

Oral Memoirs
of
Kelley Muller-Smith

An Interview Conducted by

Dr. Connie Lester, PhD

July 28, 2022

Regional Initiative for Collecting the History, Experiences, and Stories
(RICHS)

University of Central Florida RICHS

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Interview Histories

Interviewers: Dr. Connie Lester, PhD, Jessica Oldham

Transcriber: Andrew Kishuni

The recordings and transcripts of the interview were processed in the offices of the RICHES Department, University of Central Florida, Orlando, Florida.

Project Detail

RICHES is an umbrella program housing interdisciplinary public history projects that bring together different departments at UCF with profit and non-profit sectors of the community.

Central Florida has often been associated with large-scale, commercial tourism and housing development. While those aspects of Central Florida are important to the economic growth of the region, much of its history has remained unnoticed and under researched. The Public History program at UCF links many projects under one initiative to promote the collection and preservation of Central Florida history. By facilitating research that records and presents the stories of communities, businesses, and institutions in Central Florida, RICHES seeks to provide the region with a deeper sense of its heritage. At the same time, the initiative connects the UCF students and faculty with the community and creates a foundation on which Central Floridians can build a better sense of their history.

Dr. Connie Lester, PhD, is an associate professor of history at the University of Central Florida, director of RICHES, and editor of the Florida Historical Quarterly.

Jessica Oldham is a graduate student in history at the University of Central Florida and an administrative assistant in the Department of History.

Legal Status

Scholarly use of the recording and transcript of the interview with Kelley Muller-Smith is unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on July 28, 2022.

Abstract

An oral history interview of Kelley Muller-Smith, a Sanford native raised in Oviedo and professional singer. The interview was conducted by Dr. Connie Lester and Jessica Oldham over Zoom in Orlando, Florida, on July 28th, 2022. Some of the topics covered include Muller-Smith's childhood and schooling in Oviedo and Jackson Heights Elementary School, now Jackson Heights Middle School, and the roles of her parents, her father, principal Stanley T. Muller, and her mother, music teacher May Francis Muller, in segregated Oviedo-area schools for African American students. Other topics include her memories of daily life at Jackson Heights Elementary School, the instruction of memorable teachers, the role of music in shaping Muller-Smith's personal and professional life, her experiences traveling with different musical and performing arts groups, and her view on the importance of the future Oviedo Colored Schools Museum.

Kelley Muller-Smith

Oral History Memoir
Interview Number 1

Interviewed by Dr. Connie Lester, PhD
July 28, 2022
Orlando, Florida

0:00:00 Early life and schooling in Oviedo

Lester Today is July the 28th, uh, 2022. I am Connie Lester. With me is Jessica Oldham and Kelley Muller-Smith. We are conducting this oral history via Zoom. So, Miss Muller-Smith, please state your name and tell us a little about where you're from and what life was like for you growing up.

Muller-Smith Okay. My name is Kelley Muller-Smith, as you stated. I'm from Oviedo, Florida. That's my home. Reared in right there in Oviedo, born in Sanford. Um, life was absolutely great. We had a great community. We had great schools. Uh, we had great churches. Uh, it took the village to raise us and I'm so appreciative of that because it's helped to build me into the person that I am. So, life in Oviedo was absolutely the best. Did I answer you okay?

Lester So, which schools did you attend in the Oviedo area, and can you talk about some of your favorite school memories?

Muller-Smith Yes, I can. I only attended one school, and that was Jackson Heights Elementary, now Middle School.¹ My favorite memories started in first grade. Um, my teacher had us to make aprons by hand for our finger-painting class. That was a big deal. And that also kind of launched my sewing interest which lasted throughout ha – after high school. Those were just great times. Our teachers were our parents away from home. I'll put it like that. Some of the other fond memories: uh, school lunches were always home-cooked meals and they were the best food on earth. Uh, also, playground time. I—I—I just loved it because we had all of these playground equipment toys. Merry-go-rounds, swings, see-saws. You – you just had fun, uh, for the time that we were outside. And then of course, the music classes with my mom on Fridays. Absolutely amazing. She taught us basic – uh, basic songs. A lot of patriotic songs. A lot of Christian songs. And I looked for a picture to show you of her with her elementary school course. I don't know where it is. But those were great memories. Just absolutely great. And being at the school with, uh, two of my dad's sisters, my aunts, and my dad and my mom, it was just like being at home.

¹ Jackson Heights Middle school is located at 41 Academy Ave., Oviedo, FL 32765.

So again, it—it—it raised me away from the house. It—it instilled in me the values of education, of how to treat people. We—we were always taught there's a way to speak to adults. There's a way to speak to children. And when you are in the presence of adults, you address them, "yes ma'am," "no ma'am," "yes, sir," "no, sir." And I'm seventy-two and I still do that. So, those were great memories that I have not forgotten.

Lester Did you have a favorite teacher and what qualities did he or she bring to the classroom?

Muller-Smith Yes. My first-grade teacher and then my seventh-grade teacher, uh, Miss Houston [*laughs*]. She was amazing. Uh, she instilled in us the importance—you had to do all of your work in the classroom. All of your work. Uh, away from school, your homework had to be turned in. There were no excuses. Uh, and then of course, the music was first and foremost. I—I—I just love music. Um, but she would always demonstrate to us. We—we never misunderstood how she wanted the work done because she would always give a demonstration. If we were doing, uh, a history lesson, then she would say, "You have to get an encyclopedia. You have to look up the subject. You have to read it and write down the important facts." So there were no excuses. And that kind of instruction just carried over throughout my life. If you got to do it, do it right, and do it well. Yes. Yes.

0:04:52

Segregation in Central Florida public schools

Lester Central Florida schools remained segregated long after Brown v. Board decision.² What was the first grade year that you attended a desegregated school and could you share some of your memories of that experience?

Muller-Smith Yes. I was fortunate enough to start school at five years old. 1955. Uh, the law in Florida stated then that if you would turn six by the end of that year, then you could start school at age five, which I did. Um, I'm sorry, would you repeat your question [*laughs*]?

Lester Sure. Um, what were—what was the first grade year that you...

Muller-Smith Oh. Okay.

Lester ...desegregated school and could you share some of your memories?

Muller-Smith Absolutely. Yes. It was first grade. Uh, 1955. I remember it well. Again, that teacher, and I can't call her name, uh, she was just so interested in all of us. She would find ways to help us better that gift that each student had, which I thought was amazing. Although the classes were not—the class was not very

² *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954), ruled that United States state laws establishing racial segregation in public schools are unconstitutional, even if the segregated schools are otherwise equal in quality.

large, but she somehow knew us individually, not just as a student in her class. But she cared enough to find that little special something that would work for me and work for my classmates. And we just had a great time and we learned. We not only had fun, but—math was fun, which was not my favorite subject. But we—we learned the adding and subtraction and multiplication. And it was fun. She always made everything fun. But yeah, my—my first year was first grade, uh, and in 1955 there at Jackson Heights Elementary.

Lester Okay. Was that an—an—an integrated school or was it...

Muller-Smith No, it was not. Uh, in fact, integration did not happen until after I graduated eighth grade. The school went from first through eighth grade.

Lester Mhmm.

Muller-Smith And, um, it came—that—that's another story I'd like to share later. But I went from first to eighth grade in a, uh, segregated school. My dad's school.

Lester Okay.

Muller-Smith Yeah.

Lester Was that a difficult transition for you?

Muller-Smith No, because—no, it wasn't, actually. Because when I finished eighth grade, I attended Orange County schools. I lived in Orange County during the week so that I could attend Hungerford High.³ And that was, uh, segregated as well. So the—the—the integration didn't come about until after I graduated in '67. It was slowly opening in Oviedo. Um, I remember my dad had a very good relationship with, uh, Oviedo Elementary.⁴ Yes. Oviedo Elementary. I can't call his name now, but he was a man that everyone knew. And my father made it his business—being an educator, he made it his business to make sure that there was some kind of rapport. But, um, you know, it's interesting because, although I grew up in a segregated environment, when I did finish high school, there was no adjustment for me. Because I didn't—I was not taught one race was better than the other. We were all people, and we all—though we were separated, we were still God's people and He didn't make any mistakes. So you got along with whomever you were faced with. And the transition for me was easy. Yes.

0:08:48

Role of music in personal and professional life

³ Robert Hungerford Preparatory High School (Hungerford Vocational High School) was a segregated high school for African Americans in Eatonville, Florida. The school was founded in 1897 and closed in 2010.

⁴ Oviedo Elementary School was a one-room schoolhouse constructed in 1876. Initially called Oviedo Colored School, the school changed its name to Oviedo Elementary School in 1932 and became Jackson Heights in 1961.

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Lester It seems that music has played a significant role in your life. And how did Oviedo schools foster your musical talent and what other influences shaped your musical education?

Muller-Smith Okay. It was my mom. I grew up in a home with music. My family, cousins, I didn't have sisters and brothers at that time. My family was all just music. Uh, we always sang around the piano. My mother played for both my dad's church and our church. She would always – uh, we had many what we call Easter Sunrise services there on one of the lakes there in Oviedo. And she was over that, for many, many years. Anything music in the community, it was Mae Frances Muller⁵, my mother. Um, so, um, studying under her – started piano at six years old, and then in seventh grade she found a teacher for me in Orlando. So off we went every weekend to Orlando to take my piano lesson. So, it was always music. Um, it really, really made my life a lot easier because I just love it. When I finished high school, I went to Bethune-Cookman⁶ and sang in the famous Bethune-Cookman chorale at that time and then went to Peabody Conservatory of Music⁷, where I majored as a vocal major. So – and I can't tell you how much music really, really means to me and inspires me. I've had the blessed opportunity to sing with the Memphis Symphony Chorus⁸ since 2004. Um, it's what I do. It's who I am [*laughs*]. Yes.

Lester Well, can you tell us how, um – how this shaped your career opportunities and...

Muller-Smith Yes. Yes, I can. When I got to Peabody that summer with my mom and her best friend, I was too late to audition for Peabody, so I stayed there and studied at the preparatory department of the conservatory and then I auditioned a year later, got accepted, studied, studied, studied, and was out for Christmas. And my choir director called me and said, "So and so was looking for a singer. He needs one mezzo-soprano and I told him about you, but you have to be in New York tomorrow." I said, "Okay." And I did audition and that's how my career started as a professional singer. Did that for over ten years with different companies. Um, it just – the music just shaped me and I knew that's what I wanted to do. So I studied as best I could, and it just opened up the doors for singing for me.

Lester So, have you performed with, uh – with groups that, uh, people who are listening to this oral history might recognize?

⁵ Mae Frances Muller (1916-1987).

⁶ Bethune-Cookman University is a private historically black university in Daytona Beach, Florida, established in 1904.

⁷ The Peabody Institute of The Johns Hopkins University is a private conservatory and preparatory school in Baltimore, Maryland, established in 1857.

⁸ The Memphis Symphony Chorus is part of the Memphis Symphony Orchestra, formed in 1965.

Muller-Smith Yes. I did a Broadway show on the road for nine months with Eartha Kitt. It was called *Timbuktu!*.⁹ That was amazing. I learned a lot. It was fun. It was hard work. We were on a plane on an average of every two weeks flying to the next city. So that was a great experience. There was also Disney World.¹⁰ I was one of the, uh, second – the second group, of Kids of the Kingdom. That's me. I don't know if you can see it, but there I am. Okay. That was three years. The Norman Luboff Choir¹¹, Robert De Cormier Singers.¹² Uh, I did, uh, *Hello Dolly!*¹³ there – right there in Orlando at Once Upon a Stage Dinner Theater.¹⁴ That was great. Um, so it's – it's been a journey. I'm just thankful for the opportunity that God has given me to do what I love the best. Yeah, it's been great. It's been great.

0:12:59

Dedication to Oviedo Colored Schools Museum

Lester The oral history that you're giving us today will be archived in the Oviedo Colored Schools Museum.

Muller-Smith Yes.

Lester What are your hopes for that museum?

Muller-Smith First of all, I want to say hats off to our President of the Board, uh, Judith Smith. She was given the vision to open this museum. And her goal, and our goal as board members, is to better educate the Oviedo and surrounding communities and, of course, anyone that would eventually visit the museum to learn the truth about the Black history of the educational system in our area. We've got a whole new group of people. They're younger and they have no idea – I've been told many times when I come home that a lot of people think Jackson Heights Elementary was always integrated. I mean Jackson Heights Middle School – that it's always been there. It's always been i – it's, uh, uh, integrated. They don't know about Oviedo Colored School and then Jackson Heights Elementary School. They have no clue. So, our goal is to better educate the community, the surrounding areas, so that they can just learn the truth. Uh, there's just so much history in that area and I'm proud to be able to say that it's my home. But there's

⁹ *Timbuktu!* Is a musical that premiered on Broadway on March 1, 1978, and closed on September 10, 1978, after 221 performances and 22 previews. Following its Broadway run, it toured for more than a year.

¹⁰ The Walt Disney World Resort is an entertainment resort complex in Lake Buena Vista, Florida, that opened in 1971.

¹¹ The Norman Luboff Choir was one of the leading choral groups of the 1950s, 60s and 70s. The came to prominence through their participation in the Christmas broadcast with Bing Crosby which ran from 1955 to 1962. The group won the 1961 Grammy Award for Best Performance by a Chorus.

¹² The Robert De Cormier Singers performed extensively in the mid-1960s and then sporadically until the mid-1990s.

¹³ *Hello Dolly!* is a 1964 musical based on Thornton Wilder's 1938 *The Merchant of Yonkers*. The show has become one of the most enduring musical theater hits, with four Broadway revivals and international success.

¹⁴ Once Upon a Stage Dinner Theatre opened in 1972 on Edgewater Drive in Orlando, Florida. It became known as the Mark Two Dinner Theater in the 1980s and would later be known as The Orlando Broadway Dinner Theater. The theater closed in 2004, citing "losses suffered during the hurricanes."

a lot of history that has just never been known, uh, by this younger generation. And our goal is to get that information out there, so anyone that wants to can really know and learn the truth about the Black educational history of the Oviedo Colored Schools and that area.

Lester Well, is there anything else you would like to add or expand on or any...

0:15:01

Stanley T. Muller and Mae Frances Muller's legacy

Muller-Smith I would. I want to show you another picture. This is the only principal and his wife, the music teacher, of the Jackson Heights Elementary School. He was there – I don't even have the years because I was so little. But, again, I started in '55. And shortly after I graduated, he – huh. Let me share this because I think you need to know. My dad was in a meeting in Tallahassee. Uh, a state education meeting. And he came home. His favorite thing to do was to get the paper and read the news. And in the *Sanford Herald*, there was an announcement that Jackson Heights Elementary School would be turned into Jackson Heights Middle School the following year. That's how he learned that he would not be the principal anymore of Jackson Heights. Isn't that something? They gave him a position at the school board where he ended up working for a few years before he passed away. It broke – it broke his heart and broke our hearts, because I thought, "School board. You can't tell him? Write a letter? Make a phone call?" He read in the paper. I was sitting right there with him when it happened. So, I – I think those kinds of things need to be known because he was a great man. He – he believed in education of all people. He inspired a lot of young men and women. He especially believed in men being men, uh, dressing properly, taking their hats off when they're in the presence of a female or inside a building. You just don't carry yourself any kind of way.

And he was able to, as I said, inspire a lot of people. I remember when Hurricane Donna¹⁵ came through our front yard. And he got out in that storm, went to the school, Jackson Heights, and opened it so that the people that didn't have adequate homes to live in during a storm could have somewhere to go. Because no one thought of us. But he is hardly known today. So that's something else that the museum is looking forward to try and make known.

Lester Well, to make them better known, will you say your parents' names?

Muller-Smith Yes, I will. Stanley T. Muller.¹⁶ They called him Professor Muller. And May Francis Muller. My mother had seven schools when she started. She was called an "itinerant music teacher" in Seminole County. She had seven schools in one week. That's how she started. And she did it gladly. It's – it's – it's been a journey, but I'm thankful that – let me say this. I'm so thankful for your organization and

¹⁵ Hurricane Donna was the strongest hurricane of the 1960 Atlantic Hurricane season.

¹⁶ Stanley Timothy Muller (December 10, 1919-August 26, 1978).

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what you all are doing to help us. This is phenomenal. And we won't stop until the dream has been completed. It's ongoing. We want everyone to know the truth about the Oviedo Colored Schools of our area. Thank you for what you're doing. Thank you.

Lester This has been an oral history with Kelley Muller-Smith, conducted on July 28th, 2022, through Zoom, by Connie Lester and Jessica Oldham.

End of Interview