poured—the average canal used ran through down, and the average canal in town, I poured it. From then on, everything worked out. I was up there by the big houses, by where they make bricks at, stuff like that. So I was, I was, I working down here on [street] when they was coming up through there pouring that. I poured one canal in every town, just about.

And so the man told me, he said, "John, look, I got a canal coming up up there by," he said, "it's a sea canal."

I said, "It is?"

"Reckon you can handle it?"

"Oh, yes, sir, I can handle that, I can handle it."

Sure enough, I got me a crew working for me. Then, then we went, I got that started up there, we started pouring a canal. Now I'd been working up there a while when

someone, this big man said, "The man coming down to turn my books. Who is [John Smith]? He's a cement finisher. Making all this money and ain't taking out no income tax for nothing. He better start taking out income tax on it."

Okay. I didn't know what he was talking about. Then, the real supervisor said, "Look, Monday morning, I'm going take you, you gotta have a license. I'm going to take you and sign the applications. Why you need a license."

I said, "Okay"

Sure enough, he did. I had my son there with me, I said, "You be helping while I go get my license."

He said, "Okay."

Soon after I got my license and stuff like that, like it cost me \$100 a year, a license to pour concrete. Okay I got that. I said, "Now, I'm getting up in the world now. I got that. I'm happy with got that."

I asked what year John got the license and he answered,

Now, I can't tell you, but, I can't tell you, but I guess I must have been pouring concrete around 3 years after I got my license. And then, you'd take a 70 yard load of concrete in a truck and back up that to the canal and, and pour that concrete out. When they sent me out of concrete, they'd have a zone up at that wall, straight down like that. In that, 70 yard, that truck would be heavy. That took 1 load of concrete. Okay, that worked out. And I'm glad it worked out.

So I said, "Well," I said, "I've got the hang of it now. I've got boys now, my crew working for me, but for all these years, all these young boys. I'm done out there with young boys but the old men come out there, can't get down out in the canal. Can hardly come out of the canal with their legs.

So I said, "Well," I said "what I'll do, I just stick with these young boys." I stuck with them young boys around there. So the thing is, from the canal right now, well, I got it made now. And I was a cement finisher every Saturday.

John married when he was 21 years old. He explained,

Well, what happened was she was a girl who lived, we lived up on a hill and the girl lived up, out on the road, on the road. We used to go to school together. We used to, uh um, she'd come over there and get water out of the well when it was working. And then I'd talk to her like that. And so after that, she, I used to go over there and she was always taking pans out there, back out of the catalog, she always had a catalog. And like, how much I tried. I always say, "I'll get you something."

But after that, and then there was neighborhood around. And soon after I started working at [company], and I saw, she had an auntie living in New Orleans and she'd come up to the country and she'd stay with them awhile. And she poked me to talk to the girl, to, to to, after we got, after I met her and then we started to um, then I asked to come to see her. After that, I started to come to see her.

Her auntie told her, I said, I said, "That's a nice boy over there. If he ever asks to marry you, you marry him." And so, he, that boy would visit, and so she'd keep her pushing, she'd say, "That man got a good job at [company], he, he, got a job, you'd be lucky to have somebody that got a good job."

Sure enough, that girl come to see me and told me yeah. Soon after I left out the country and went down to town, staying with my auntie. And then I got my uncle to write a couple letters for me. Stuff like that.

John's wife was literate:

So the school guy come, what they would do, he would send them down to town to live with their auntie and they come to school in town. She hadn't got to walk from way out of the country on the gravel road to go to school. They would stay down round about two or three years with their auntie down in town, come to school in town. But, but they could read, they all finished high school.

They had five children who all graduated high school:

my two girls did better, they done went to college. And then my baby boy and my two girls, they did about two or three years at Southern up there. And, and then my baby boy, he finished college, too. But the girls, they got around two years back at, back at, back at college but but my baby boy, he finished college.

John's youngest son "stayed in the army for awhile" and his "baby daughter," he told me with an adorable smile, is "in uh Washington DC, she's a big lady back at a hospital because all the hospitals are closing down. She's a big lady in a hospital and she has her own office."

John never traveled much but he did make a trip to New York once:

He [a work friend] had two sisters living up there. Every time, he'd get a vacation, he'd get a vacation and he had a big old long Buick with the with the bumper coming off. With the um bumper coming out. It was coming over the bumper, long tall, long tall, tall uh Buick. He had a black one and it was coming back over the bumper and he was supposed to go to New York City in it, and so we got to talking.

"You ever been to New York City?"

I said no.

"You'd like to go?"

I said, "Yeah I'd like to go."

"We'd go there every year on my vacation, we go there."

I said, "You do?"

"You and your wife want to go?"

I said, "We'll go."

I asked my wife about it and she said, "Yeah you go, but I want to stay here for the children." So she wouldn't go.

And me and him went to New York City and stayed up there for I think, it was, it was two weeks up there... And how, I used to hear people say, you can go down, you can go to New York City and they go down under the bridge and the water on top. Go down under the water, under the bridge, water on top and they be, they'd have big lights come on under the water. I said no, that ain't happening. But I got there to see it, how it went down under there.

We transitioned to the literacy questions and John explained that he found ARC because

I had an auntie and she would tell me about it and uh, when we first started out there, she was out on [street]. It was a great big building on [street]. You had to get to [street], you had to get to [street], it was a big old building you had to make a turn. And I'd go there. And my auntie was telling me about it. And I said, "Could you take me to it?" And she showed me where to go. And I went in there, I started going to school back out there.

He believes that he's been attending "around two or three years, I guess. Somewhere in the neighborhood. I'm not sure, you know." At that point, it had been more than four years.

John wants to learn to read "'cause back in the country I never did learn to read because I had to go to the fields all the time... I wanted to. I wanted to. And that's why I'm still coming out, trying to learn to read and write." He wants to read "the signs on the

streets. And uh a page like that. [points to the questions] Somebody called me to work or to go somewhere, I don't know where to go, to read the signs. But if you can't read, you in bad shape."

When asked what 'reading' means to him, John said,

Reading to me is a whole lot because you can get the newspaper and see what's happening. If you reading the newspaper, you know what's going on in the world. Back in that time, when, when I was, when we were coming up, the boys, there was a man back in the country, he had 15 head of kids. And then he could read, his wife could read. Out of all of his kids, there wasn't schoolteachers that they was, I was, they were principals. Because he sat down to read, and his wife could sit down to read, and there was nothing about it. That man was like the hustling himself. He had green stuff like to sell and he lived in the country, he had a wagon, he had milk cow. He didn't have nothing but a horse to ride somewhere. He could get around. But we couldn't.

John has found attending classes and tutoring sessions at ARC a little difficult:

See, what happened is when I first came here, I stopped for awhile. And then and then people were telling me, "You was doing good. Why you stop?" And then I then I come back and started back again... It took me a while. It has been difficult. Now I'm living by myself. All my children don't live with me, I live by myself. As giving me something to read or work on, but I ain't got nobody at home to help me with it... See, I give me something like that to take home and study, but I got no one at home helping me, so I try to do my best with it. Ain't nobody helping me. It's like back in the country. Daddy couldn't read and Mama couldn't read. Well, you see, what that was, that was, that what makes it so hard. This man what I was talking about with 15 head of children. They was, they was teaching. Because he would sit down and explain it to his children what education meant. Stuff like that. But all my daddy and mama know was nothing but a farm. Nothing but a farm. That's all they know. So it was mighty tough to explain and help, but you could do pretty good with it, you know?

John seems to have a happy, successful life, so I asked, "What was the hardest part before you started trying to learn to read?"

He said, "Well, you know, like, you know, like in class with the stuff like that. What I had to do. But sometimes I go home and go out to my aunt's house and I'd get some of my

grandchildren come up there and they'd help me with it, you know. Stuff like that, you know. So when you ain't got nobody to help you, it's harder on you."

Seeing John's excitement every week gives me hope and reminds me why I want to go into this field. He visibly loves being in class, he's hilarious and sweet; after I turned off the recorder, he talked about always doing what he can to help people and how glad he was to be able to help me with my project. He thanked me for letting him help. He told me that in his free time (which he has a lot of, being retired) he enjoys being outside and going places, and also sleeping.

At the time of this writing, John has been working with ARC for at least six years. He attends two classes a week and a tutoring session. He has lived a long, successful, happy life; all he wants is to do good in the world. I know for a fact that he inspired one of the other participants simply by showing up. He is a wonderful person and I am privileged to have met him, and I learn from him every week he hobbles into class. Interviewing him was a privilege.

CHAPTER 8. MARY

“Back when I was coming up, things was rough, baby.” – Mary, 2014

The only non-member of the class interviewed was Mary, Sarah’s mother. A week prior to our interview, I met with Mary and her tutor in the same room where class takes place and informed her of my intentions with the project. I gave her the questions, with the tutor’s assurance that they would be reviewed and explained in more detail, if required. Our interview was on July 25; Mary was very sweet and open, and thanked me when the interview was done for listening. She also told me the whole thing was fun.

Mary “come out of Denham Springs when I was 8 years old and I was raised in Baton Rouge for the rest of my life.” She was born on October 19, 1929, “the second to the oldest” of nine children, “8, 9. 8 head of kids. And one extra. Wasn't my daddy's kid... my oldest brother died.”

When asked what they did for fun as children, Mary answered, “Nothing 'cause of where we was living at, we was unable to go to school there. They had a school there but we wasn't allowed in it.” She made sure to catch my eye and raised her brow, adding, “I think you know what I mean... See, it was a *racial proposition*.”

I nodded, a little uncomfortable, with a soft, “Yes, ma’am,” and she continued, “They had a school next door to us but we wasn't allowed to go to it. Blacks wasn't allowed to go to it. And so that's the way it was back in those days. That's really, I don't have no education or anything.”

She also told me, “I didn't hang out with no friends. I don't know. I was just peculiar person. I never, I didn't hang out with a bunch of friends, girls.”

Mary's first job (outside the home) "was doing private home work working for [name]. Worked for him for 40 years... I started working when I was around 12 years, about between 12 and 11 years old. And working all my days."

Mary "got married when I was 38 years old" in 1967 and only had one child, Sarah, who I also interviewed for this project, in 1946.

I asked Mary if she would mind sharing what she remembered of desegregation and she said,

Well, it was hard. You know, but, I don't know what is the worst. It is good now, better than it was. You know, 'cause back in those days uh I don't know, you're too young to remember but back in those days you couldn't go into a restaurant, a white restaurant and sit down and eat. If you wanted something, they had a little holes in the walls on the outside, you'd walk up there and get what you want. But you wasn't allowed to go into a white restaurant and sit down. And neither a white bar. Couldn't go in there and sit down. Couldn't go in no white place and sit down. Back in those days... Yeah. Things was, things were easier then when he [MLK]r come along but when I, when I came into the world, things was rough. And he came out trying to make things better. They did. But um, back when I was coming up things was rough, baby.

I asked, "So how much has Baton Rouge changed?" Mary gave me stupefied look and I chuckled, "That's the exact same face your daughter made."

Mary laughed, "Oh my god. Hmm! What a question. Lord have mercy. See all this down here?" She gestured towards downtown.

This be nothing but a swamp. People used to hunt down here. And across the railroad, northern Baton Rouge, used to be nothing but a farm. People used to raise cotton and corn all up in there. No houses up in there. Nothing but a farm. And nothing but a cow pasture. They raised milk dairy up there, lots of milk dairy... Just had woods and everything. Nothing but dairy now. Oh, lord. Girl, shoot, you ask. If I had a pictures to show you. I imagine there are pictures somewhere to show how Baton Rouge used to be. And [street], that wasn't nothing but a swamp... Oh, yeah, girl, no houses over in that.. Yeah. Shoot. Wasn't no houses. Used to be cow pastures all in there. 'cause we, we and uh, and uh, [street]? Used to be a gravel

road. [Road] used to be a gravel road. And, and uh [street] used to be a gravel road."

I asked if she remembered when the roads were paved and she said, "Oh lord baby, I don't know when they got paved but I remember they used to be a gravel road when I was a child coming up."

"So it's changed quite a lot," I said.

Mary replied, "Oh lord have mercy. It's, it's changed about a 1000% from what it used to be. And it's still growing. They tearing down all the woods everywhere now. Even the animals got nowhere to go. They're coming to Baton Rouge, coming to town. The other day I seen, when I was coming home on one of the roads, I seen up ahead two armadillos. Now you know armadillos should be in the woods. They ain't got no woods now so they're coming out. It's a great change I have seen since I've been in this world. A great change. Yes indeed."

I asked, "What role has reading played in your life?"

Mary told me, "Well, right now it's doing great things in my life. 'cause see I didn't know how to read, period, still I started going to the outdoor, to the school. And the first outdoor school I started at was [school] in the park. And they started opening up, you know, asking people to come. So I started going to school there... Been quite a few years, baby, many years. Many many years."

Mary "always could write but couldn't read. That sound funny, huh? I always could write, always could sign my name but I couldn't read." Five of her siblings "could read" because "they went to school in, and I was the oldest girl and I had to stay home and tend to the youngest kids while Mama worked."

Mary “wanted to learn. I still wants to learn. 'cause that's the reason, at my age, that's the reason I'm still going. 'Cause I wants to learn.” She “just want to learn to read, period.” It was difficult “when we first started off. But I’ve been getting to learn better as I go along... It feels good to learn how to read.”

Mary is very kind, and very talkative, and quite adept at avoiding topics. Partway through the interview, she said she wouldn’t answer a particular question completely while the recorder was on. Though I did not remind her, once the interview was complete and I’d shut the recorder off, she proceeded to tell me further details for the question. Obviously, I have not used the information in this project, but knowing it has affected me. Mary said I was one of three people she’s ever told. It has been... difficult, as I’ve tried to keep the knowledge from overshadowing certain things.

I am very glad to have met her, though I wish she’d attend the weekly classes, if only to see her and Sarah interact. Having met both of them, I can see where Sarah gets her strength of personality.

CHAPTER 9. CARL

“Now, I know that may be a little hard to swallow down but that's a true thing.” – Carl, 2014

Carl was next. I feel like his was the worst interview on my part; I felt wrong-footed and never really recovered, as I think I may have accidentally offended or insulted him. He is the member of the class I am least familiar with, which unfortunately may have affected the interview. While Carl doesn't often volunteer answers in class, his are usually right.

Carl's parents “met at the blind school at uh Southern University... She was always blind but he, uh he, he was only, whatcha call it, um, it was uh, it was blind, too, but not totally blind but uh, there's another word for it, I can't find—”

I offered, “Legally blind?”

“Yes,” Carl said. “He was legally blind.”

He doesn't know what year they met but he was born in 1938 and grew up “in an area called Scotlandville” with two older brothers. He and his brothers are all sighted.

I asked, “What was it like growing up with two blind parents?” and Carl explained,

Well, I can't really answer that question simply because my mother did everything a normal mother would do. She cooked, she cleaned the house, as much as she could, and my father, he just like I said, he wasn't totally blind. He worked out there in, uh, he did the things a normal father would do for his children. So, and they raised the three best boys in the neighborhood. I didn't say that, other people said that... Never been to jail or uh, never lied there drinkin', gamblin', and whatever normal guys do, you know. Well, we dranked all right, we just didn't go to extremes or anything.

I found myself distracted by the fact that both of his parents were blind, which is where I think I offended him. He seemed able to move past it, though I felt off-kilter for the rest of the interview.

For fun, Carl and his brothers “did normal things. We played baseball, football, basketball, go in the woods and jump in the hole and swim. Wasn't such thing as swimming pools in that time.” Of them all, “Baseball was my most favorite... Well, back in that time, you could do anything and enjoy yourself. Mostly, most of us, a self thing, you know, you didn't go nowhere, didn't do no traveling or none of that.”

Carl “went to the ninth grade” because “after, I went to work, really, after I got out of school. I went to work trying to have something to help my parents.” Only one of his brothers completed high school, but it was “after he went into service. He finished in service, he didn't uh finish before he went to service.”

That brother “retired and he spent about 30 years in the army.” His oldest brother also quit school to get a job; “he worked at a lumber yard for quite a while and I, then he drove a cab for awhile.”

Carl, meanwhile, “mostly was a roofer. And after that I went into grocery stores and started working as a meat cutter.” He remained a butcher “till I retired... I retired in, in uh, 12, um, 6 years ago. Twelve, um, I can't get it together... Off and on, I cut meat about 30 years. Not at one place or that long a time.”

Carl met his wife in 1957 “at her house. At uh, there was a choir singing group and I brought my, a friend of mine who was uh singing, he didn't have any transportation and he asked me to drive him. And I met her there.” His wife “was a musician at churches.” They had three children who all completed school and were fully literate, and Carl has four grandchildren; he usually misses class during the summer because he spends so much time with them.

When I asked about Carl's experiences with desegregation, he said, "I'm thinking in my mind about, I was a butcher. You mean telling what happened to me at that time?"

I answered, "Anything that you remember."

Carl told me, "I had a boss man this one time. He didn't like my mustache, I had to shave it off."

"Your mustache?" I repeated in disbelief.

"Yes," Carl said. "And I was leaving a job, I left a job. And I have had someone tell me 'You, you work.' Other words, this white guy was in there with me. And I was cutting the meat and he was getting butcher's pay and I was getting porter pay and he actually told them to clean the floor and I was cutting the meat. Now, I know that may be a little hard to swallow down but uh that's a true thing."

When I asked how he got into butchering, Carl said,

I had a cousin of mine got fired from Food Town. When he got fired, he got out and came by the house and he was walking by the house, and he said, "Carl, you know I just got fired, man."

I said, "For what?"

And he began talking about what he got fired, but I told him, "You know I need to go check on that job." I did. That's what I did. I went and checked on that job and I got it. I didn't get it as a butcher, I got a job as a porter. At that time they called it a porter but you worked around the meat all day long. And when it was time to clean up, you was a porter then. But you didn't clean up all day. You work around doing something in the meat department all day. But you was the one that started cleaning it up when the time, just before you get off.

When I asked Carl why he thinks he didn't learn to read as a boy, he said, "I was mostly thinking I didn't know how, but I didn't have the necessary help at home. I'm not gonna put that as an excuse, excuse though because it was presented to me, I just failed to

get it.” His family knew he was illiterate and his “mother, they tried to talk to me you know, but my daddy, he was illiterate, too. He couldn't read. But he could sign his name.”

His earliest memory of books is that he “didn't really like 'em,” which “I guess it shows up now. You know. But uh, I just never did really, what uh, took the time out to pursue that as I should.”

His wife “was very smart” and she read to their children.

Carl told me that he “woke up and begin to realize that uh certain things on certain jobs you just should know or have to know to do something, they tell you to go out there and take inventory on something and was unable to do it. So that affected me by living it. Not living, but uh, on the job or what have you.”

ARC is Carl's “maybe 3rd or 4th time coming back to night school and this, this is my, 3rd time. Each time I came back and stayed awhile and felt that I wasn't confident that much, that I wasn't, so I quit. But I retired so I decide to come back again. Matter fact, I came back again and then I quit and went back to work. Heh.”

His first time returning to school “must've been back in 19... 1960. I been trying in 1960,” which didn't work out because “Basically I didn't put the time in it like I was supposed to have put in it.” The second, he told me with a chuckle was the “same thing.”

He found ARC because “I was in a store when I picked up a literature, in a paper that I was reading, on that literature about night school. And I decide to pick it up and decided to come back to night school then.” At the time of the interview, he'd “been here about 3 years now.”

I asked, “Have you noticed improvement?”

He replied matter-of-factly with a nod, “Yes I have. I have noticed a whole lot.”

Not being able to read, Carl told me, “kept me out of some positions I was being, I was meat manager. Uh, whatcha call it. The meat manager or second man in the place. I was, I had the ability but not the knowledge. You know what I mean?”

The best part of learning, Carl shared, is that “it's a pleasure to get a letter in the mail and being able to read it, and understand what it says. Not having to carry it to someone else and ask them to help you with it. And most of my mail, I can read it and understand it. Not that I know every word but uh, I found sometimes you could know two or three words, two or three words and that uh they would uh tell you what the other words is.”

He “just would like to read better you know. I mean, the strength and knowledge and understanding about some things.” For Carl, reading is “relaxing. When you can absorb and understand what you reading, it really relaxes you and helps the mind out.”

“So, is it fun?” I asked.

“Yes, it is,” he said. “I really enjoy getting the real essence out of it. But when I don't get the essence out of it, it kinda get discouraged and...”

I offered, “It's frustrating.”

He replied, “Yes. You can't get the real thing out of it.”

After I turned the recorder off, Carl informed me that throughout his life, he had pushed reading away but feels he's accomplished amazing things despite that and hasn't really suffered a lack without it. This is definitely the interview that was the most difficult, as I wasn't sure how to approach Carl, especially after how open and talkative Alan and John were. That is a failure on my part as an interviewer.

CHAPTER 10. GEORGIA

"It was my time. I said, 'This is my time to do somethin' for me.'" - Georgia, 2014

My seventh and final interview was with Georgia on August 28, my other favorite. Georgia is short and plump and walks with a cane. She rides the bus to and from class, so when I worked the front desk, we would talk sometimes. She is very sweet and takes great pleasure in reading aloud.

Georgia was born February 13, 1944 in Bainbridge, Mississippi. She is the youngest of three girls and then had three younger brothers. She said, "we left when I was about three years old, we left and went to Lambert, MS and my mother, she remarried again" to a farmer. When Georgia and her siblings were young,

we had to get out there on the farm we chopped, pitched in, raised our garden, raised our hog, I mean our hog, cows, milk cows, we had four, five milk cows so we had to milk them twice a day... what was, we had to do, we had to get out there and clean that, we had to, when we got old enough, we had to get out there and clean that, saw all the trees that came down... So we had to cut them trees down and take the ash and trim the branches off the tree. And then we pile 'em up and then we had to, two or three days, their leaves were dry and then we had to take a match and set them on fire. So we had to clean up the property. Us three girls and two of our brothers, we got old enough to work in the fields... You know the cotton sack was full and we had to tote it on our back. Now you think about a 90 pound girl come tote that cotton. We had to do it. Because guess what, if we didn't do it, you know what was gonna happen? We was gonna get it right there. And uh, I used to pick 350 pounds cotton a day. The only thing we stopped for lunch. You didn't have no watch, you went by your shadow to tell you what time was it. Back in that time, baby, that part and uh we worked, baby, we worked we didn't know when Sunday come. That's how brutal he was. And uh the end of the year, you know what a hundred dollar bill was? That's all we got. That's it. And then we had to take that and by children clothes, by everybody clothes, out of that hundred dollars. That's all. And I was, we was enslaved. We didn't got shoes, no soap, no nothin'. And baby, now we're free. But like I said back in the 60s, you couldn't wear shorts, nothing, in the 60s. And you had to do what we never was, I mean we didn't have nothing to say back in that time you better not open your mouth. He was the boss. Couldn't go nowhere.

Regarding school, Georgia said that “we march to the second grade, that’s the furthest we get... We were in first or second. We didn’t go cause we was on the farm. We didn’t go.”

Georgia said that she

came [to Baton Rouge] in 71, I was 25 years old... the older I got, I worked up some sense. And when you get to the place that you can’t take no more, I left. I runned off. But I had to leave my children there, that was the problem. But these police down here, when we went to back to get our kids, me and my sisters, and uh they put ‘im in jail and uh that’s how we got our children. And like I said, was a lot of ‘buse and he was temper, temper, he just told ‘em with fists and he was the beast, very beastly.

Georgia never married; when I asked Georgia about her own children, she explained that she had six children and two miscarriages, and then she shared this heartbreaking story:

... my oldest son, he had passed. He passed down here in Baton Rouge. That was in 72. November 22, I never forget that. I had, I went to work one Friday morning and the wind was blowing, it was beautiful, and had the trees all green, crisp. Like I’d gone back to the farm, beautiful. He had came in from work and he said, “Mama, I love you.” I said, “I love you, too.” And I put my coat away, I hold him in my arms. I told him, “Eat your food, your lamb, and get some rest, you worked all the night.”

About two o’clock, that when I got off. Yeah, I got off at two o’clock. I guess about, I had to walk from uh Nathan’s Food Store on Plank road; I had to walk down to Thorn’s street where I was living. And the further I got, there was so many people and so a lady come to meet you, “Your son’s dead.”

“What are you talking about?”

Your sisters and little brother all three come in from school and he said the door was open, but we had some neighbors that lived next door and they always was into it because they had a attitude problem, but I didn’t go over there, I never did go over there. I weighed 275 at the time ‘cause I was taking medication for my nerves, and baby, I could hardly get through. And I walked in there. He was, he was dead. He was stretched out. I asked “Why?” and he was gone. And somebody had broken in the back door.

I had made groceries, I had bought – it really didn’t matter what the food was, they used talking, the press was coming in, and we, we looked at that, he gone. I didn’t

believe that. That's all. I guess I was in shock. I didn't believe, I didn't believe that. And the coroner said, "He gone."

I tried getting a heartbeat. He was gone. And they took him, they moved the body, and they took him to uh Earl K. Long over there, and I went with him. And that time, they pulled that thing out, I don't remember nothin' else. And then after work, I got up the next mornin' and nothin' have, I got up, put my clothes on, got ready for work, went on to work. And my boss told me, he uh [name], 'cause I was workin' at [restaurant], and he told me, he said, "Go back home and take care of your things." And then he said period, it didn't bother him, I don't know what was goin' on in my mind. I never broke down or nothin'. And I never grieve before in my life. But that night, I grieve."

Georgia broke down in tears and I wasn't sure what to do. I waited a few moments and asked if she wanted to pause the interview, but she shook her head, saying she was fine and that she wanted to continue. She then explained how she worked through her grief and pain:

I was letting all of them know what happened in life, what happened to me, my kids wasn't gonna go through what I went through. I made sure of it... I had to get myself together and I looked at my other five kids out there. It was hard. It was very hard. But I made it... Ask me, sometimes I'd go, I'd be looking at my granddaughters and they be asking me, "Mawmaw, what is you looking at?" I said, "Baby, mawmaw's lookin' at how beautiful her baby is." They don't know what we went through. And I never tell 'em. You know? But sometimes right now, I get so angry.

Georgia's "first paying job was in Baton Rouge" working at "[restaurant]... They used to serve food." She left there around 1974 because she "started getting SSI on my disability. I had a bad back. And so I didn't work anymore after that... I couldn't work, I couldn't work no more. And that's my last paying job, I used to work."

Georgia said,

I used to pray, I asked God, "One day, I'm going to be free one day." And sure enough, I was free. Like Martin Luther King said, "I thank my god I'm free at last, I'm free." I'm free. And what did that get me? I ain't get in trouble for what? I done came too far. He brought me too far to turn around. I ain't going back. Every day I pray make my day thank god for the sunrise one more day and that day, every day is a good day. Every day, I said thank you for one more sunrise. Every day my

children live, I thank you. 'cause so many thousands lay down last night and he didn't wake them up. I say thank you I got a place to lay my head, I got food, I got shelter, and I got a check coming in, I said thank you cause so many people don't have nothin'. So, baby, that's my life.

When her children were younger, Georgia "used to try to help my children when they had homework. But I didn't understand, I didn't know what the words were—I tried to help them but I couldn't because I didn't know how to read."

When asked why she chose to return to school, Georgia said, "Why? Because I had raised all my children, all my grandchildren, I raised them. It was my time. I said, 'This is my time to do somethin' for me.'" She elaborated,

I got smart and I told them, "Tell y'all somethin'. You see when the last one graduates, it's my time." I told them just like that. I said, "I'm not getting no trouble" because I didn't want my children to come up like I come up. That's pretty cool. Over then, I couldn't read. But I could write my name. But uh, after I got older, my children, pulled myself together, moved out of that house where he passed, I passed into another house, I left. But it took a long time for me to really get out, I guess, because I was just still shocked. That's where I lived.

She tried to return earlier but

my sister got sick. She had—I dropped out. I had to take care of her. And then my health started getting bad, I had to have you know surgery and everything. But I never gave it up. When I had my grandkids, I told them, I said, "Soon as y'all mom's y'all you in daycare center, tryin' to get my health, I'm going to school." Just like that.

And they said, "What school you be going to?"

I said, "I be goin' to school on [street]."

"Mawmaw must be good, because we be going to school, too."

I said, "Yeah, that's good. Mawmaw goin too."

"But you sick now, you gonna have surgery."

I said, "That don't matter, I be going." I said, "When your mama put y'all in daycare center, I'm a start goin'." And that's when I started going. And that's how I after all

them many years, I went back down and the lady told me where I'm a get you, she called, I didn't have, all they had down there was the one who dropped out of the 12th grade and they was down there getting a GED. I said, "I didn't get that far." So the, I can't think of her name, but she sent me here. And that's how I got here [the nonprofit].

Georgia truly loves reading; she told me,

Since I have been coming here, to read and everything, I'm fine. This here, this is somethin' that I want. And I'm gonna try and try and try again, up and down, I need my health but still, when I'm at home, I read, I'm trying to go to my lessons always. See that's, that's what I do. So I thank god that y'all here and I thank god that I'm just living and this program is here. 'cause I tell you, it's helped me, baby. I go out and eat at a restaurant I can look at the, at this here and this here, and now it's changed 'cause I can read somethin' but I want to read better... I ain't depressed no more. I can read. They gave me a fresh tab after I told y'all I wasn't depressed. I'm not... I know I'm not depressed because I can read somethin'.

As to what Georgia enjoys reading, she said,

Most of the time, I'm on my own with my book in my uh, I be there sitting reading my Bible, my Psalms, and then my books. I've got uh, second grade book at the house. And I sit there and I read that book and I go through it. Even though I've read, I'll go back two or three days I'll be on absent. I'll go back over that same lesson, you know. Yeah... I read the bible and I got that book at home that I read. Most of the time, I'm in the bible and reading Psalm 113. I read 113. 121, and sometimes I read 135 and 142. I just go through, been going through the bible and then I jump over to 91. I just be reading.

When asked what the hardest part of being unable to read was, Georgia said it was the frustration. She mentioned it multiple times:

I was frustrated. And uh that was more depressing than all this was, like everything was coming up on me all at once. I never, I wanted it to stop. That's it. I didn't even know how to spell. You know when you got the dog food section and the can goods in one section? But see, I couldn't have known that if I couldn't read. And I opened a can of dog food and I smelled it, I said, "Wait a minute. Come over, you should have known." I said, "I couldn't read, not like that." And then I started feeling bad and then I got mad... I got frustrated. That was the hardest part. Frustrated. But when I got into it, it's fun now. Yeah, it's fun. I like it. I like reading.

When asked what the best part of being able to read is, Georgia said,

That's in uh, they said, wait a minute, what that man say on the TV. The best part of it is uh when he said, "Don't be no fool. Stay in school." That's another thing, he said, "A mind is a true thing." He said, "The mind is a true thing you can't lose." And it is. It's a sad thing if you can't read. And another man said, "Don't be no fool, you stay in school." And that's what I try to do. I ain't no fool but I'm trying my best to stay in school because this is something I want to benefit me. 'Cause I done did my job. It's my time now.

About reading, Georgia said, it is "Another world opening. That's what I say... It's fun. It's fun and it's very awesome. It's fun. It's fun because I know how to do it."

I think that of all the interviews, this was the one that struck me as the most emotional. Georgia began crying and I offered to stop the tape, but she wanted to continue going. Once I figured out what Georgia *wasn't* saying, I glossed over the childhood questions and moved on. I still haven't really figured out how to write about this one. I had no idea what do *during* the interview because Georgia talked about some pretty heavy things and implied a whole bunch more. As I was driving away from ARC, I called my sister in tears, though I couldn't explain why due to the promised confidentiality.

Just like with Mary, I know things I wish I didn't. I've struggled with how to write, and feel that I've ignored significant parts of their stories, but my project is on literacy. I am in awe of them, all seven participants, but these two in particular.

CHAPTER 11. FINDINGS

Reflections on Interviews

Interviewing these men and women was a task I took very seriously. It was sometimes uncomfortable, sometimes heartwarming, sometimes funny—and sometimes heartbreaking. Most of the time, both when observing and while interviewing, I felt very young. In class, I am treated as both a grandchild and as a teacher, a dichotomy that is both odd and confusing.

Themes

During the interviews, I noticed that many of the participants were saying basically the same thing, albeit in slightly different words. Most of them grew up in rural areas during the same era, so their experiences were very similar. As they've all joined ARC out of their own personal desire for literacy, their answers to the literacy questions were also similar. In this chapter, I will explore the themes that revealed themselves as I analyzed the data.

My research questions are

- Why did these seven participants never become literate as children?
- What role does learning to read play in the lives of elderly emergent readers?
- How can the life histories of elderly emergent readers inform our understanding of literacy?

From these questions and my interview analyses, I developed two major themes: 1) why the participants never became literate as children and 2) how they are now attempting to obtain literacy, each with their own multiple sub-themes. For the first theme, I noticed that most of the interviewees were citing very similar reasons why they were unable to go

further in school and why they weren't successful while they did, so I divided those into categories that are explained below. For the second theme, I noticed similarities in the participants' literacy journeys and the reasons why they're pursuing literacy now, at this stage of their lives, also discussed below. I had a great deal of trouble with formatting this chapter because I had so much data; I finally settled on arranging the data below the research questions, as the research questions had guided the entire project. Therefore, instead of following each theme, the themes themselves are organized beneath whichever question they fit.

Why did these seven participants never become literate as children?

There are multiple reasons why the participants never became literate when they were children, which I've divided into the themes: 1) location / access, 2) racial identity, and 3) family responsibilities.

Location / Access. Location is, of course, self-explanatory: most of the participants grew up in the rural Southern U.S. between the 1920s and 1940s. Due to the fact that access to schools was limited for many, but especially Black children at that time and in those areas, I also have a sub-theme here: racial identity. According to Anderson (1988), "Even when schools were available, most of the children lived beyond a reasonable walking distance of one and a half miles from the schools in their area ... unlike for white children, southern state and local governments refused to provide transportation for black children," (p. 150).

John and Elizabeth both discussed how far they had to walk to school: John eight miles and Elizabeth three or four while Georgia explained, "So we had to clean up the property. Us three girls and two of our brothers, we got old enough to work in the fields.

The furthest in our education, the only thing we got to march in our minischool and we march to the second grade, that's the furthest we get."

It seems that of all of the participants, John, Elizabeth, and Georgia had the most similar childhood: working on the family farm instead of school. With work needing to be done at home and no viable way to get to school, they lacked the opportunity to continue their education.

Racial Identity. When I asked Mary about schooling, she told me, "They had a school there but we wasn't allowed in it." She made sure to catch my eye and raised her brow, adding, "I think you know what I mean... See, it was a *racial proposition*." She continued, "They had a school next door to us but we wasn't allowed to go to it. Blacks wasn't allowed to go to it. And so that's the way it was back in those days. That's really, I don't have no education or anything."

Part of my difficulty with working on this project is trying to find a way to acknowledge the truly terrible historical context of African-Americans and literacy. A truly in-depth examination is beyond the scope of this project but I do need to touch base on two facets of it that affect the participants: slave narratives and the Jim Crow laws. Perhaps things were different in the northern U.S., or to the west—but all seven of the participants grew up in the rural south not even a hundred years after the Civil War. Anderson (1988) explains that

The [white] planters, with few exceptions, viewed black education as a distinct threat to the racially qualified form of labor exploitation upon which their agrarian order depended. The planters' heavy use of child labor contributed significantly to their opposition to black education. During good crop years black school terms were so short and irregular that children hardly had time to learn to read and write. (p. 23)

Elizabeth told me matter-of-factly, “they were riding the bus and spitting out of the bus window at us. And stuff like that. I'm trying to remember. I remember that much.” I had no idea how to respond because I have no basis of comparison for it. I don't usually feel the privilege granted to me by when and where I was born, but I distinctly felt it over the course of the interviews, and I had to come to terms with that, too.

Alan explained that “we used to try to go in, when we was young, as kids, and they didn't want you to come in the front part, you had to go in the back. That was the, my first encounter of you know the segregation. I didn't feel it before then. I was like 10 years or 12 years old, something like that. That was a long time.”

Obviously, as my participants are Black men and women who grew up in the rural U.S. between the 1920s and 1950s, the racial context saturates their interviews; I simply pulled out the best examples to demonstrate this theme.

Family Responsibilities. Because they grew up in rural areas, most of the interviewees had to help around the house instead of going to school (if there was a school close enough to actually attend). These family responsibilities are divided into 1) *work* and 2) *family* because while the boys helped with physical labor, girls did not only that but also looked after siblings.

Work. Elizabeth, John, and Georgia all discussed working on the family farm instead of going to school. Georgia elaborated that,

we had to get out there on the farm we chopped, pitched in, raised our garden, raised our hog, I mean our hog, cows, milk cows, we had four, five milk cows so we had to milk them twice a day... what was, we had to do, we had to get out there and clean that, we had to, when we got old enough, we had to get out there and clean that, saw all the trees that came down... So we had to cut them trees down and take the ash and trim the branches off the tree. And then we pile 'em up and then we had

to, two or three days, their leaves were dry and then we had to take a match and set them on fire. So we had to clean up the property.

Family Care. Elizabeth said, “I was the one did most of the caring when I came along, when I was big enough, so. I ain't liked it, but uh that's where I fell in that line. To take care of the ones under me.”

Five of Mary's younger siblings learned to read because “they went to school and I was the oldest girl and I had to stay home and tend to the youngest kids while Mama worked.”

I noticed a very interesting dichotomy that should be further studied: while needing to care for their families kept some of the participants out of school when they were younger, the need to take care of themselves or their families also partially caused some of the participants to seek literacy in their later years. Is it because society changed, or the participants?

What role does learning to read play in the lives of elderly emergent readers?

Obviously, there can be no uniform answer to this question, whoever is asked. Whether over the course of their lives or relatively recently, learning to read or the lack of the skill has played some part of their life experience, but to different degrees. Perry (2012) explains that literacy has multiple meanings in people's lives, especially socially, and that while examining it in that way “may not explain the process of *how* people learn to read and write, it can help describe *what types* of knowledge are needed in order to effectively engage in literacy practices,” (p. 55). My participants travel to ARC multiple times a week and greatly enjoy being in the classroom; they socialize with each other prior

to class, during class, and after (save the ones who have to hurry to catch the bus). They are not there simply to learn but to interact with their friends.

Obtaining Literacy. As I interviewed them, I noticed that most of the participants have been trying to obtain literacy for longer than I've been alive. Another common factor was that most of them had a moment where they decided to switch from passively waiting to actively pursuing literacy, and their reasons for doing so.

Pivotal Moment. When asked why he's decided to join ARC, Alan said,

I could go places and see names on the street but for me just pronouncing the name, that's out, that's another thing. I'm good at goin' places but just, like I told you. I can't really, can't make a sentence right now. And I can't do none of them, you know, just go pick up a book and read like the paper there [gestures at the list of questions], you know pick up and read it. That's another thing. That's the, you know, like [sighs] the dark side to everything. But you know, I deal with it. I can deal with it. I've been dealing with it this long. But I'm looking at that old guy [John] that was in the reading class Monday. Wow. Looking at—If he could think about to do this now, I need to."

Sarah told me, "if I'm being honest with you, telling you the truth, that the only reason I'm interested in learning the words because I want to go from Genesis to Revelations."

When asked about why she decided to pursue literacy, Elizabeth said,

I was sitting down one day and looking at the TV and had an older lady, she was in her uh 80 or something and she was graduating from college, she had gotten her degree, her diploma or whatever from college, and she was marching across the stage with her cap & gown and I was sitting down looking at that one day in the summer time cause I was working for the foster grandparents, that was the last thing I did, working for the foster grandparents as a volunteer where they give you a little thing, but uh—she uh, that old lady was walking across the stage with her cap and gown, got her little diploma, I think that was a [college] or wherever she were, but I said, "She uh, doing that." I said, "I can do that." That's when I started coming over here... I said, "She can do that, going to get her diploma old like she is. Getting her diploma for college, she had done went to school, something she had missing, she had gone to get her diploma, so she was walking across stage. If she can do that,

I can go improve my reading and my writing. And uh get a better understanding of what's going on."

Because of how proud she sounded, and the smile on her face as she told me, I think my favorite part of Elizabeth's story was this:

We was talking and it was three sisters and a sister-in-law and a niece, and they, they said they wanted to go to school to, you know, some of them had went to 11th grade and they wanted to complete. Some of them had a few courses to finish the 12th grade but they ashamed to go because at their age. I said, 'I ain't ashamed.' I said 'Y'all take me; I'll go.' So that's how we all started going.

John has chosen to pursue literacy now "'cause back in the country I never did learn to read because I had to go to the fields all the time... I wanted to [learn to read]. And that's why I'm still coming out, trying to learn to read and write." He wants to read "the signs on the streets. And uh a page like that. [points to the questions]. Somebody called me to work or to go somewhere, I don't know where to go, to read the signs. But if you can't read, you in bad shape."

As I said before, Carl has attempted literacy three times before this current run with ARC. "Each time," he said, "I came back and stayed awhile and felt that I wasn't confident that much, that I wasn't, so I quit. But I retired so I decide to come back again."

Mary explained that she "wanted to learn. I still wants to learn. 'cause that's the reason, at my age, that's the reason I'm still going. 'Cause I wants to learn."

When asked why she chose to return to school, Georgia said, "Why? Because I had raised all my children, all my grandchildren, I raised them. It was *my* time. I said, 'This is my time to do somethin' for me.'"

Lifelong Journey to Literacy. Learning never stops; there is no endpoint where you can say, "Well, I've learned everything I need to. Guess I'm done." It becomes more difficult,

perhaps, as you age, but you learn until you die. While traditional school as a child was not successful for any of the interviewees, most of them attempted, a number of times, to return as adults; but until their current work with ARC, none of the attempts worked out for any of them.

Carl first tried returning to school “must’ve been back in 19... 1960. I been trying in 1960,” when he was around 20 years old. ARC is “my, maybe 3rd or 4th time coming back to night school and this, this is my, 3rd time. Each time I came back and stayed awhile and felt that I wasn’t confident that much, that I wasn’t, so I quit. But I retired so I decide to come back again. Matter fact, I came back again and then I quit and went back to work.” When asked why the previous times didn’t work out, Carl explained that “I didn’t put the time in it like I was supposed to have put in it.”

I think Carl explained why attempts at full literacy failed before: time and effort. Until they found the time, and until each reached that moment of deciding *I need and I want this* it would not work.

John said, “See, what happened is when I first came here, I stopped for awhile. And then and then people were telling me, ‘You was doing good. Why you stop?’ And then I then I come back and started back again...”

Georgia said, “I got smart and I told them, ‘Tell y’all somethin’. You see when the last one graduates, it’s *my* time.’ I told them just like that. I said, ‘I’m not gettin’ no trouble’ because I didn’t want my children to come up like I come up. That’s pretty cool. Over then, I couldn’t read. But I could write my name.”

Mary told me, “I didn’t know how to read, period, ‘til I started going to the outdoor, to the school. And the first outdoor school I started at was [name] in the park. And they

started opening up, you know, asking people to come. So I started going to school there... Been quite a few years, baby, many years. Many many years.”

Self-Sufficiency. Merriam-Webster defines *self-sufficient* as *able to maintain oneself or itself without outside aid: capable of providing for one's own needs*. When asked why they wanted to become literate, most of the participants talked their way around the concept of *independence*, which I've reframed to be self-sufficiency, as shown below.

Alan said,

It's hard to ask a person to do somethin' for you... I've had this phone [gestures at blackberry] for 8 years and last 3 years since I've been home, I've started to really learn how to work my phone, text. A little, not a lot. Send a little few texts. Right now, small things like a picture or something. A little statement. But for me just making one up, I can't do it... I like to sit around and read. You know, just, wow, take the newspaper and sit down and read, start looking at the TV, read what went on... I just want, I would love to read, you know, it's just like, just to know, to love to be able to take a book and just go to myself 'cause I like to do a lot of stuff by myself.

When asked how he defines reading, Alan said, “Reading? It's the tool that helps you to look at the world in a different, like, and it ain't gotta look at the face, you look at the word, put the words together. That's about the best way it can be explained... And it opens up a whole 'nother world to, to man.” Georgia echoed this: “[reading is] Another world opening.”

“Reading to me,” John said, “is a whole lot because you can get the newspaper and see what's happening. If you reading the newspaper, you know what's going on in the world.”

The best part of learning, Carl shared, is that “it's a pleasure to get a letter in the mail and being able to read it, and understand what it says. Not having to carry it to someone else and ask them to help you with it. And most of my mail, I can read it and

understand it. Not that I know every word but uh, I found sometimes you could know two or three words and that uh they would uh tell you what the other words is." Not being able to read, he said, "kept me out of some positions I was being, I was meat manager. Uh, whatcha call it. The meat manager or second man in the place. I was, I had the ability but not the knowledge. You know what I mean?"

Elizabeth "wanted to learn how to uh help the kids, you know, the little kids I'm working with." In particular, she related a story of one of the students and shared that she "took care of her when she was a little baby and she telling me what I'm doing now she, she 9 or 10 now, she telling me, 'Oh, I done went through that already.' That made me feel bad. She had done finished what I'm doing and I done take care of her."

Elizabeth was quite firm about her adult education teachers not doing the work for her:

Sometimes, some, like at my school, if there's something I want help with or something, like at the school, an aide at the school, sometimes she'll have a little spare time you know if I ask her a question or something. But they busy on doing their paperwork and stuff so they don't have too much time to uh, get with me. Like, they wants to do it for you. You know, like if you ask for help, I don't want you to write what I want down. I want you to tell me what, how to do it, not you write it for me... just explain it to me and then if I don't know how to spell it, then you spell it for me and I'll write it down.

When asked what the hardest part of being unable to read was, Georgia said it was the frustration. She mentioned it multiple times:

I was frustrated. And uh that was more depressing than all this was, like everything was coming up on me all at once. I never, I wanted it to stop. That's it. I didn't even know how to spell. You know when you got the dog food section and the can goods in one section? But see, I couldn't have known that if I couldn't read. And I opened a can of dog food and I smelled it, I said, "Wait a minute. Come over, you should have known." I said, "I couldn't read, not like that." And then I started feeling bad and then I got mad... I got frustrated. That was the hardest part. Frustrated. But when I got into it, it's fun now. Yeah, it's fun. I like it. I like reading.

How can the life histories of elderly emergent readers inform our understanding of literacy?

According to Snow *et al.* (1998), “Reading is essential to success in our society. The ability to read is highly valued and important for social and economic advancement. Of course, most children learn to read fairly well,” (p. 1). These life histories show us that this claim is not perhaps factual, or perhaps is highly contextual. These life histories inform our understanding of the importance of literacy *and* the state of our culture’s schooling system—who is literate and who isn’t, and why? Anderson (1988) explains that “... within American democracy there have been classes of oppressed people ... there have been essential relationships between popular education and the politics of oppression. Both schooling for democratic citizenship and schooling for second-class citizenship have been basic traditions in American education,” (p. 1).

As I was listening to these interviews, it seemed to me that the participants kept answering, “What does reading mean to you?” with some version of the concept of *freedom*. As I’ve often described it that way myself, it made sense to me. After I spoke with an individual, though, who was both black and very highly-educated, and of a generation or two younger than the participants, I realized that simply calling reading *freedom* is a disservice, perhaps.

Or, if not a disservice, a difference of generations. For the elderly emergent readers, why is literacy freedom? Further research is needed, of course, but I think it does have to do with when and where they were raised. The oldest of them was born in 1924 to parents who themselves could not read. His parents were probably born around the turn of the

century, also to parents who never learned to read. His grandparents may have been slaves and if not, were almost definitely the children of people who had been.

In *Slave Narratives*, in a chapter called "Literacy and Freedom in the Slave Narrative," Tackach (2001) says

When African-Americans fought to gain literacy, they expressed a desire for freedom and self-determination which had deep roots in modern culture. The movement towards universal literacy and written culture is one of the most important democratic developments in the modern world...

For enslaved African-Americans, literacy was more than a path to individual freedom—it was a communal act, a political demonstration of resistance to oppression and of self-determination from black community. Through literacy, the slave could obtain skills valuable in the white world thereby defeating those whites who withheld the skills...

Literacy was also linked with freedom during slavery because it facilitated the African-Americans' creation of a liberating religious consciousness within the slave community. To be able to read the Bible was the first ambition of the converted illiterate Christian... the African-American used the Bible in an additional way, creating with its imagery a new reality from the slave experience. (p. 88-89)

What is interesting about this is that multiple participants mentioned wanting to read the Bible. There is also the fact that literacy has always been used as a tool of those in power; certain classes can read and certain classes cannot. In this same chapter, the author says,

Though some used their reading and writing skills to escape from slavery, few of the slaves who acquired literacy had illusions that literacy would immediately transform their lives. Their goals were more specific: slaves who learned to read and write could use literacy to gain advantages for themselves and mediate for their fellow slaves. Towards those ends, slaves used ingenuity and patience and risked discovery, death, and dismemberment to learn to read and write...

Underlying this slave-owner defensiveness was the fear of a literate black population. Despite the protestations of the small group who would teach slaves that 'Bible literacy' would uphold the social order, the majority of white Southerners knew better: they knew that knowledge was a two-edged sword. (p. 91-92)

I think that the generational difference is an important factor, between the participants and the individual I spoke to, and even myself. The participants were all born less than one hundred years after the Civil War, and perhaps had family members who could even remember it. They all grew up during the Jim Crow era, when “separate but equal” was a standard very few (if any) schools in the rural south met. (For more on this, see the Literature Review.) For the participants, the literacy I’ve always taken for granted was a dream, just as it was their ancestors.

Of course, I am only speaking of print literacy, but that is not the only kind of literacy. As print literacy was denied to them, those bound in slavery mastered another, as Minor and Pitts (2010) explain so eloquently:

Prohibitions against reading and writing literacy disregarded or failed to recognize other forms of literacy, forms that facilitated slave agency, resistance, and freedom. Oral literacy—that is, the capacity to verbalize and understand uses of the voice for self-expression and to represent the world—provided a cogent means for slaves and ex-slaves to challenge authority and for empowerment both in slavery and in freedom. Oral literacy includes employing and comprehending various orally discursive practices and styles like repetition, intonation, inflection, rhyme, alliteration, parallelism, and even inversion and omission. (p. 9)

One participant in particular comes to mind when I think of this quote: Georgia. Curry and Brodie (1996) also discussed this form of literacy:

Though they came from many different countries, with different languages and religions and stories to tell, their owners treated them like one single group, and tried to take their stories away. But the slaves kept their stories alive, telling them out loud to each other, and handing them down from one generation to the next. (p. 9)

My project has focused only on print literacy, but I must acknowledge that most of the participants are gifted orators. They also have so much knowledge that was learned through the course of living instead of any course at school, which I am always reminded of

in their presence. Though they have gone without print literacy for most (if not all, in the case of one in particular) their lives, none of them have lived an unsuccessful life (though ‘success’ is, of course, subjective). Carl actually wanted me to know that he hadn’t felt a “lack” in his life due to his being illiterate.

As the older daughter of two people who both attended university (though only my mother graduated), as the granddaughter of a university professor, I always knew that I would attend university, as did my younger sister. As a middle-class White girl who grew into a woman, I always knew that I would attend university. For the most part, university was easy. When I compare my experience to those of my participants, there is not only a racial component but also a generational component. In both my classes and my research, I have found that for non-Whites there is sometimes a bias against “acting White” (Ogbu, 2003); there is also sometimes a stigma (for everyone, not just non-Whites) of not doing “better” than one’s family or one’s neighborhood, and sometimes going further than secondary education is seen as doing better. For some parents, the aim is for their children to go farther than they did; sometimes, the aim is to keep them right where they are. There is no way to know who falls into each category until the time comes.

It is impossible to know for sure if the parents of my participants wanted them to go to school or not; even if they had, as mentioned above, there were very few viable ways to actually get all of the participants to the schools. much less the time and energy it would have taken to flourish. That each of the participants’ children have graduated from high school and gone on to college shows that the participants value education. Each of the participants came from a low social-economic status as children; that, along with their

location in both rural areas and the South, kept them from reaching their potential. The time and effort they are putting in now also shows how much they value education.

As I mentioned before, I grew up in a house overflowing with books; my parents read to me every night and I saw my parents reading for fun. My younger sister and I both read for fun from a young age. There is more to reading than just going to school and learning; there is also access to different kinds of literature like magazines and newspapers. When I asked, multiple participants said there was very little access to literature in their childhood homes. However, they now have books, magazines, newspapers—and they read at home, both for practice and for fun.

So back to the question: *How can the life histories of elderly emergent readers inform our understanding of literacy?* It teaches us whose literacy has been valued culturally. It teaches us that it is never too late to learn. It teaches us that there are multiple kinds of privilege, and that not only do we privilege literacy in general, we also privilege a certain kind: White, Eurocentric literacy. It teaches us that while literacy is important (and some people cannot comprehend life without being literate), a successful and happy life can be lived without it.

Reflections on Findings

I think that a similar study in other regions might reveal different results; the historical context of my participants most definitely played a large part in their illiteracy. In other places (such as a large city), there may have been different reasons for elderly emergent readers to have become illiterate as children. Another possible project would be interviewing more elderly emergent readers throughout the south, to see how prevalent or accurate my findings actually are, especially if pulled from different races.

I went into this project with a firm idea of what “reading” is and why it is important; over the months since I began, I’ve realized how contextual that idea was. I see the world as interconnected stories and this project has only deepened that belief. For me, reading has always been easy—though I fought it in the beginning, I cannot remember it. Reading is my joy, and a way to explore places I could never go, people I could never be. For me, reading is unconscious, something I do not have to think about to do.

For others, that is not so. Though I have known that since childhood, I had never truly attempted to understand until I began interacting with my participants. I was raised by literate parents in a house saturated with literature; this project has been a challenging eye-opener, as I’ve grappled with understanding my own privileges and trying to do justice to others’ stories.

Despite my difficulties with this project, I am glad I undertook it. Reading has been such a large part of my life and I wonder, sometimes, who I would be if I hadn’t read so much in my youth. If I had to negotiate the world with such a large part of myself gone—well, I would obviously be a different person. If someone were to ever tell my story, it would have to begin with reading.

As I said earlier, I grappled with how to tell my participants’ stories; I wanted to let their words stand, not take over as the writer in me tried to do. I hope I have done them justice. When I first began thinking about having to share their stories, thinking about removing myself and giving their voice precedence, I realized:

This is not my story. My story is in but its opening chapters, a tale yet still spinning; I know not when it will be done.

Their story is yet unfinished, too, but while I've left notebooks full of my childish prattle, they've never written down their own. I asked questions, recorded the answers, will write it for them now.

But this is not my story. I am merely the pen.

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APPENDIX A

The questions each participant answered during the interviews are as follows:

1. Background

- Who were your parents? Who were your grandparents? Where'd they grow up? How'd they meet? What work did they do? What was their highest level of education?
- Where were you born/raised? What was the community like? Were there many schools in the area? Who went to school? How has the community changed within your lifetime as far as physical appearance is concerned? What were the gathering places in your neighborhood or community? What did you do for fun?
- What do you remember about your home and your neighbors' homes? Who were your neighbors? Which relatives lived nearby? What were the occasions for family gatherings?
- Do you have any siblings? What do they do?
- What were the different entertainment options in your neighborhood and how did you decide what you would do on any given evening?
- What's the furthest you traveled growing up?
- What food today brings back childhood memories?
- What was your field of employment?
- What was your first job? What were your wages? How long did you stay at this work? What other jobs have you held? For how long? What job did you like the best and which job did you like the least? Who else worked in your family?
- Are you/have you ever been married? Where and when were you married? What did your spouse do?
- Do you have children? What is their highest level of education?
- What is your highest level of education? Do you remember your favorite subject at school? Your sibling(s)/spouse(s)?
- Can you remember any stories you knew before you read? Something from your family that you shared with your children?

2. Major historical events

- What do you remember of desegregation?
- Do you remember any particular controversy in your community/neighborhood? How was it settled?
- What was the role of boycotts of businesses, schools, transportation?
- When did you first vote? What do you remember about people organizing around voting?
- How did you get local/national news?
- Who were the most important people in your community?
- Who were the important black national figures in this time?

- Do you remember anything that, in hindsight, was world-changing? What was the significance to you, personally?
 - What wars had a major impact on your life?
3. What role has reading played in your life? How were you able to camouflage your difficulty? Did your family know?
 4. What role has writing played in your life? Did your difficulty with reading affect your writing ability? Did your family know?
 5. Why have you decided to learn to read? What has the process been like? Has anything about it been challenging? What kind of support have you gotten? Any negative or positive feedback? What was the worst part of being unable to read? Was anything easier before? What is the best part of being able to read?
 6. What do you remember about reading as a child? Did your parents/grandparents/guardians read to you? What is the first thing you remember reading? What reading material was available?
 7. What do you read the most? What kind of text do you prefer? (Magazine, comics/graphic novels, signs).
 8. How do you define reading? What is reading to you?

APPENDIX B

ACTION ON PROTOCOL CONTINUATION REQUEST



Institutional Review Board
Dr. Dennis Landin, Chair
130 David Boyd Hall
Baton Rouge, LA 70803
P: 225.578.8892
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irb@lsu.edu | lsu.edu/irb

TO: Petra Hendry
Education

FROM: Dennis Landin
Chair, Institutional Review Board

DATE: November 6, 2015

RE: IRB# 3468

TITLE: A Story to Tell and the Voice to Tell It: Elderly Emergent Readers

New Protocol/Modification/Continuation: Continuation

Review type: Full ☐ Expedited ☒ Review date: 11/6/2015

Risk Factor: Minimal ☒ Uncertain ☐ Greater Than Minimal ☐

Approved ☒ Disapproved ☐

Approval Date: 11/6/2015 Approval Expiration Date: 11/5/2016

Re-review frequency: (annual unless otherwise stated)

Number of subjects approved: N/A

LSU Proposal Number (if applicable):

Protocol Matches Scope of Work in Grant proposal: (if applicable) ☐

By: Dennis Landin, Chairman 

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: PLEASE READ THE FOLLOWING –

Continuing approval is CONDITIONAL on:

1. Adherence to the approved protocol, familiarity with, and adherence to the ethical standards of the Belmont Report, and LSU's Assurance of Compliance with DHHS regulations for the protection of human subjects*
2. Prior approval of a change in protocol, including revision of the consent documents or an increase in the number of subjects over that approved.
3. Obtaining renewed approval (or submittal of a termination report), prior to the approval expiration date, upon request by the IRB office (irrespective of when the project actually begins); notification of project termination.
4. Retention of documentation of informed consent and study records for at least 3 years after the study ends.
5. Continuing attention to the physical and psychological well-being and informed consent of the individual participants, including notification of new information that might affect consent.
6. A prompt report to the IRB of any adverse event affecting a participant potentially arising from the study.
7. Notification of the IRB of a serious compliance failure.
8. **SPECIAL NOTE:**

**All investigators and support staff have access to copies of the Belmont Report, LSU's Assurance with DHHS, DHHS (45 CFR 46) and FDA regulations governing use of human subjects, and other relevant documents in print in this office or on our World Wide Web site at <http://www.lsu.edu/irb>*

VITA

An avid reader and writer, Laura Williams is a native of Baton Rouge, Louisiana; she earned her bachelor's degree in English, concentration Literature, at Louisiana State University (LSU) in 2010. She became interested in adult literacy the summer after graduating and returned to LSU to pursue her master's in Education focusing on adult literacy in 2013. She anticipates graduating in summer 2016.