

Renata Williams: Okay. At first, when we moved out there, and when we moved out there in 1990, and it was kind of known for a bad reputation, but I have always had in my mind, and my mom instilled in us, you make your place a home. You make it a home, and so we did it and we didn't see the negativity. It was positive. She made everything positive. And over the years it got better, because she, like everyone says, she got involved with everything and she started working for housing a while after that and helping everybody in... Well, she always did. She was the mother, the counselor, the judge, the attorney, she was everything.

Cynthia Hardy: You're right. I didn't work for housing during that time. I worked for the Urban League, but I knew Tomay. She made her presence known and we had a lot of programs back then. She had resources with Columbia Housing. She was always the person that I would talk to to make sure they got everything. But it was just a pleasure to know her, so I can only imagine what it was like being her daughter.

Renata Williams: Oh, she was strict on us as her kids. What else are you supposed to do? You're a single mom with three kids. Yeah, I miss her so much.

Cynthia Hardy: I know you do. I know. I know you do. The community misses her too.

Renata Williams: Yes, it's not a day go by that someone's either messaged me on how much they miss her, and her birthday was just on the 22nd, so my timeline and my brother's timeline was flooded of reminiscing of her and everything she did for them in the Gardens, everything she did for them, period, when it came to housing and everything. All that. I still love that people still remember her and love her like that.

Cynthia Hardy: Talk to us. Tell us your mom's full name and talk to us about your mother, about how that made you the woman that you are. Because you're her legacy. You know people say that about you, right?

Renata Williams: Oh, really? Oh.

Cynthia Hardy: Lee McRoberts was saying a lot of great things about you.

Renata Williams: Oh, I didn't even know I had an impact at all, on anybody. Okay. Oh, this is... Okay, I'm blushing. Okay. I did not know that. Okay, now I'm... Okay. You caught me off guard with that one.

Cynthia Hardy: It's bound to rub off, you know what I mean?

Yeah.

Cynthia Hardy: It's bound to rub off. She speaks in such... She was so delighted that I was going to get to interview you, because you're the living legacy of your mother, and how neat that would be, because when you run into someone as special as Tomay was, then you have to lift that up. And the way people continue to lift is when we continue to lift their name. And so that just makes sense. I remember a couple of times when J.T. and I... I worked with the Urban League a lot of time, as I mentioned, and Mr. McLawhorn, J.T. McLawhorn and I would show up at the front desk at Columbia Housing, and I remember this one time, Tomay thought I didn't remember who she was and she was quick to re-introduce herself. Not in a negative way, but she wanted to establish that familiarity. She wanted to connect. She wanted to make sure that she was the person that made sure that we had all the kids that we needed to work.

Cynthia Hardy: We had probably 25 or 30 kids that we would take from Columbia Housing to work in the Urban League program. And Tomay would make sure that all of those people was where they needed to be, when they needed to be, all those kinds of things, just the little extra things that... You send somebody a letter, you think everybody is on their own, but she would organize the whole group of them every two weeks, because we would have a new crew coming through. They would stay four weeks, but every two weeks we would get some new ones. And so she would be always that person that would make sure. You would see some sometimes, maybe they needed socks or maybe they needed a nice shirt or maybe they needed nicer shoes. She would just always make sure all of those things were taken care of. That's quite a legacy that she left for us. Talk to me about what it was like in... Where did you live before 1990? And how old were you guys when you all moved in and that kind of thing?

Renata Williams: We lived in Saxon Homes, and that was with our great grandmother. And then she moved into Oak Read High Rise, so then that's when we moved on King Street for two years, and then we moved to the Gardens in 19... I think it was the end of 1990, at J3, right down Forest Drive.

Cynthia Hardy: It was you, and tell me about your brothers and your sisters.

Renata Williams: Oh, I'm the only girl. It's me and my brother, Travis, and Charles Williams.

Cynthia Hardy: Okay. What grade were you in when you moved there in 1990?

Renata Williams: Oh God, I think it was fourth grade I was in.

Cynthia Hardy: Oh, bless your heart. You were just a itty bitty girl.

Renata Williams: I think it was fourth grade.

Yeah.

[crosstalk 00:08:20] Street, yeah.

Cynthia Hardy: And so how long did you live there?

Renata Williams: I moved out in 2005.

Cynthia Hardy: Okay, so 15 years?

Renata Williams: Yes, ma'am.

Cynthia Hardy: Okay. All right.

Renata Williams: And my mom, she moved out once the strokes and stuff, she had too many and she wasn't able to move up and down stairs, so they moved her 2012. I think it was 2012, to Waverly Street Apartments.

Cynthia Hardy: Okay. Okay.

Renata Williams: Yeah, and she did, she tried to do the same thing over there that she did at the Gardens. Yeah, the strokes started to mess with her, as far as thinking and stuff. And when she couldn't do it, I did it.

Cynthia Hardy: Mm-hmm (affirmative), so let's talk about, when she couldn't do it, you did it. Give me some examples of that.

Renata Williams: Mainly, okay, well the neighborhood, if it was something, things that they didn't know and they wanted to know how housing worked or how they go about with housing or who they need to talk to or what needed to be done, I knew it, because I was there with Mama and I worked for housing for the longest too, so I knew as well, so I helped, or kids, I loved kids before I didn't have any. I would babysit. That's how I know a lot of people in the Gardens. I was the babysitter. I was neighborhood babysitter.

And I was also out there with my mom doing those same things, like you was just saying, with the Urban League and things with the senior citizens and stuff like that. I was into that, because I love my seniors. That's how I got into working there, through her. I just continued doing things that she loved and it rubbed off on me and I started loving it too. I just helped as much as I could within my power and I just kept going. I still do it where I'm at now, but not too much over here, but I still try. That's what I kind of miss now that I'm not working for housing anymore, but it's okay.

Cynthia Hardy: Well talk to me about what you're doing and where you are.

Renata Williams: Right now, well, right now I'm just being a single mom. I'm in the Reserves. I'm still under housing. I was working. I was a desk monitor. They laid us off last year. I'm not going to say I kind of... I miss that, because I miss being there for those seniors, because I've been doing that for the longest with my mom. I miss the seniors. I miss protecting them as much as possible. I was always the one that they wanted. "Oh, well, if Renata can't do it, it don't need to be [inaudible 00:11:30]." I was that person. I was strong like my mama, and I was overprotective, because I just looked at all those residents as my grandmother or my grandfather, because I don't have none of those.

I just learned to protect them and that's what I wanted to do, protect. If I could go back to that right now, I would. I know that I can't right now. I'm trying to find something somewhere else where I can do the same thing, even if it's here with housing. I would still do it, because I still love those residents and I'm still friends... I friended them on Facebook and they still call me their baby girl and I will still be their baby girl. They'll always be my family and I'll always love my housing family, always.

Cynthia Hardy: That's just awesome.

Renata Williams: I love my seniors. I love my seniors.

Cynthia Hardy: What made your house a home when you lived in the Gardens?

Renata Williams: I would say peace to where I could come outside and I could sit on my porch and I won't have to worry about someone running up, either shooting at you or this argument with you. It was like that. For a good little bit it was like that, until it died down and people worked on getting that group out of the environment. And that was awesome that they did come together to get that out of there. Once all that bad and negativity... Not all of it was gone, but I'd say maybe 80% of it was gone and it made it so much better that you can come outside, you can sit outside, you can go see your neighbor. Children can run around and play. You didn't have to worry about gunshots. You didn't have to worry about any of that. No [inaudible 00:14:22] around and it was beautiful.

Everybody got along with everybody. I had loved that about out there and it was one big happy family. If they didn't know you, they will make know them. "Oh, I stayed such and such. I know your mama! You Tomay daughter?"

"Yeah."

"Yeah, I stayed such and such. [inaudible 00:14:47]." Everybody was family.

Cynthia Hardy: That just sounds so wonderful. Now, were there all kinds of activities that you all could be involved in? Were there programs and things like that for residents? I would imagine you stayed pretty plugged in with Tomay.

Renata Williams: I did, yeah, I loved the senior bingo night. They did a lot of things with the kids. My favorite thing was Halloween, and we did a scary house thing for the kids, me and my brothers and some of our other friends. My mom just said, "Have at it," because I'm the creative one, but she'd, "Do what you want to do." And every year we did it, it was a success and everybody loved it. The kids just loved it and stuff like that. Christmas time, the holidays, Thanksgiving, you feeding the children, feeding the seniors, all of that stuff. We would get out to the park, we had to go to do feeding the homeless, doing stuff like that, we did that a couple of times. Go to the park, feed the kids, summertime, feed the children in the park, play games, all of that. I'm absolutely tingling. It was just such a great time and everybody got along. Everybody got along.

Cynthia Hardy: It's interesting hearing you talk about it. It makes me think about my time with the Urban League, and I had the same kind of feeling. Do you know what I'm saying? When you

honestly are connecting with the people and you know that you are actually contributing something that's going to make the whole better, it really makes you feel great to be a part of it. Because we can't do them things by ourselves. We're part of a collective effort, but it still makes you feel really good to be able to do it.

Renata Williams: Yes, ma'am.

Cynthia Hardy: Yeah, I can hear it in your voice when you talk about it.

Renata Williams: I've missed it. I hate to say good old days, because I hate that those days are gone, but I'm still in contact with some of those people. It's like it's still continuously going on, but we're not there anymore, but we still meet up at places or we just call to talk about it or anything. It's just that place, it holds a special place in my heart. It really does.

Cynthia Hardy: But what you're talking about, Renata, is a level of community empowerment. Your mother did it, you did it and it's like nobody's going to come to save us. If we want things to be better in our environment, we have to change the things in our environment. We can't wait for somebody else to do it, and so that's what was so powerful about the legacy that your mother left. Everybody doesn't learn that. Everybody doesn't learn that level of independence, where it says if the current situation is not the situation that you want, then work to fix it and change it. And so everybody doesn't understand that.

Cynthia Hardy: I imagine one of the reasons why you do, and you're able to project it onto others, is because you did see your mother do it and you did see her make a huge chain and you knew that it could happen, because how often do we hear people say, like just earlier, I heard somebody say something about somebody who was running for office. "Why are they running? They can't win." As if to say they shouldn't run. Well, sometimes you get more out of running than you do out of winning.

Renata Williams: That's right.

Cynthia Hardy: Even if the challenge seems insurmountable, there's still a brave you, your mama, who will say, "I still can make a difference in that situation." It may look like it's big old, big old, but one step at a time we can do a lot. Just think about all those little kids that you said, all those little kids that you made sure got to their jobs, got to the [inaudible 00:18:48] or did all those things in the Gardens, just because there was someone else pushing them, gently nudging them

to be able to do it. And sometimes that's all we need and so that's the reason it's important to have people like you and your mom and communities, so that those things can be possible. Sometimes we just don't even think about the fact that a lot of people are stagnant, just because nobody said, "Come on, let's go." What are some of the things that you want to make sure don't get missed when we talk about the Gardens? What are some of the things that you want to make sure people never forget?

Renata Williams: Oh God, there was so much. I really can't pinpoint.

Cynthia Hardy: Well, just think about that a little bit, and then if you want to call me back and have an addendum to this, because I've got until Tuesday afternoon to get it in, so if you come up with something that you want to say, "Let me tell you about this story. I remember one time we did this one Christmas and it really made a difference. Or I remember one time we was registering people to vote, or I remember..."

Renata Williams: Ooh, yes, I remember the voting. Oh, my mama made [inaudible 00:20:07].

Cynthia Hardy: Tell me about that.

Renata Williams: Oh my God. Oh, Obama first term, oh my goodness. I'd already moved out of my mom's house and she's... Well, I'm the only girl, so she was always with me. Weekends, she was at my house, I guess to get away from my brothers. But anyway, she rallied up everybody. "You registered to vote? No, come on. Let's go. You going to vote? Come on, let's go. What you doing? You working? No, you ain't doing that. Come on, you can go down here and work the polls." Yes, she did. She came to the area that I was staying in and it was not under housing, and she still rounded people up.

She still got them to the polls.

She'd just pull up, "Hey, baby, what you doing? You got a job?"

"No, ma'am."

"Come on, get in." She put them all in the van. She put them all in the van, "Come on, let's go. You coming down here, you going to get on there. You're going to get on these phones." Yes, oh my goodness.

But tell them to vote for Obama.

Oh, she had them out there. When I say she had them out there, she had them in droves. She had that van on two wheels.

Cynthia Hardy: That's amazing. Isn't that amazing? Her job ended at five o'clock and she... The weekend stuff was all her. It was all her and what she knew she needed to do.

Renata Williams: Yes, she did it. She had us out there faithfully.

Cynthia Hardy: What do you think drove her? What do you think drove your mom to be as effective as she was in communities to empower people [crosstalk 00:22:06]?

Renata Williams: My granny, her grandmother. She told us, she always raised us, "No matter what that person is going through, you don't never look down on that person. If that person needs help, you help that person. Whether you have a grain of rice, give that grain of rice, because God going to bless you 10 times fold. Help that person, because you never know, that same person may help you down the road. That stuck with us. And be active in the community. You live here. If something's wrong and you say nothing, you are nothing. Evidently, you like the drama that's going on. Straighten your area, fix it up. If there's trouble there, get it out, because one person can't do nothing against 10, 20, 30, 100."

Cynthia Hardy: Wow.

Renata Williams: Yeah, that's what we're getting from our granny. And it stuck with us. It stuck with my mom and it stuck with me. My brothers were a work in progress, but it stuck with my mom and me. I still hear that in my head everyday. I try to push myself now, for my son, because by him being a Black male coming up in this world, I want him to know right from wrong, do better and always will.

Cynthia Hardy: Were you sad to see the Gardens go?

Renata Williams: I was, and I did get a brick from the building where we were, right on Forest Drive. I wanted the plate, the J3 plate, but I forgot to ask. I forgot who they told me to ask for it. And I'm still sad to see it. Every time I drive past it, I cry. I can feel my mom. I feel her every time I go past there. When I come into the main building, I used to come there for meetings or



whatever, and they're going to say, "Oh, hey little Tomay. I know it ain't the same without your mom here." And when I first brought my baby there, everybody was all, "Oh, look at him." And it was like he felt like he was home there. And I said, "I know my mom's spirit is right here. He's feeling like that." And it was like he belonged there. I can't go in that main building without thinking about her. I can't go past there without thinking about her.

Cynthia Hardy: You must be very, very proud of the legacy that your mother-

Renata Williams: I am, and I was crying a second ago when you was talking about her, because I felt that people, some people, kind of forgot about her. I really did think that. And then when you said that I was also mentioned, that shocked me too, but I really did think some people forgot about my mom. And to hear this, and then when Tina called me and she said that, I was like, okay, my mom's name is still out there. And then you telling me more and more people said something, and even about me, I'm like, did I have an impact? My mother, she's with me all the time, so yeah, okay. I accept that. And to hear you say that, to confirm it, I had cried for a second, but I'm okay.

You don't want people to be sad. You know what I mean?

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Cynthia Hardy: Your mother was an extremely influential person and a lot of times we see people who don't really go after fame as the ones that really deserve it. Tomay wasn't the kind of person that... She didn't want her name in the newspaper. She wasn't [crosstalk 00:26:07]-

Renata Williams: No pictures, because she was not taking no pictures.

She didn't want that.

She didn't want it.

Cynthia Hardy: But she wanted the impact. She really, really... And when Lee McRoberts heard that I was going to interview Tomay's daughter, Renata, she took a moment to talk to me to make sure I understood what I was about to do. I was like, "I knew Tomay too."

Cynthia Hardy: And so she was like, "No, you don't know what she meant to this agency. She meant so much to Columbia Housing and she meant so much to the whole Gonzales Gardens area. And then she taught her children to serve." Which is true. It really is. And I love hearing you talk about, during President Obama's first run in 2008, do you remember how a lot of people didn't think he could win? And then a number of people thought he could... A lot of people didn't think so, and then you had as many people who thought he could. The people who thought he could, like your mom, were working doubly hard for him. I've never seen people work as hard as they worked for Barack Obama, because they saw something that was possible, that so many people thought this couldn't happen in a million years. And to know that your mother had a little piece of making that happen, riding up on people on Saturday, saying, "You got to go to work? You got a job?"

"No, ma'am I don't have no job."

"Well, get in. You get ready to go."

She did it. She did the random people on the street, "Come pass out these fliers." Oh my goodness, yes she did. Oh, Mommy, I miss you so much.

Cynthia Hardy: I know you do, because you know the impact that she had. And that level of grass roots leadership, I know how impactful it is, because I know how hard it is to motivate our people. The reason it's difficult a lot of times, to motivate our people, is because our people get beaten down a lot. They don't know a lot, opportunities don't go in their direction. When they try to get up, somebody tells them to sit down. A lot of times we are beaten back in terms of our spirits, our young, because people seemingly don't let us get ahead. You know what I mean? Just seems like it's obstacle after obstacle after obstacle.

But for those of us who believe and honestly know that we can make a difference if we just exert ourselves, like your mom, then those are the ones that make the biggest difference in the world. It's quite rewarding, actually, to witness. It's quite rewarding to witness. Okay, is there anything else that you'd like to leave with me about your time in the Gardens or about Christmases or about trick or treating or homecoming?

Renata Williams: Oh God, I remember this one girl. Oh God, it was so long ago, I cannot remember her name, but she was a young girl, she was a single mom and she had three beautiful kids. Now I understand now, because I've been through it. She's been abused by her kid's father and she

didn't have anything. She was trying to work. She didn't have a babysitter. She didn't have food. My mom's like, "Oh baby, you're not alone." We fed her, we kept those kids. I kept those kids while she worked. I said, "I don't care what time you come back, I got these babies. Go ahead." She worked, I stayed at her house, I cleaned her house for her, I did that. My mom cooked for her and we did that for six, seven months. And just the smile on her face and to see her kids happy, it had made me and my mom so happy.

We did start doing that. If it was somebody down, everybody let the word out. "Oh, you need such and such? If you hungry, Ms. Tomay going to feed you. Go to her. If you need anything, Ms. Tomay going to feed you. If you need a babysitter, Renata got you. If you need this, they got you." And they came to her for that and they came to me for that. And it wasn't about what you can pay me to keep your kids. I love children. I'll watch your children half the time for nothing, and then [inaudible 00:30:43] for nothing, because I loved her kids and I love Tina. And I still love those kids to this day, and they grown with children and Tina is grown. I still love all of them like they was still little children. We was just talking about that the other day. I remember how they used to make us... "Y'all sit down, we making dinner tonight." And they used to make me and Tina peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. It was just so cute. Children, how can you not love children?

And that with my mom, because I... And another thing, I've been with my mom, seeing her go through with bad relationships and being beaten and everything, so that's why she was like that with neighbors and these younger girls with their kids, or even some women her age with kids. I still watched them kids almost my age at the time, and I'm still watching them and they like, "Mom, why you got me a babysitter?"

"Shut up. She going to watch you." Yes, and stuff like that, my mama is my mom and everybody can... Just like they will tell you, she was there. I hated to see my mom go through that abuse, and then she got tired of it and that was it. Okay, it's me and my kids. I'm not going to let my daughter see this is how you're supposed to be treating... Or a female period, I'm not going to let my sons see how this is how you treat someone you say you love, so you can get out of my life. I mean that. And sadly to say, I repeated the same messed up cycle, but I did the same thing. My child is more important. It's all about taking care. Like I said, taking care of the kids right there, she did that. Taking care of the people, if they were like, "I'm short a couple of dollars."

"Here you go." And I was doing the same thing. "I ain't got no bus fare."

"Here." My babysitting money, "I don't have no bus fare to get back [inaudible 00:32:45], Renata."

"Here you go." Me and my mom, we did the same thing.

Amazing.

I love her for that. I love her for her making... Well, not making, but letting me see it and letting me go through it with her and taking me these places with her. Taking me to the high rises, with all the high rises, to see the people, because I knew them before I started working, doing desk monitor. I already knew them, so I was already family. I was already protecting them before I even got in there. "Oh, that's my baby right there. Oh, Renata, oh, we good. We protected."

Yeah, because one thing about my mama, I'm a little bit different, because I ain't going to take no mess. She'll take it for a while, but you're not going to do that with me, not when I'm right. I'm here to protect and I got that from her. I'm going to protect you. You're my child. I love you. I'm going to protect you. You're my family. I love you. I'm going to protect you. And that's what she did. Everybody out there was her children. Even if you were her age, you were still her child.

Cynthia Hardy: Well, that just goes to show you how protective that she was of her community and the people in it. She treated everyone as if they were valuable. And I think that's the biggest thing that people remember about your mother, is that she treated everybody with dignity. Everybody had something to contribute. Everybody had the ability to help somebody else. And so when we see ourselves as valuable enough to give to others, it's just a different kind of way we see ourselves. Being able to volunteer and connect with people in that way is valuable.

I'm just so happy that your mother understood it and that she instilled that in you, because it's important that we have people to carry on those legacies. You talk about your great grandma, know that she was strong like that, she was just a Christian woman until she had you all knowing that, if nothing else, you can lift somebody up. If nothing else, you can help. And so imagine if all of us, if everybody in the world felt that way, it would be such a better place to live.