Oral History

#067

An Interview with

Maxine Young

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CAITLYN JONES: This is Caitlyn Jones interviewing Maxine Young for The oH Project. This interview is taking place on August 14th, 2019, in Houston, Texas. I am interviewing Ms. Young to document her recollections concerning the response to the HIV/AIDS crisis in Houston.

Welcome.

MAXINE YOUNG: Thank you.

CAITLYN JONES: Let’s get started. Tell me a little bit about your parents. What were their names, and what did they do?

MAXINE YOUNG: My father’s name was Herman Young. He is deceased. He entered the Navy after he married my mom. When he got out of the Navy, he went to Houston’s Negro College. That’s what his degree says. It’s now known as Texas Southern University. He was in the first graduating class. He was an entrepreneur. He had Young’s Radio & TV Service. It was in the heart of Sunnyside, right on the corner of Cullen and Redbud. He had a very successful business. I’m sure if he had some ups and downs, we were too young to be aware of it, but his business was successful. I was in college when he decided to transfer and started buying upholsteries wholesale and then selling them to hotels and all of that.

My mother’s name was Lillie James Young. She was a stay-at-home mom but went to school. She left Texas Southern when she only had 16 hours to graduate, but she went to cosmetology school to become a cosmetologist.
father built a beauty shop onto the house so she could be at home and, of course, have her own business so that she could be empowered to know that she was able to generate income, too, but the other part of it was that enabled her to be at home while we were growing up.

JONES: So you got to listen to all the beauty shop gossip when you were younger?

YOUNG: All that gossip. Most of her consumers were people from our neighborhood and then some of their family members that may have lived in other neighborhoods. At that time, the African-American women or blacks weren’t wearing perms. They did the pressing with the straightening comb and curling with the marcel curling irons, the heat. Yeah, it was interesting.

JONES: Do you have any siblings?

YOUNG: Yes, I have six siblings. I have my sister Marie, who graduated from Prairie View A&M [Agricultural & Mechanical]. Then I have my sister Paulia, who got her master’s at HBU [Houston Baptist University]. My sister Jennie, who received her doctorate from Texas Southern. Flechia, who received her master’s from the University of Houston. My brother Kenneth, who is an entrepreneur. He does marketing and advertising. My sister Rosalyn, who is also an entrepreneur, and she runs a Bannergrams.com company that she does the backdrops now, because the banners, after the Walgreens and copy centers and all of them started to do it, it started diminishing her business, so she had to think of another way to generate more income. She went to Texas Southern and the U of H [University of Houston], and I think that she’s doing online studies to complete her degree there.

JONES: Are you the oldest or the youngest?
YOUNG: Yes, I’m the oldest of seven children.

JONES: What was that like growing up?

YOUNG: I had this need to be by myself a lot, so my father, when he built the beauty shop, added another bedroom to the house because I felt like they were younger than me and I needed to have my own space. My sister Marie and I were close. We were only 11 months apart, so we did spend a lot of time together. Then my sister Paulia, when I was going to TSU [Texas Southern University], that was back when it was, “Say it loud. I’m black and I’m proud,” and they used to have a lot of rallies down on Dowling with Operation PUSH [People United to Save (later Serve) Humanity] and Breadbasket.

(END OF AUDIO PART 1)

[BRIEF DELAY]

JONES: All right. We’re good to go again.

YOUNG: It enabled them to be a boarder of services. For an example, my father sold and repaired radios and TVs, and he taught a class over at TSU, I remember, about four or five years. He told me he didn’t even stay there five years. They wanted him, since he was an electronics, electrician major, to help those individuals that had now started coming to TSU to get into electronics, but it wasn’t a four-year degree plan. He agreed to do it, and he did do it part-time while he ran his business.

We had other members of the community, like one family, their business was plumbing. You had electricians. You had people that had lawn services, meat markets, and the corner-store convenience stores. Anytime something would go wrong, if we had plumbing problems, we’d call William & Sons or
Bert’s Plumbing, and I guess they worked it out. If they needed a TV, a TV was broken, or when they converted from black-and-white to color TVs and people really wanted it but they were expensive buying them out of the store, of course my father got them wholesale and was able to sell them at a better price. Then when something would happen to them, he knew how to repair them. So that was that.

JONES: What did you learn from being a child in that family? Lessons your parents taught you?

YOUNG: One of the lessons they taught me was to get an education, love other people, focus on what we have in common as opposed to always being focused on the differences. Because we have a lot of multi-culture relatives, it wasn’t difficult for us to grab the concept because we weren’t really exposed to a lot of negative things. My family, I think, kind of protected us, and then we had a TV, but we could only watch it at certain times and like on the weekends and have some kids over that didn’t have one and all of that. When I reflect back at what movies that they really had out for us, I was saying, well, it wasn’t so bad. But it kind of like sheltered you from what was really going on and how to approach that or manage it or be able to see it for what it is and not allow yourself to get caught up in hypes, but to seek to understand and see if you can contribute.

My family were churchgoing people. We grew up in the Pentecostal Baptist Church, and we had to go to church all day long on Sunday, all day long. My father, my parents, were very active in it, and they were very active in the community. My mother is a former precinct judge for Precinct 240, which is in Sunnyside. She didn’t tell us we had to, or we knew we had to — that was when
everything was hand, you had to walk and go door to door, go to businesses. When it came time for elections, it was all handwritten, and they had the ballots. She had to protect the ballots. It was my sister Marie, my sister Paulia, and myself. We would have to get in the car with her, go to the Astrodome for her to get everything checked and wait until they cleared her to go. She would talk to us about it and the meaning of being an active participant and care what’s going on in your neighborhood. She was really strong on local and state elections. She drilled it in us and instilled it so that we would know that it was important that we knew about it. We grew up being connected and knowing the significance in voting.

Another thing that they taught us is that — of course, they embraced the Democratic Party. However, they talked to us a lot about being a split-ticket voter; that all the time that’s not the right — it may be a good person, but it’s not the best person for that particular position. Basically, you learned to stay in school and to respect one another and have compassion for people.

JONES: What was school like for you?

YOUNG: School was up and down for me. I remember having some experiences in elementary school where I wasn’t being taught anything about my body and what was going to happen. I didn’t even realize what was happening when I started my menses. I really thought that I had gotten cut because this blood was in the tub and I just couldn’t figure it out. But my mom comes in the bathroom with this bag and this box that says “Kotex.”

I was like, “What is this? I don’t even know what this is.”

And so I guess she did what she knew to do, but my father was the one
that had more compassion for me. He saw that I was totally devastated, that I wouldn’t close my legs and walk, and I just cried because I didn’t understand what was happening.

My father’s biggest thing was get your education because one day you’ll be getting married, have children. You may marry a good man and something happens to him and you have to be able to take care of your husband and your children. Get your education because you might marry a man that is not so good, is not going anywhere in life, and if you don’t have an education, you’re not going to be able to take care of yourself and your children. Those are the main sticklers that we learned.

My mother was the kind that, “You’re a girl. Girls sit like this. They walk like this. They talk like that. You don’t have a potty mouth. Always present yourself. Always have on clean clothes. Never leave the house without taking a bath and having on clean underwear.”

That stuck. Even though I have sons and grandsons, that stuck with them, too, because I said, “She’s right. If you have an accident or something, have to go to the hospital, what would that be like if you’re not really clean?”

Those were the major sticking points that I really remember because they were grilled into us and you never forgot it. They never let you forget it.

JONES: What was high school like for you? I understand that you had gotten pregnant at 16.

YOUNG: Right, at 16. I was a good, maybe an average student in high school. I really thought that some of the teachers or officials like the principal and the counselor of the school, the dean of the school, called me in because they knew my parents
and all my aunts and that was a good thing, but I learned that several of my
teachers, especially my Spanish teacher, English teacher that I had, and I think it
was an algebra teacher, one of my aunts used to be the principal, and that was in
their early years of teaching, so I just assumed, because they asked me, “Is
Beatrice Young your aunt?”

“Yes. You know her?”

Boy, look. They really gave me a hard time, and I didn’t know how to act. I
couldn’t understand it. When I got pregnant, school was out in June back then.
I had my son in July, and August, when school started, I started back to school.
The dean called me in to ask me about other girls that may be pregnant or
drinking and skipping school, and I told her that was her job, and I wouldn’t tell
her.

I had done everything for my yearbook. I was on the volleyball team, I
was on the debate team, and I was a thespian in my high school, Even E.
Worthing, and she told me that all of that would be removed from the yearbook
because of the fact that I was a teenage pregnant girl and that they didn’t
highlight. Back then, I don’t even think the Houston Independent School District
encouraged them to do that. It was like you were just taboo. They’ll let you go
on and go to school, but you consider this taboo, a grown woman now that you’ve
got a baby. But my parents were taking care of my kid. I was to go to school and
get my education.

At any rate, she said something to me, and what I did was, I pushed her,
and she started screaming as if I attacked her. The principal got involved, and I
ended up being expelled from Worthing for unladylike conduct becoming a
Worthing student. My graduation class was supposed to have been June of 1964, and I ended up having to transfer to Jack Yates, and I graduated the January class of 1965. That was not good for me. I was pulled away from the high school that I had grown up in, from all of the friends and stuff from my community that I knew, and had to actually go to high school in the Third Ward area. I knew some people, but it wasn’t the same thing like people that you grew up with. I had some struggles with that, but life moves on.

JONES: After high school, you went to college for a little while?

YOUNG: Yes, it was kind of like an expectation in our house. When you graduated from high school, you automatically entered college or a university because that’s the next step. Both my parents were very big at that, so it wasn’t like you had a choice. It was something that you just automatically do. It automatically happens.

I entered Texas Southern. I got exposed to more things, and I wouldn’t say that I was a sheltered kid because, of course, I had older boyfriends, so I was doing things that girls older were doing. Just some kind of way, I just grabbed ahold to skipping classes and hanging out at the rec and going to this place called the Groovy Grill. They have it now, but it’s way different. It’s like a lot of the Greeks do activities there for kids and mothers who are in shelters and all of that stuff, which is good. It used to be a place where you could eat and drink. I found myself frequenting that and started getting withdrawals of failing the class or having to take the class over.

And finally my parents found out about it. “Miss, you’re going to have to do something different.” Of course, their solution was to either send me to D.C.
[District of Columbia] or send me to California. My father’s family were in some parts of California. On my mother’s side, her brother lived in Bowie, Maryland, but he and my aunt worked in D.C. proper, so that was always a solution. If something really bad goes on with us, you send them away. And Sister and Brother Young would just say, “Oh, she went to Los Angeles, and she’s going to take some classes up there. She’s with family, and that enables her to see another part of the world,” and so it was blown off like that, but it was me acting out. When I got pregnant, they did it. When I started flunking out of school, they did it, too.

JONES: Where did you go?

YOUNG: The first time, when I got pregnant, they put me on a train. We weren’t flying back then. I forgot the name of the train company. Anyway, I was put on a train, it took three days, and I had to have this little ID [identification] tag because I was 16 years old, I was under 18, and it took three days to get to D.C. My aunt and uncle picked me up, and I just couldn't get with why I had to go away.

One day about three or four days after I was there — they lived in Bowie. Bowie is kind of like a suburb out from D.C., and they had bought this property and had this house. They had all this land, and you had to walk up. Well, they had a long driveway. You had to walk up to the actual highway. So I just decided that I was going to hitchhike, but I was going to make it back to Houston. So the couple that gave me the ride took me to the train station, made sure that I got on and that my destination was actually Houston. They saw I was pregnant, too.

When my aunt and uncle came home from work, I wasn’t there, so of
course they panic, call my parents. They were having the police looking for me and all that, and they found out that I was on the train.

I came home, so they were like, “Why would you do that?” My aunt almost had a heart attack. “We didn’t know what had happened to you, if somebody had killed you, or you could have been kidnapped,” all kinds of stuff.

I was like, “I didn’t want to be there. You made me go, and I didn’t want to be there, so I came home.”

My dad talked to his sisters. The next thing I knew, I was going to California.

JONES: After college?

YOUNG: No, this was when I was in high school. But in college, I had to do the same process. Go there, go there. I think a lot of it, today, I did have conversations with my parents about it, “What was that really about?” Some of it was the shame. They always felt like they would be looked down upon or they would be blamed because here you’ve got this child that’s gone astray. A lot of it was faultfinding on the family, and my family really wasn’t with that. Everything that would go on in this house would stay in this house, and they’ll find a way to fix it so nobody else could know.

JONES: After you got some bad marks in college, what happened after that?

YOUNG: That’s when I went back to California. My father said that not going to school was not an option. I went back to Bowie, Maryland, to my uncle and aunt’s house, and I decided that a four-year college was not really what I wanted to do, so I said, “Maybe I want to be in a skilled-labor employment.”

It was like, “What? That’s not an option.”
So I enrolled, and I had to pass the entrance exam, and of course my transcript from TSU was a hot mess, so I had to take some pre-courses. I remember that.

JONES: What school?

YOUNG: Howard. But my GPA [grade point average] wasn’t really high enough for me to be there in the first place. My uncle knew some people, he and my aunt, because my aunt was in education. They knew some people, and that’s what helped me get in. Of course, my behavior hadn’t changed. My attitude about it didn’t change. I don’t know why I had to feel that this wasn’t the right thing for me, but I just had such strong opinions about things at a very young age and resisted some things that they were putting in place to help me have a better, healthier life, but I was very —

JONES: Headstrong?

YOUNG: Very. My mother said very defiant.

JONES: Was it at this point in your life where you started getting into drug use?

YOUNG: Drug use. I started drinking first, and some of my friends would drink different types of wine. I drank the wine, but I really didn’t like it, and I chose whiskey and brandy, and I did that for maybe about two years, and then I started drinking Tanqueray gin, a whole different impact, and a lot of different things going, a lot of different dynamics. Got involved in a relationship that this guy not only drank, but he drugged, too, and I was just determined to try it. I just wanted to know how it felt. He wouldn't give it to me, so my roommate — I had my own apartment. My roommate used to ask me for $7 every day.

“Why would you have to have $7 every day?”
I wouldn't see her because I would be gone, and I had a little part-time job over at U of H. One day I just said, “I’m not going to give it to you until you tell me what you’re doing with it.”

She said, “You don’t want to know, and I don’t ever want you to know, and I don’t ever want you to get into things that I’ve gotten into.”

I was curious, and I made her, and that’s how I got — I skipped marijuana and pills and all of that. It was alcohol, and from alcohol I went straight to heroin and did heroin for all those years. Of course, I had some incarcerations in between that. In 1978, I started using speed — methamphetamines — and heroin together, which is a very toxic situation. I just went into a spiral, started getting into criminal activities like forging checks and writing prescriptions, forging stocks and bonds and selling them to people, but it cost me some years of my freedom. In all, I spent a little over 10 years off and on in incarceration.

JONES: What was that like for you?

YOUNG: The first time I went to jail, I had never been around anybody that didn’t graduate from high school. I had never been around anyone that couldn’t read or write. And so it was like when I would listen to the women talk and they were saying they got pregnant with their baby and their parents put them out, even though I had crossed that side of the street, I didn’t know anything about it because I was like, “What did you do? Where did you go?”

They would tell me all the different things that happened to them and their baby, and I couldn’t get with, “How could your mother put you and your baby out and you don’t have anywhere to go?”

Houston didn’t have a whole lot of resources back then, so these women
ended up separated from their children. I didn’t know that it was CPS [Child Protective Services] custody back then. I didn’t know what it was. Anyway, they had lost their children or they couldn’t get their children back until they went through a lot of different stages of different programming and stuff.

I wasn’t afraid. I was really curious. It was a whole different world to me. That was the biggest thing, is that they had no skills. A lot of them were saying that they never knew their father and all of that. I was in an element but not in the element because I didn’t have the exposure to it, so it was like I don’t even have the excuse for messing up my life like they do. How did I even get into this tailspin? But that didn’t stop me from using.

The first time I got arrested was in 1969, and I did six months in Harris County Jail. The next time I got busted was in 1974, and I had possession of heroin with the intent to sell and distribute, six counts, so I got six two-year sentences running concurrently, and I served six months, eight days, and I’ve forgotten the hours. I used to have to count it down.

But while I was incarcerated — and going back, I did a volunteer project for the Houston Urban League during my college years and stuff. It was an OJT [on-the-job training] project for men and women coming out of prison or the county jail, and I got the opportunity through family contact and all of that, and even though I was doing drugs, it was like I had this attitude about, “Dude, you’ve got to do what they say, and you can’t come in here dressed like that.”

This guy grabbed me behind the desk and started shaking on me and asked me who did I think I was? He has seen me in different places, but I had never seen them. That was really an enlightening period for me. It was like I’m not like
that, but it’s a reality you are. You just haven’t been exposed to all of it yet. Of course, I continued to use. In using, you have to find ways to get the drugs, so usually it was in selling drugs or in forgery or fraud. That’s what I did.

In 1978, I caught another case. My initial arrest was in Jefferson County, Beaumont. It was presenting a forged instrument, which was a prescription for narcotics. I got arrested and sentenced to five years TDCJ [Texas Department of Criminal Justice], which I had to discharge it, and I spent two and a half years in prison then.

When I went to prison, all I did was read and took whatever classes they had to keep my mind active. I still hadn’t accepted that I’m in a whole new world. It was like I did it; let me see how I’m going to cope with it and keep it moving.

JONES: What was the turning point for you?

YOUNG: The turning point for me was in 1982. I got arrested — I think it was at Gibraltar Bank — presenting a forged check. I didn’t know that I was sick. I had pneumonia and I had cancer, and I didn’t know.

[END OF AUDIO PART 2]

[BRIEF DELAY]

JONES: What was the turning point for you? It was in 1982, and you had gotten arrested for a forged check.

YOUNG: Yes, and I went to the Harris County Jail, and when all these women started asking me had I seen it, it was like I just couldn’t hear it, and I was tired, and I was like how do I keep putting myself in these kind of predicaments, and I hate this place, I hate the smell. I just asked them to please leave me alone and give
me some space. They were asking me was I dope sick, because in jail you have your own pharmacists in there and they know how to put together little recipes to help you get through the detox because, of course, in the medical department at Harris County Jail back then, they didn’t give you anything to go through detox. You had to cold turkey, and it wasn’t nice. I wasn’t that sick, because I was doing more speed than I was doing heroin, but I just couldn’t concede that here I am again in this, and why do I keep doing this to myself?

I just cried out. I had left the church years ago. It wasn’t like I didn’t still believe in God. I did, but I was a person that if you’re doing right, the right things, and you’re going to church and all of that, then you’re this kind of person. When you get over here [indicating] and you’re doing all of this stuff, I just felt it was so hypocritical, I couldn’t do it. I have these bizarre, extreme fixations in my mind that you’re either doing right or you’re doing wrong in knowing there’s no gray area, at that time anyway. I cried out and just said, “If you are God, then do something with me. I’m tired of this,” and I was just banging on the concrete floor until my hands started bleeding.

One of the ladies in the tank said, “Come on, why don’t you get some rest. You really look sick.”

By 2:00 o’clock that morning, one of the ladies got up because the toilet was right there in the cell with you, and she said she reached over because my hand was hanging off the bunk, and she said I was just burning up. I was just hot to the touch. She said when she touched my neck, that’s when she woke the other ladies up in the cell and they started racking on the bars for someone to come in. They took me to the infirmary. I ended up in Ben Taub. I had double pneumonia,
and I had cancer. I ended up having a complete hysterectomy, and they kept me there in Ben Taub for six weeks.

Then, of course, I was returned back to the county jail and had already been indicted and had a court appearance. I had just gotten out of the hospital, and then the court appearance was on March 11, which that was my birthday. I went in upset, and the judge over the court said, “What are you so upset about? Why do you keep doing this stuff? This is not the first time you’ve been in this court.”

I was just angry, so I was saying, “I’m not done. You might as well get ready to reset me. I know I’ve got a lawyer waiting out there. I’m not going before any judge today. Today is my birthday.”

So he started laughing. He said, “Your birthday? You want to call your family?”

I said, “Yeah, let me call my family,” and he did.

Of course, my mother was like a loose cannon. “Oh, my God.” She’s praying, and she’s talked to the lawyer, but he’s not saying very much, and, “I don’t like his attitude. Do you want me to get another one?”

I was like, “No. He’s supposed to be a good defense attorney.”

At any rate, I had a visit from a man. He was Hispanic. Hispanics and Caucasians played a big part in my flipping my energy, can we say? So it was this Hispanic man that came. I wasn’t one of those inmates that would put my name down on the list for the Christians to come pray for me and give me a Bible and all that stuff. I knew it wasn’t an attorney visit, so who would be asking to see me, and especially at night? I went, and this man’s name was Pablo Torres.
He told me that God had sent him to see me and to share, so I got up, and I said, “I didn’t send for you, and I don’t believe that. You don’t know me. I don’t know you.” He asked me to give him five minutes, and I did.

He’s the one that told me, “You have cancer, but you’re not going to die. You’re going to get more time that you ever got, but you’re going to make it. You’re going to go to the Torres Unit, and when you get there, ask for Carol Segura.

Everything the man told me — I looked at him, and of course I had reservations. “Who is this? I don’t even know him. He doesn’t know me,” but he shared that he had done drugs 25 years of his life, and the other 25, he spent in and out of prison, and that he had had this spiritual revelation. That just, “Oh, Lord, why is he telling me all that?”

He asked me to consider doing two things. He said, “I’m not telling you to memorize any prayers. I’m not telling to get up and read the Bible. When you get up in the morning, just say, ‘God, help me stay clean and sober just for today.’ At night, just say, ‘Thank you,’ and go to bed.”

I did it. I went to Ben Taub. I had my surgery. I stayed in there six weeks. I went to court. I received 10 years in Texas Department of Criminal Justice. I was a sick pup. I was like, “Ten years? I’m not that big of a criminal, and I know it.” At least in my mind, I wasn’t.

I went to the Torres Unit. I happened to fall at the same table as Carol Segura. Hispanics are very guarded. You don’t ask questions about them. One of the girls, I asked, “Do either one of you know this Carol Segura?”

She said, “Why? Who wants to know?”
So I told them who I was, and I told them about meeting Pablo Torres, and the lady just said, “Praise God. I’m Carol Segura.”

I was like, “What is going on?” and I even told her, I said, “This is just spooky to me.”

She asked the lieutenant to let her come to the dorm and get me. Every night, we would go to the library, and then some nights on Saturday — I was married to Arthur Dux, Muslim, and so in the practice of Islam, I was caught up in it for a while, and then it’s just like now I’m not doing anything. I don’t serve anybody. I don’t call on any higher being, just relying independently on myself because, again, I would always think, “When you’re doing wrong, you’re doing wrong, and you don’t have a right to call or depend on God.” That was an opportunity for me to really try to get it together. Then the 90 days, they pulled me, and I went to Mountain View.

Mountain View is a maximum security state prison for women. In fact, that’s where death row is for the women. I thought I was going to die the death of a chicken. I’m not an aggravated. I don’t have any aggravated offenses. I’ve never killed anybody. Why would they send me to a maximum security prison? That was a saving grace for me. It was on the Mountain View Unit. I had a warden that one of our state jails is named after, Lucille Plane, that suggested that I get involved in AA [Alcoholics Anonymous], NA [Narcotics Anonymous], or something. She referred to me as a dope fiend, and I found it to be so demeaning. It crushed me, and I was like, “You can’t talk to me like that.”

She told me to give myself a chance. She said, “Insanity is doing the same thing over and over. Looking at” — they used to call it your hall card, but it’s a
list of psychological exams and different assessments that they’ve done, and then when you come to prison, different things that you do. Of course, I would always take some kind of classes or do something because the mundane stuff of prison and all this craziness that goes on in there, I couldn’t get with a lot of that stuff.

I did go to AA. Dorothy Martin was the counselor, and I just told her I was doing what Warden Plane said, and I told her I felt like my life has been on a merry-go-round, like I’ve been a part of a circus act, and I just wanted to know how I could get off.

She told me something very simple. “If you learn to listen and listen to learn, we’ll give you the tools that you’ll never have to use alcohol or drugs if you choose not to and you’ll never have to commit another crime if you choose not to.”

I embraced that, and I did it. I stayed there three years. I would look out the windows a lot of times, and it was just like it’s really not mountains and mountain views. They’re really hills and stuff. I was the outside trustee, so I got a chance to go outside a lot. At that time, they had a furlough system, so every six months, you could come home for a week. That kept me where I was like, “Ooh, three years in here. I don’t know how I’m going to be able to do it,” but I did do it, and I did start doing a lot of cognitive restructuring and exploring “Why would you make these decisions? What about this side of the street was so appealing to you and kept you so drawn to it?” What I learned is not to beat myself up about it and not spend a whole lot of time on why I did it, how to not do it again, and to take back control of my own life.

It was pointed out to me on a spiritual side in AA that I had a very strong
will, very defiant, very matter of fact, and that I could take those same tools or
those same attributes and turn them into a positive. That’s what I began to do.
When I got out of prison, I had an opportunity because I had worked at New
Directions Club Inc.

JONES: You had worked at New Directions before you went?

YOUNG: No. I worked in New Directions when I got out. In 1979, I worked at New
Directions, and they made an office as the OJT counselor, on-the-job training
counselor.

JONES: What is New Directions? Remind me.

YOUNG: New Directions was a halfway house program for men and women coming out
of prison. The founder was J.D. “Sonny” Wells, who was a five-time offender,
alcoholic, in the Texas Department of Corrections. Sonny was a man that I used
to buy stolen merchandise from, and that’s how he knew me. He came for a
walk-through at Goree. When you first come to prison, you’re downstairs. It’s
like a dungeon. You’re in a single cell by yourself. They take all your clothes, of
course, and they put all this stuff on you to de-lice you and all that, and this big
cotton gown with some white cotton flip-flops.

When the warden is coming through, they announce it, and I don’t care
what you’re doing, you have to get up and stand like a robot at your cell door.
When Sonny was doing a walk-through with Warden Meyers and he passed my

cell, I looked at him, and it was like something is familiar about this guy, and he
stepped back. He said, “Little girl, little girl, I told you this was going to happen
to you.” He asked the warden could he talk to me, and he gave me the job from
there. So when I got out that time, I did start working for New Directions.
JONES: Then when you got out of Mountain View, you started working there?

YOUNG: Yes.

JONES: What were you doing there that second time?

YOUNG: This time, I was the director of their treatment facility, and our focus was on a therapeutic community program for men and women coming out of criminal justice systems, not only state prisons, but federal and county. The Texas initiative had come down on the then-Governor Ann Richards, so I was a part of that. I believed in the program. The concept of the therapeutic community is behavior modification with a lot of reality therapy involved in it, and I knew that it was a grounding factor for me to really look inward saying, “Oh, if it wouldn’t have been for you,” or blaming the stuff on my mother. “If she wouldn’t have told me” — like my mother used to fuss at me about staying out late at night and drinking and how bad it looks and all of that.

My defense, “What would it take for you to get off my back?”

She said, “If you had M-r-s in front of your name instead of M-i-s-s, your husband would be made in shame, not me.”

My response, with my defiance, was, “If that’s all it takes, I can get a husband,” and I did.

Being the director of New Directions was very rewarding to me. I had an excellent staff. A good director is only as good as your staff, the people that are there and that you can empower to make decisions. “If you do make a mistake, let’s fix it. Don’t try to hide it. Let’s fix it. Learn from it.” The men’s campus had 318 beds. The women’s campus had 75 beds. We did a lot of family reunification and a lot of behavior modification with the men and the women. It
was a very structured program. I learned as I built, and I stayed there for 10 years. New Directions went bankrupt. When I left there, I got the job at AIDS Foundation Houston.

JONES: What was your first exposure to HIV/AIDS? When did you first realize what it was or what it could do?

YOUNG: When I was in jail the last time, at prison you started hearing about it. “What the heck is that?” and then you would hear, but they wouldn’t talk about it, and I couldn’t really figure out why, because if it’s something that we’re getting, but they were like, “Oh, no, but it was just white, gay males,” and so they would never talk about it, so you didn’t know anything about it.

When I got home, I was going to school to get my LCDC [licensed chemical dependency counselor]. They did very little talking about STI’s [sexually transmitted infections] and HIV. But something I was like, and he was saying only IV [intravenous] drug users get it.

It was like, “What?” So now I’ve got to be tested and find out if I have it, and then I started finding out that different people that were in my peer group or in a group that I had committed crimes and done drugs with, they were dying or they had already died. I was like, “How? What happened?”

So they would tell me. Back then, they would just say everybody had AIDS.

“Why is this so? How could this happen?” Now I really think I have to have it, because I knew them. I did drugs with them. I committed crimes with them. I finally figured out, because I used to feel guilty, how could all of them have it or be dead, and why didn’t I get it, because I shot drugs with them? What
I finally learned, after I really got involved in HIV, knew what it was and had gotten into the work and really started back asking them questions — because there were some of my friends that I really took and supported them when they got tested. It used to take 21 days. Then it was 14 days before a person would know whether they actually had it. The connection was made clear. We didn’t sleep with the same people. I didn’t sleep around like that in that culture.

I was like, “Wow, so what can I do?” because there were people that I knew that were close to me that had it, and I had two of my friends, close friends, they both died and they died on the same day. We knew each other from high school. We knew each other from getting out and involved in drugs, doing crime, doing time together, and then I was clean and sober. When they finally decided they wanted to get clean, they came to me, and I took them to meetings. I even hired them as techs and stuff in New Directions to give them some hope that they could do better and then go on with their life, and which they did.

The lady, we’ll just call her Twin, I went to Riverside Clinic with her when she went through a test, and I went through that 21-day waiting period with her, every day crying, praying, begging God to let her be okay. But her results were positive, and so my message to her was, “Refrain your thinking. The doctor told you that you are HIV positive. So what I want you to start telling yourself, ‘HIV is living with me, and I’m going to give it hell every day.’”

She said, “Well, how am I supposed to do that?”

“It’s living with you. You’re going to be able to decide how will you live with it, and you will not let it define who you are,” because it’s not supposed to do that.
Working with friends enabled me to start working with more community, then getting involved in the community, like CPG [Community Planning Group], which put us with Ryan White Planning Council because you had to do comprehensive plans. Prevention without care — the two are a marriage because you need both. The journey of actually learning the care side and the prevention side, I was fortunate enough to get a job at AIDS Foundation Houston when New Directions went bankrupt, and they had a HRSA [Human Resources and Services Administration] grant, and I was on the ground floor for that. It was MAI, Minority AIDS Initiative, which it was for minorities coming out of prison settings. I got work with them. At first, it was just the men that were coming out. What I did was, identify what other resources were available for them because we were only funded to do certain things, but I knew the men needed to have their own support group. Then you had a blended group of men: some heterosexuals; some bisexuals; then you got the gay guys; then you got the female impersonators, they really weren’t trans people. Maybe some of them have really transitioned, but I knew that they needed something special that I didn’t have, so I got with Brenda Thomas, who was a trans woman that worked at the City of Houston, and I asked her, “Could I come to the groups?”

She went and asked the group for permission. At first, they made me sit outside the circle, and I couldn't have asked any questions, because I told them I was there to learn because I wanted to provide the services and I didn’t want to assume what I read out of a book, and that if I had a trans person sitting in front of me, I want to be an asset, not a liability, and I didn’t want to be judgmental or say the wrong thing to offend them and they wouldn’t come back. So they taught me.
And I started coming to more meetings with Ryan White, and I just embrace women, and I just didn’t want any discrimination. Just because the grant said black and Hispanic women, I didn’t feel that you should be left out because you were not.

Anyway, I added, I did it, and I made it. I was able to add trans people in the group, and it became a blended approach. Dr. Dorie Gilbert out of UT [University of Texas] Austin was very generous in providing her professional expertise because she wanted to see the model. Get Started and Get Started Girl didn’t have a traditional model, evidence model.

[END OF AUDIO PART 3]

JONES: So you created the model for Get Started Girl?

YOUNG: Yes. The way it was presented even to the Office on Women’s Health was a homegrown intervention, and they accepted it.

JONES: What was the purpose of that group?

YOUNG: The purpose was for women to be able to get together to learn how to love one another, respect what a person’s story was of what had happened to them or how it wasn’t all that important for them to judge another individual, but can you be my sister’s keeper? Can you help me? Can you help me in my journey on how I became infected?

JONES: Was this just for minority women, or was this for recently released?

YOUNG: No, recently released women. It was supposed to have been for minorities only, but in my defiance, it said women, and then the more I got involved in the GLBTQ [gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer (or questioning)] community, let them all come, if they were going through a transition. But I did
ask the women could they come, and they did it on a trial basis. They embraced it.

Then, of course, it was Get Started Girl with a blended approach. It was a very successful model. A lot of women grew from that. In fact, a lady that Tori contacted to get my information from was one of the women. She’s a graduate of Get Started Girl, nine-time convicted felon, diagnosed in prison with it, just embraced it, got out, came to New Directions, and she’s 29 years, T cell has never dropped where she got a diagnosis of AIDS, and she’s in school to be a counselor and working on her first degree. She’s on the Ryan White Planning Council representing the affected population, female population.

So some of them went on and they embraced it, they learned a lot, they learned to love themselves, learned to work with others, went looking for similarities, not listening for differences, and you are just the vessel for another human being to say, “Help me if you would,” or they’re sitting there, they’re hurt. You’re the professional. You’re the one supposed to have the compassion. Embrace it and help them learn to love themselves again instead of beating up on themselves. So many are feeling guilty. You have it.

Today they have miraculous. Science has come a mighty long way since AZT [azidothymidine], and people are living longer and healthier with the virus. I still do a lot of mentoring, a lot of advocacy work around it. Get Started Girl was a public, medically published, and the Ph.D. that was studying under Dr. Gilbert was doing an overall evaluation to say that this was a good model and a very therapeutic model to help women strengthen their self-esteem, be able to get back with their families, stop using drugs, and become whole, get into care,
stay in the care. That’s what the Get Started model was about. In fact, we called it Get Started Girl.

Get Started Girl presented it at the inmate conferences for six years. They had an international women’s conference on AIDS in D.C., and I was invited to serve on the panel, to talk about the work and how we did it, because they had women from all over, from India, Pakistan, parts of Africa, and the West Indies, I know that they had, and so we were able to get together and talk about that even though you’re in another country, HIV is still the same. The type of HIV may be different, but all of the stuff is interconnected, and so let’s not focus on what’s different about it. Let’s focus on how do we heal? How do we become a part of the process? How do we empower these women to, number one, learn to love themselves, and to learn to have compassion? How do we teach them? What tools do we use to encourage them before you reach down, pick up the phone, come to group, call your mentor, do something. Just don’t use again. If something happens in your family, we’re all a family. We’re all a sisterhood. So it worked.

JONES: You were doing a lot of advocacy with the city at the time. You had served on the State of Emergency Task Force.

YOUNG: The African-American State of Emergency Task Force when Houston was identified in a state of emergency with HIV.

JONES: When was that?

YOUNG: In 1999.

JONES: What did Houston look like at that point in their response to HIV/AIDS?

YOUNG: We were a jurisdiction and we’ve always been a jurisdiction that is very
progressive when it comes to approaching the work. I’ll say it because I’ve said it before. We were about the work and helping the people and all of that. We were not about branding and all of that. But all of those [indicating] are real posters. This is some of our work, and we didn’t brand it. Other states branded it, renamed it, branded it, and got multi-funding for it. Houston was a jurisdiction, and we were in the fight against HIV, and getting people tested.

One of the avenues that was used in this jurisdiction was Hip-Hop for HIV because the community was getting younger and younger and our goal was to get in front of it. We had already done a lot of outreach and testing and linking in the Fifth Ward, Acres Homes, and Third Ward community, and so you’ve got to look at our youth and what’s happening to them, and so the City of Houston Health Department came up with Hip-Hop for HIV, and it was unique in that even Ryan White, the care side got heavily involved in it and how the health department would transpose itself into the community. They could do labs right there. We tested. We did the education. We did everything under this whole operation of what we said the target population was going to be, how many people were going to be tested, know their status, get linked into care.

Pharmaceutical companies were very involved then because — of course, the medications are extremely high, so they would offset the costs for those individuals who agreed to get into care and to start their meds. We did that. Our last Hip-Hop for HIV, our challenge was 15,000 in 30 days, and we met it. It was a lot of hard work and you would be exhausted, but it was to get this information to them, give them something that they could look forward to because they liked the rappers. The only way that they could go to this concert — it wasn’t a concert
you could buy a ticket for — you had to come and get tested and go through the education of how HIV is transmitted, and if you’ve got anything else, because we caught a lot of syphilis that way, a lot of gonorrhea, and chlamydia was just off the chain. I was like, “Gosh, ooh, my goodness gracious alive.”

JONES: What year was this in?

YOUNG: We started Hip-Hop for HIV in 2002, I think. Ada Edwards was on city council. I just really can’t think right now who all was involved in it, but it was the mayor —

JONES: How long did it go for?

YOUNG: We were involved in it for five years.

People in this jurisdiction were saying that they didn’t think that it was effective. People were still getting —

JONES: Even with the thousands of people that you tested?

YOUNG: Houston is that kind of jurisdiction. We have a lot of young people now, and we have PrEP [pre-exposure prophylaxis] and PEP [post-exposure prophylaxis]. Of course, they’re getting the information. They’re getting the education about it. But behaviors, it has to be a decision that you or I make to make even the medicine be effective. For me to have a healthy, whole life, if I choose to make choices and decisions, I don’t get my rest, I don’t know how to manage my stress, I don’t take my meds the way that they’re directed to take, if I’m still engaged in unprotected sex, I can get reinfected, and many of them do, and that’s what we’re dealing with now.

JONES: How do we combat that? What’s the next step?

YOUNG: The next step is to enter — they have in AIDS, which is a part of, I guess, the
new comprehensive plan that’s coming out, and that’s going to be done through CPG, the Community Planning Group, Ryan White Planning Council. Even though they work together, Ryan White is the care side. CPG is the prevention side that’s done by members of the community. Then you have a coordinator from the city that’s a City of Houston employee that’s involved in the process. We’ve got to come together and come up with a plan to address how we can wrap the real idea of it is to get healthier. To get healthier, I might want to be able to look at some of my choices for my behaviors and what’s going to keep me healthy and what’s not? Again, people are living longer with HIV, and some of our people eat right, they manage their stress well, they don’t drink and drug, they take their medications as prescribed, period, and they know how to take — self-care is very, very important, and then having a good support system, having mentors that care enough about you to say, “I don’t like it when you,” yada, yada, yada. “I see you setting yourself up for failure. Ultimately it’s your decision, but I love you, and I care about you, and these are the things that I see, and I want to bring them to your attention so that you may want to make another decision on which way you’re going to do.”

When you care that much and you can work that closely with individuals in the community, then they begin to trust you because they know you don’t judge them, and then they get grateful because you pulled them up on their behaviors and gave them an opportunity to take another look at it, not in condemnation, not in a negative, derogatory way. “You aren’t this,” and, “You’re doing this,” and yada, yada, yada, just everything that brings you down. I’ve got to be able to look at you and say, “I am your sister, and I love you enough to pull you up on your
behavior and to say I’m not going to be like an ostrich with my head in the sand and pretend that I don’t see you setting yourself up, period.”

We’ve got to be able to find a way to get our jurisdiction into looking at better choices, and of course if we’re going to see the end of HIV in our lifetime, we have to keep trudging, we have to keep empowering, we’ve got to keep caring, and we’ve got to do it wholeheartedly, passionately, and every day is a new day for them to get a better message, a clearer message, or reminded that this is not the end of your life. That happened.

Now, where do we go from here? Again, one of my tags is to let them know, “HIV is living with you. Give it hell. It doesn’t define you, and you don’t have to be sick. You make the choice. If you need me to go to the doctor with you, I’ll go to the doctor with you. If, say, you’re in HACS [Houston Area Community Services] or Legacy or wherever, and you’re thinking that your doctor is not listening to you, I’ve always encouraged people, including myself, to have at least three questions. And I go to a private doc, and I don’t deal with HIV, but I have other health concerns, and I’m not going to just sit there and say, “Uh, okay.” No, I have three questions that I’m going to ask, and I say, “You may get lucky enough to get the answers for two.” Help them help you. A doctor is only as good as you are a patient, and the more you participate in your own healthcare, the better the outcomes will be. That’s a thing that I’ve always talked about, is teaching people how to participate in their own healthcare. When we empower them to do that and teach to give them the tools, it doesn’t have to be any long, lengthy question. Write it down. Write down your question, and write down what the doctor tells you. Then if you’ve got to chop it up with somebody
to figure it out, you have plenty of avenues to find out answers so that they’ll learn more.

JONES: How do you feel about looking back on your life’s work so far?

YOUNG: I feel that I have accomplished a lot, that I have been blessed to be a part of a whole era of men and women who made some choices, and was the vessel that just by experience, just by a showing of unconditional love, that they, too, it wasn’t something that can’t happen for everybody. It was a choice I made. I don’t ever tell anybody, “Oh, and it’s been roses all the time.”

Life is going to show up. We just have to have the tools and the support to move it from one stage to another, like in my time of being clean and sober and being in the field, I’ve had some devastating things to happen. My oldest grandson, Alpha Phi Alpha, licensed, ordained minister, graduated with honors, had already been accepted for employment plus drafted by an NFL [National Football League] team, had his own business, and these guys decided to rob him, and they killed him.

In a program of Alcoholics Anonymous, they did say when you’re struggling, tie a rope and hang on. But on the spiritual end of it is that you made a decision to turn your life and your will over to the care of God as you understand God. That means that I’ve got to have some faith. I don’t need to act like I have no strength or nothing. I’ve got to really let go and let God, because I was devastated. I was grieved, but I still have to have enough faith and my support system to remind me that bad things happen good people. We don’t have any control over it. Take what you can get out of it.

My thing was, he had done everything that God would want him to do.
He was active. Even though he was president of Alpha Phi Alpha, he made sure that every semester, twice a year, that HIV testing was done as SFA [Stephen F. Austin State University] because the outreach team and I, our prevention team from AIDS Foundation, went to Nacogdoches twice a year to pass out condoms, to do education, to do condom demonstrations. That was a part of and I’m proud of that I passed on to my grandchildren you don’t judge other people, and if you don’t strap up, if you don’t make better decisions, you too can have or get infected with HIV.

I think that we still have a long way to go, but we’ve done some very good work here; that this is a jurisdiction that works, we work hard at it, we’re very passionate about it, and we learn to disagree, not just to disagree, but to keep hammering at it until we can get a better understanding of it for the men and women that are infected or the families that are affected by this virus. I still believe that 30 years down the stretch, that we will — I’m not talking about anything negative about PrEP or PEP, but I got into this fight until there’s a cure, so that’s my take on it.

JONES: I think that’s all I have for you, ma’am, but thank you so much for sitting down with us. I really appreciate it, sharing your story.

YOUNG: I appreciate having the opportunity, and anything that I can do or can assist with in any way you need me, if it’s advocacy, if it’s telling my story, if it’s actually sitting down and looking at a plan and helping pick it apart to make it an effective instrument, I’m willing to do that.

[END OF AUDIO PART 4]

[INTERVIEW CONCLUDED]