

Interviewee: Dorian Ross*
Interviewer: Claire Rheaume
Date of Interview: October 23, 2007
Location: Worcester, Massachusetts
Transcriber: Claire Rheaume



*Pseudonym

Abstract: Dorian Ross was born in 1927. Her family came from Bermuda and she grew up in New York City and then upstate New York on a farm. She talks about being poor, dark in a light-skinned family and about encountering racial and gender discrimination. She went to Howard University and studied math and physics. While working at GE she observed confrontations between union sympathizers and other workers. Dorian is enthusiastic about her involvement with Worcester State College's Intergenerational Urban Institute and the Massachusetts Senior Action Council.

Claire Rheaume (CR): My name is Claire Rheaume and I am here with Dorian Ross. Do I have permission to ask you these questions for the Worcester Women's Oral History Project?

Dorian Ross (DR): Yes.

CR: Could you just give me an idea of your life and background? What year were you born?

DR: 80 years ago. My mother came from Bermuda where my brother and sister were from too. From New York City we moved to the country. I had good teachers there. I was at the top of my class. Then I left teachers' college in the middle of my junior year and went to Washington D.C. They gave me money because I had none.

CR: Where did you go to school in D.C.?

DR: Howard University. I had to maintain a B average to keep my full scholarship. The faculty and others, whom I didn't even know gave me their support.

My father I didn't know, because he got deported for non-support. My mother married my uncle, my father's brother. They went back to Bermuda for retirement. Like my sister and brother, who died of cancer, I never lived there.

CR: But did you take care of them?

DR: I always took care of them, but mainly when I was grown up. In recent years, I have been to funerals in Bermuda.

CR: How were you able to survive on so little throughout your childhood?

DR: I had to. I don't think anyone could do it now. I had arthritis, but I recovered from it. I lived where I worked my whole life. I graduated from graduate school in 1949.

CR: What did you think about racism at the time?

DR: My family, I didn't live with them, because I was brown and they were not. My mother was from England, but my father's mother was a Pequot Indian.

One thing that wasn't too desirous I had to avoid a certain encounter a faculty member. One chair of the department rescued me from a situation where a professor had intended to molest me [she laughs to herself].

At another point a dean found out that I had been working as a cashier at a supper club. I had a part time job, and when he found out he made me quit. Boys could work there, but not girls. Not at a supper club. He could take his wife there for dinner, but he made me quit.

CR: How did you make it through school then?

DR: That had been a problem since I was born. I really had to struggle...I knew that I was smart enough to make it through school.

My mother's uncle was knighted as a physician in England. When Elizabeth's grandfather had cancer of the throat he was the one who was brought in... and so he was knighted.

My grandmother, my mother's mother was known as being a midwife and an herbalist... I guess what we would call a physicians assistant. Even though I didn't know them, they were kind of like heroes in my life. I wanted to be like them.

CR: That's excellent. So, who did you live with growing up?

DR: I went to live with my mother permanently when I was five. And the other thing is that when my mother took me home, she said that someone wanted to adopt me. They say you're smart, you behave well and you work hard. So those became the things that seemed required I had to be to stay with my mother.

CR: Right.

DR: I was a worker, a good student, you know...

CR: So you wouldn't be adopted unless...

DR: Well I don't know if that was real. My mother said so.

CR: Oh, so she was just telling you that?

DR: She used to joke like that, or just tell us things to get us to think what she wanted us to.

Well you know when I was sixteen I was finishing high school. When I wasn't away at school, I still helped run the farm and took care of everything.

CR: Have you always been very dedicated to your family?

DR: Well you know I learned to be on my own. I felt obligated to. This high you could do everything, and this high you could do a whole lot more, and by the time you were ten you could do everything. In a sense I became like my mother. Farming is hard. We were farmers. My brother was a very good farmer, you know. We learned to be farmers. He finally went to high school, after the war. He got remediation for his reading disorder.

CR: Right. That must have had a big impact on your life.

DR: Well it demanded from us a lot of us. I also worked at GE, and since I had majored in math and minored in physics, they started what they call a junior engineering program. There were many women in that. We were one of the few. The hard thing was working at GE, because it was dangerous. Ya know...if you wouldn't join the union they were about to push your hand in the chemical bath...things with the turbines. The guy was going to push my hand down in that. So they moved me to the test department. I wasn't tall enough to be on production, because you had to be 5 foot, but I could train people to use all of the equipment.

CR: How tall are you?

DR: Four foot, ten. You had to be five foot to be on an assembly line. We did this all at night. You know you aren't supposed to be on third shift when you're just 17, but I did. They didn't enforce them during the war years. Just like when I was in high school, I was 13 and you had to be fourteen to get working papers. So since my mother was in the hospital, but my teacher and principal signed the papers to say that I was fourteen... and I got working papers. If it weren't

for all those teachers, and the people...when I was out of school for one year, I quit in the middle of my junior year to work and I didn't get half as much attention when I got back to school, because I had three jobs... one was part time the other two were full. I would sleep between floors on the elevator until someone rang the buzzer. But anyway, I always found work in high school.

It was hard work...in high school...and then a post-grad education...well not officially. I didn't know it was in Washington or what it was? Segregation was a shock. It was different than in the country.

CR: The country is upstate New York?

DR: Yes. There were eighteen kids in the whole 8 grades. One teacher, no electricity... the teacher had flashlights.

When he [my brother] got out of service, he used the GI Bill to complete high school and improve his reading, and then he went to college and never stopped. He did well considering what the family was like. We had foster children. Since my mom lost my younger sister, we always had foster children.

CR: Were you able to survive with all of those people?

DR: We ate pretty well. I wouldn't eat meat, because I didn't want to eat our pets.

CR: Are you still a vegetarian?

DR: Yes. Our farm was good, but everything we produced we had to sell. My brother and I were left at home. There were always issues, but the worst thing was just I would carry everything I owned in a dress box, and just sit and get a library card in Saratoga Springs.

You never do the second half of the year of school in New York City. In New York they have like 8 first graders, we always just went straight to next grade. I had the permission or job to bring the traveling books to the library for 25 cents. Us two girls could only have half of them.

I used to tell them that I'd be a geologist. My brother, he was older, used to tell me that we'd find my bones in the Gobi Desert. He was great at putting me down. My sister would say I'd never be good in English or History. I was pretty good, but had no confidence.

CR: What about your economic status?

DR: You don't know you're disadvantaged, you just know that you're hungry.

You stayed in New York City and it was embarrassing, because if you didn't pay your rent they'd put your furniture out in front. It was embarrassing because they'd ask you what your address was and you never knew. Sometimes you'd be in one place or another. Or at one point the landlord tried to get fresh with my 13 year old sister, so my mother would have us move and that was embarrassing.

Being poor wasn't a personal issue. There were so many people who didn't have fathers or weren't from this country. New York City at that time was not like now. In class people would say, "My father," and we'd say, "You've got a father?" The ones from Armenia, they'd been slaughtered over there, the ones from Russia had tried to escape and the war had taken the males. And in the Caribbean...you know.

CR: Could your mother not afford it?

DR: It wouldn't have happened in Bermuda. I couldn't live with them in the country at first.

CR: What about now?

DR: I got a wonderful occupation. Learned more and more and more and more. Here I'm in the Intergenerational Urban Institute at Worcester State College. Additionally, I'm on the Massachusetts Senior Action Council. We are called a senior lobby. We go into Boston and try to educate the legislature and even picketed Pfizer one time...I don't generally do that.

[I cannot understand this part]

I volunteer at MedCity. I talk to parents about immunization and other safety issues, like nutrition and reading the labels to understand what food they're feeding their children.

CR: What about work?

DR: Initially, at work, I was the only female. It was terrible...lower pay, more duty, heavier time, and heavier assignments. It was really bad.

You'd have to give the idea to the guy, because it was important that the idea be heard. Even in recent years, if it is a really good idea I have to funnel it through those who are on the inside.

You know the mayor's office or McGovern's office, I leave all these notes...I say you know this ought to be changed. I'm not going to get up at city hall and have them blow you away.

CR: It's not right.

DR: No it's not right.

[I cannot understand this part]

CR: Has your faith influenced your work?

DR: I lived with a family that was Jewish and many other different families.

CR: Is faith a personal thing?

DR: I learned a lot of religion while helping other kids with their reading in the Bronx. We'd sit on the stoop and just do this. These kids couldn't read well, there would be five of us who weren't Jewish in the schools.

[I cannot understand this part]

CR: What educated you for your work? Any experiences?

DR: I was very fortunate when I was in high school and said that when I was a freshman in high school I wanted to be a doctor.

One side said that I couldn't be a doctor because I was poor, and I didn't have a father. Others said just look at you...whatever I was. In this country if you're not white you're black, no matter whether you're Native American, or whatever. I just hate that. I wish that they just wouldn't throw so much hate around. After a while, your dream comes true, and you are what you want to be.