

## **Shared Stories: African Americans in North Mecklenburg**

Interview with LaGretta Neal, November 5, 2016

Conducted by Katie Marshall

Transcript edited by Andrés Paz '21

**Summary:** Interview with LaGretta Neal, where she discusses her family life and her lifelong connections to Davidson. Born and raised in the town, specifically in “Brady’s Alley,” she mentions being the daughter of Annie Mildred Lowery and attending Ada Jenkins Elementary School from kindergarten to the 8th grade. As most of her contemporaries, LaGretta Neal attended Torrence-Lytle High School from the 9th to 12th grades. She talks about her experiences growing up in a big family of 8 siblings and mentions James Raeford as her uncle. Moreover, Neal shares snippets about her mother, who worked as a chef for a fraternity at Davidson College. After marrying and moving to Charlotte, she graduated from Johnson C. Smith University, and mentions how her granddaughter also graduated from that university. Lastly, she mentions the names of Kaneisha Gaston and Brenda Tapia, two notable Black women of Davidson, and the connections she had with them.

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### **LaGretta Neal 02:24**

My name is LaGretta Lowery Davis Neal. I was born and reared in Davidson, North Carolina, to the parents of Louis G. Lowery and Anna Mildred Mayhew Lowery and out of that union were eight siblings, seven living. And there was fun living in Davidson, our family-friendly town. As the years progressed, from kindergarten through 8th grade I attended Ada Jenkins Elementary School, that was a family-oriented school, and I could walk to school. From 9th to 12th grade I attended Torrence-Lytle High School, which is now the David Waymer Center. After graduating from high school I married, in 1967, and I moved to Charlotte and my children were raised there. I have two young adults, now living. And I’m able to come back here to Davidson and enjoy the new look.

I was raised in Brady’s, it’s called Brady’s Alley now, it used to be an alley—and I remember M & M Soda Shop, which is now the Soda Shop. And you could walk the streets and just enjoy and

relive some of that when I do come to Davidson. I've met new people, new friends, along with Jan, her husband and Nancy who's now in the room and it's just that some of this history here is still a part of my history because I was born and reared here until the time I left some 40-some years ago. So now I come back, my mother's still living, who will be 90 years old January 6, born in 1928, and the church, Davidson Presbyterian Church—I have been attending there almost 12 years now, so I still have a connection with Davidson. It's just a part of me, growing up here. My mom is part of the history here. I gather and learn a lot from her. Being the oldest of eight she worked and quit school, but she went back later on and got her GED. And she has a story to tell from her dad, during the illness he had, so that's some of my history. And her mom... and from here now, I'm just here to be a part of Davidson, North Carolina. That was it... do you have any more questions?

**Katie Marshall 05:44**

Could you talk about the new look of Davidson, and reliving some of those memories? I wonder if you wanted to share any particular memories you have, whether it be at Ada Jenkins and how that's changed, or if you had anything else you wanted to say about how Davidson has changed since you were a little kid growing up here?

**LaGretta Neal 06:04**

All right, the new look of Davidson, I love it, because it still has history here, the places, the storefronts, they still have that look, the way it was before, the big house where Miss Ella Deal lived. And when I come to Christmas in Davidson, just to see people there, people from up north visit, I say 'Oh wow.' Someone was here from Ohio a couple years I came, and so the fake snow, they had it coming, and they say "oh, we're going to send pictures home to let them know that here's snow in Davidson, North Carolina!" And from the experience I had from Ada Jenkins' principal there, Mr. Harris was a stern principal and that helped us to be the person that we are now. And my motto's always been 'treat people the way I like to be treated,' and that has been my motto from then and till I was old enough, you know, to get that concept. And I enjoy the walk, that you're able to walk, to and from, from my mom's house, downtown, I want to take that walk! And the Village Green, I make that a part of still coming to my hometown. The library here, where we are today, has a new look, a new face, and the barber shop, which is my uncle's,

Ron Raeford, his son, just a part of Davidson, and that's part of me, this is part of me.

**Katie Marshall:** You brought this wonderful picture of your mom. I wondered if you could talk more about that, where she worked, if you could speak more about her, because this picture is just incredible.

**LaGretta Neal:** Her livelihood has been, she worked in the schools, Charlotte Mecklenburg schools, some, and then she worked at the fraternity. I can remember that the most, she would cook there.

**Katie Marshall:** Which one? Do you remember?

**LaGretta Neal:** It's Epsilon I think... She worked there some years. We got the taste of different foods and that's why I appreciate the foods I'm that able to taste now, be it new food or different food. This was her livelihood. She enjoyed doing what she was doing, because she had to cook for her family, a family of seven plus my daddy.

**Katie Marshall:** So she worked in CMS though too. Was she a schoolteacher?

**LaGretta Neal:** No, she worked in the environmental part of it.

**Katie Marshall:** What was it like growing up in such a big family?

**LaGretta Neal 09:19**

What was it like growing up in a big family? It was fun. And as I will tell people now, there was something to do all the time. So we would share. There were times when some of my sisters could wear the clothes that I would wear as I got older. And my mom would have clothes that she would get from different places. That didn't stop the integrity or the dignity that we had.

**Katie Marshall:** Integrity and dignity—I really like that. Another question, so integrity and dignity. So you moved to Charlotte, I wonder how that changed because Davidson is very

different from Charlotte. I wonder if you could speak to those sorts of changes you saw when you moved to Charlotte.

**LaGretta Neal:** Okay, when I moved to Charlotte, working there, and seeing lots of different places—it was such a large city. I moved with my husband and my family, to have a new start. And they were educated, still at Charlotte Mecklenburg schools. My daughter went to North Mecklenburg and my son went to West Charlotte—they had a choice. It wasn't very far from here—Beatties Ford Road—and it has grown too, but the distance with the new highway, I could still travel to Davidson. So there was a new start there and a new adventure.

**Katie Marshall:** Do you feel like, having lived in Charlotte, when you come back to Davidson it makes you notice things or appreciate different things?

**LaGretta Neal 11:19**

Appreciate different things? Oh, also, after my children were in middle school I attended college. I finished my college degree at Johnson C Smith University. And that's where my granddaughter graduated from two years ago.

**Katie Marshall:** Congratulations!

**LaGretta Neal 11:19**

And she's there working on her masters.

**Katie Marshall:** Oh, for what?

**LaGretta Neal:** For social work.

**Katie Marshall:** That's incredible.

**LaGretta Neal:** And then Kaneshia Gaston graduated from here. The dates and the years, I have all that written down. She graduated from Davidson College. And the faculty here, including Jan,

everybody here had a part in that day, when they had Kaneshia Gaston Day. Davidson is still a part of me, no matter, the distance doesn't separate me from coming here. And I'm up here too because my mother is still here, lives up here, and I'm able to spend the night. Anyway, that's my story.

**Katie Marshall:** I think it is really cool that you still have a Davidson connection. Is it the people who bring you back to Davidson? Do you just feel like you still have a connection with the people who are still here?

**LaGretta Neal:** The people and the town of Davidson. Dr Woods was our doctor, Dr Woods, he would home visit, And his son John Woods is still the mayor here. In fact, I saw him last night at a basketball game. Davidson got a great basketball team! I left before it was over because I didn't want to be in the midst of the crowds. I left because of the score, wow, but it was a good game, and to see some people, Jane and Cheryl Holland, and Mayor Woods, and a lot of other people I know. And they ask me about my mom, they find me. Anyway, basketball I like. Davidson College, it's been a college town. It's where my mom and a lot of people were employed. And my grandson attended Love of Learning here. I would stay up here and work and have him over there for the events. Brenda Tapia who was founder of that program. I'm so glad my grandson was able to be part of that.

**Katie Marshall:** I'm not aware of that program. Can you tell me a little more about what that program was and how your grandson was able to get into it? I would love to learn a little bit more.

**LaGretta Neal:** He attended Ranson Middle School. And somehow they had to write a letter, and once he had written the letter, somehow it was passed in and then somehow he was able to get in that program. The years, I've got some of that written down. Anyway, Laferis Davis is his name. It was a very good program. They would stay on campus. It was very inspirational, and it was very educational and just being around other people.

**Katie Marshall:** Do you feel like the campus has changed a lot since you grew up here? When

you come back and visit now, do you feel the change a lot?

**LaGretta Neal:** I'm still learning my way around, and all the new buildings over at Davidson College. I just, like I said, make myself a part of Davidson, I try to as much as I can. And Ben and Jerry's ice cream place, to walk there, and just enjoy the laughter, just to see the people.

**Katie Marshall:** There are lots of new stores. What other kinds of businesses and stores—I know you talked about the barber shop and the soda shop—what other kinds of businesses were there when you were a kid? Were there a whole lot of things when you were growing up here?

**LaGretta Neal:** There was a little cosmetics store, the shoe shop, Mr. McKissock's shoe shop. Let's see. The Village Store was added later, I had the privilege of going in there. The bookstore here, and then Summit Coffee, those are all new. The Village Store came a little bit closer to time, but Summit was added on and Wells Fargo, a storefront bank, and then the Flatiron here. All sorts of restaurants were added, and a shoe shop—there's a shoe place back there—I can't afford those shoes but I like them!—Carolina Shoe Company. And then the new look of the town hall.

**Katie Marshall:** There's a new look? So what did it look like when you were growing up?

**LaGretta Neal:** Yes, it was a smaller building. And I think now they're getting ready to build-- or have they started?—A fire station or something...out on 73. I took the 101 class just to be abreast. I took it last year, just to bring myself up to what's going on. They talked about Summers Walk and I rode down through some of the places out there, to see the new places, all the beautiful homes.

**Katie Marshall:** Where some of the new homes are, when you were growing up, was that just woods and not developed?

**LaGretta Neal:** Yes, not developed.

**Katie Marshall:** So there's been a lot of growth in Davidson too. A lot more people.

**LaGretta Neal:** Yes. And the mill there. And the Brick House which has very good food.

**Katie Marshall:** What was Brick House, what was over there when you were growing up? Was there anything?

**LaGretta Neal:** That was, I think it was the old mill. Because MacIntosh Law firm is in there. And I think the Herald, the Weekly Herald, newspaper place is there. I don't know what else, but I remember going through to see that. I try to see what's new, and kind of enlighten my territory.

**Katie Marshall:** Since we're talking geography, where did you live when you grew up in Davidson?

**LaGretta Neal:** Right here between the Soda Shop and that little road there, down through there, right through here [Brady's Alley] That's why I was in walking distance to the library. The library was on the right side, where the strip of stores are, the storefronts and the bank.

**Katie Marshall:** Were there lots of other kids in your neighborhood that you would play with? Or were you mostly playing with your siblings?

**LaGretta Neal:** Quite a few young people. And some of them have come back to church, at Davidson Presbyterian Church. Some of them attend Davidson Reeve's Temple, AME Zion Church, but mostly DPC. We were always 'across the tracks' from DCPC. And then when they have concerts on the Green, I try to come sometimes and mix and mingle. And I'm glad to be a native of Davidson. And sometimes there being Jan, who's present. some of the other people, at Summit, I'll meet them there to have a, to chew and chat—I use those two C's!

**Katie Marshall:** What's kinds of stuff do you guys typically chat about? Just like different memories and stuff from growing up? Like, what's one of your biggest memories from growing up in Davidson? Do you have a memory that stands out?

**LaGretta Neal:** My biggest memory would be, being able to walk to each person's house. And if we had to share items or different things, just making ourselves available for whatever may be, and being able to have the laughter. And be very grateful and thankful for where we've been to where we are.

**Katie Marshall:** Do you thank God because you guys were such a small town and you were able to do that? Like, do you think that was different from when you moved to Charlotte?

**LaGretta Neal:** Oh, definitely so, definitely so! Yeah, definitely so. Such a big city, you know. Even though Beattie's Ford Road wasn't quite as large as in the inner city. But just being able to do that because Davidson is a friendly town.

**Katie Marshall:** How would you say that the demographics of Davidson have changed since you grew up here? Did you have a small African American community in Davidson? Could you speak to that dynamic a little bit?

**LaGretta Neal:** I wouldn't exactly it say it was small, because there were people that were near Magnolia Street, before they built up. And Beaty, there's a street called Beaty Street. Some of the students went to school with my relatives. Because see I graduated before they did, because they went to North Mecklenburg. So they were able to play together and be together. And see where in Charlotte, it had to be my neighbors that I would say hello and speak to, but here they were able to interact. That's the Davidson way. We have big boy and big girl love, but that childlike way, you know, just being able to laugh and interact with each other, that's still a big...

**Katie Marshall:** What about the college, because your mom worked at the college. Did she like working at the college?

**LaGretta Neal:** Yes, she did. Some of the guys would still keep in touch with her. She would come to the basketball games. Like when Mike Malloy and some of the other players. One of them went to a school in Gastonia. George, I mean, what was his name? Mike Malloy and the



whole Dean Smith team, some of those guys went to Davidson. Mike Malloy, some of the ones that played along with him. He went to, he was from Gastonia. And I lived on Mount Holly Road—in 1987 we built a home—I would commute back and forth, like to go to Gastonia, and I would see where he lived, I would see that school.

**Katie Marshall:** That's so cool that your mom had such a close relationship with those guys. I'm sure they were very grateful for what she did for them.

**LaGretta Neal:** And there was a lady that worked with her, named Sylvia Donaldson who's now deceased, she has a picture of her there, at home. But after Jan gets some more information if you have other questions, I have to meet my son today. He will be fifty November 18. So that kind of tells my age. I'm glad to be a young grandmother and a young great-grandmother!

**Katie Marshall:** I definitely don't want to keep you. Thank you so much. Is there anything else, before you go, that you want to share, that you think would be cool for me to know, as a young Davidson student to know about the town?

**LaGretta Neal 25:19**

Yes, just as I told Jan. I'm glad that my mom is a part of the history here in Davidson [Jan Blodgett: her mother was responsible for Town Day] Yes, it's in the article. And see, when they built this home, the time I made to spend the night in that house now it means a lot because I had moved to Charlotte so she moved in there in 1967, over there, Lakeside. She walked those streets. And there are some students that come from school, that come and, they come and do the yards over there for some of the seniors, the printout is still on her refrigerator, and just by meeting them over at Ada Center, they come and do the yards.

**Katie Marshall:** I would love to talk more about Ada. It's really cool how that center has changed and really grown. What was it like going there for elementary school?

**LaGretta Neal:** And just walking. There was a store—oh, let me tell you about the store! It was right there where the pizza place—I think they say several businesses have been in there now—

it's now a pizza place, I think, on the corner across from Ada

**Katie Marshall:** Davidson Pizza Company. Yeah, that is sometimes where I park.

**LaGretta Neal:** And there used to be a store there, Ms Edna Fall's and her house is still standing, somebody lives there and when I ride past there I think about that. And we used to walk to that store, and I would love to get the king-size Baby Ruth! Baby Ruth's don't taste like they used to taste like! And they used to be trying to eat one of those Baby Ruths! But that was a fond memory, we would walk across to that store and get things. And the floor—it was a wooden schoolhouse and a bell they would ring and when I would walk through Ada Center I would think about those days and the principal's office there. And we went to Torrence-Lytle High School. We were ready! And I still carried on treating people the way I liked to be treated.

**Katie Marshall 27:55**

Awesome. Very, very cool. Well thank you very much again. So if there's anything else. But thank you so much for taking the time. I know you're busy celebrating,

**LaGretta Neal:** Celebrating and he's got to move a desk that I have in storage for his grandson. and I hadn't started for his for his grandson.

**Katie Marshall:** Yeah. Well, thank you so much. It was so nice to meet you.

**LaGretta Neal:** Nice meeting you too. And that's an old desk too, Jan. So he's planning on keeping it for his grandson. I'm gonna let him have his way with his grandson. I'm just a great grandma. Nice meeting you, and I wish you the best. [28:28 multiple voices].

*End of Recording.*