Grays Ferry Oral Histories

Interviewee: Tammy Reeves (TR)
Interviewer: Maggie McNulty (MM)
Date: 2/27/2020
Location: The Reeves House
Transcribed by: Maggie McNulty

MM: This is Maggie McNulty. I'm a student and PPEH Penn Program in Environmental Humanities and I'm speaking with Mrs. Tammy Reeves, Tammy, do you mind saying your name and then also spelling it?

TR: My name is Tammy Reeves. And that's TAMMY REEVES.

MM: Perfect. Thanks so much for talking to me today. So I first want to start out by asking you how long you've lived in Philadelphia.

TR: All my life.

MM: And where in Philadelphia have you lived?

TR: I've lived at 1700 D Patton Drive, 1805 D South 31st Street, 3110 Tasker Street, and now I'm residing, oh 1542 South Patton Street, and I now reside at 1539 South Patton.

MM: How do you think those neighborhoods have changed since you've lived there or in the time that you've been living there?

TR: They've changed drastically.

MM: Can you speak about that a little more?

TR: Well, I grew up in the projects. And that life over there was really hard. It didn't get better until we moved on Tasker Street. Once I moved on Tasker Street, things got a little easier. But back to living in the projects, the refinery it caused a lot of problems while we were growing up a lot and we could barely go outside to play, if we went outside we had to be with our parents, get in the car, roll the windows up. You know, we used to go like to drive in movies on Saturdays with my parents. We had we couldn't even do that anymore. It was not safe at all, due to the refinery.

MM: And what are some things that you want people to know about your neighborhood?

TR: Well, like I said, I grew up here, and I've been out here all my life. And we loved our neighborhood. But now you know with the violence and everything that's going on now is really hard. So you just kind of stay to yourself, mind your business, stay in your house.

MM: Are you involved in any community organizations?

TR: Yes, the Tasker Morris Neighborhood Association. That's my husband's our RCO for Sony and Resident Action Committee 2 is our community based organization.

MM: And how long have you been involved?

TR: I would say four years.

MM: Can you speak about some important places and or memories that you have growing up here?

TR: The projects, the way we used to go out and play and, you know, oh the Schuylkill.

MM: Can you speak about the Schuylkill?

TR: I have a brother, is name is Anthony. He's deceased. But he used to take us down there. And girls, we didn't belong there. But we went anyway, because there was only time we could really get out and play. My dad used to make sure that all six of us, went together and came back together. So Anthony would take us on these journeys, and he took the down to I believe is 33rd Street and its an Exxon gas station there and we used to walk down this hill to get to where we were going, but it was the actual Schuylkill River and it had green slimy water and your feet slid off the rocks and things like that. My brother used to jump in that nasty water and swim across the water. And then he even pretended he drowned and have us all out the crying and then he just pop up out of nowhere talking about haha gotcha. He used to make us pick up nasty eels. I know what it was. I thought it was worm, but it was an eel but we will play down there. And I mean for hours, they used to fish down there. They even make, they built go karts out of crates, and used to ride down the hills down there. And nobody ever told us that we didn't belong down there. And that it was unsafe. But I kind of knew it was unsafe, because we shouldn't have been around in water, period. And if one of us would have drowned, it'd been crazy. But at that time, we wasn't thinking about the refinery. We just wanted to go play so.

MM: Did you always have concerns about playing in the water? Or was there a certain event or time…

TR: Well, first of all, I can't swim. So water scared me okay. And like holding your breath? No. It's that going down like that, but we just didn't belong down there, at all and we knew it. But we followed our brother. He took me and my sisters down here. And he had a couple of friends with him.

MM: I'm curious what you think there's not enough of in South Philadelphia, and also what you think there's too much of in South Philly.

TR: There's too much violence in South Philly, too much and there's not enough community support. Okay when I was little if you did something wrong, the neighbor would pop you, take you home to your grandmother, who was watching us because our parents was at work and my grandmother would tear a fire to us and then when my parents came home, we got whippins. And if you said, I didn't do it, you got in trouble because you lied on an adult. Just cut and dried so you just learn not to even you don't make faces or nothing. You just take the whippin, go to bed, and call it a day, that's it.

MM: Can you speak more about there being too much violence? I'm curious if that has been consistent throughout your lifetime, if there were certain periods in your life where you felt that there was an increase of violence or decrease of violence.

TR: There's an increase of violence now. When I was little, we didn't see much of it at all, at all, because the adults in the neighborhood they all watched over everybody's kids. Now and then there may have been some adults that were fighting or something, but I only seen in my lifetime when I was little, one person, that had gotten shot in the head. Outside of it, but then, like now, you can't even go outside. You can't go nowhere. And if you around these young people, after a certain hour they're looking at you like, why don't you mind your business you belong in the house.

MM: And what are your earliest memories of the refinery and when did you become aware of the refinery being there?

TR: Okay. I always knew the refinery was there. Because I grew up out here. I just never knew why that fire was coming up out the machines over there, what it was or whatever. And I remember being in school, in elementary school on certain occasions and they told us we had to stay our classrooms, close all the windows, don't go out, the loudspeaker, this the principal on the loudspeaker. They would contact our parents. Our parents was coming to get us for early dismissal. We didn't know why. Nobody knew why

we were too young to know why. I'm guessing the adults knew why but we didn't know. Never knew. But on a couple of occasions as I gotten older, and it happened, and I was in Audenreid, I kind of knew what it was. Then we started smelling this funny odor and they would close the windows and tell us you can't go outside, no recess, none of that, you have to stay in here until your parents come and pick you up. And we still didn't know what it, still didn't know, and at night I would lay in my bed, and me and my sister, we were really close. She used to tell me stories, and then it'd be my turn to tell her a story. And we'd be laying in the dark. And I'd be telling her, you know, my story, tell it til she would fall asleep. And I'd be looking at that window and I'd tell her "Here come *The Wizard of Oz*, here come *The Wizard of Oz*, you know, and you can hear fire engines, but you didn't know where they were going. I don't think the fire engines had anything to do with that. But somebody whose house was on fire or something, but that fire consistently came out of that tank over there with a lot a large amount of smoke. A large amount.

MM: How is the climate changed in your lifetime? That can be related to the weather, the seasons.

TR: It didn't change much to me. It just seemed like in the summertime it gets extremely hot. We have like odors around here in the summertime don't know where they come from. I mean, we can all assume they came from the refinery, but we don't know where they come from. I actually like the smell of natural gas, like if you filling your gas tank, and I smell a whiff of gas, I like that, but the odors that we've smell now, and the odors that I smelled then, was not natural gas. I don't know what it was. Don't know. Sometimes they, oh, it'll, it'll take over you. You know you'll be coughing, clearing your throat, rubbing your eyes. But again, you don't know where it came from.

MM: Growing up, did you or anyone in your family experience any breathing problems, like asthma or allergies?

TR: All of my nieces and nephews from one of my sisters have asthma. Okay. My granddaughter from my daughter, she's seven, they think she has asthma now. Okay. She also has eczema really bad where her skin just like her complexion is like mine but hers her skin on her legs and all around her stomach and stuff everything is black. I don't know where that came from cuz there was no eczema in the family ever. Not ever nobody ever had no skin problems or nothing. My mother, she had cancer of her esophagus. My stepfather, her boyfriend, he had cancer. My sister, the oldest one, she had breast cancer and ovarian cancer. The sister that's under me, she had ovarian cancer, and had to just recently get a full hysterectomy. Okay. God has been good to me. I haven't. I don't have it. But I suffer with severe vertigo. I don't know where it come from. Nobody my family never been messed up or anything. My husband, he suffer with prostate cancer. Okay. Then he has all these other ailments going on with him too. You know, I have high blood pressure, you know, I'm active and you know, I don't even eat much as you see. So what am I eating that's giving me high blood pressure? So I don't know.

MM: Have you ever had any experiences with flooding living in South Philly?

TR: When we lived at 1805 D South 31st Street in Tasker projects we did have a few floods, but I think they were something that had to do with the Philadelphia Housing Authority. Okay, and at one time the whole row where we lived was underwater. Never had any on Tasker Street. Never had none here on Patton Street where I reside now, no.

MM: What about mold in the home?

TR:: No, I don't remember no mold being in our home at all. My father was really, really clean and was adamant about his six kids better keep this house clean or he gonna tear some skin off your backsides. He was the type of father that he was, he wasn't in the military, but he was the type of father that when he come in your room for an inspection, he opened your drawers and all your socks better be rolled up in a ball like they supposed to be lined up your panties laid on top. That's the kind of father I had.

MM: So when the refinery exploded in June 2019 did you hear it?

TR: We heard it. Yes.

MM: Can you talk about your reaction?

TR: I jumped up out of my bed and was wondering what the hell's going on.

MM: When did you find out…

TR: I looked at my window, and I seen all this light. And I was like, Oh my god, something's on fire. Now from my bedroom, you can't tell that it was the refinery. Okay, then we heard a second explosion. So you didn't know where it was coming from till I actually turned the news on and the news was saying that the refinery caught on fire and some large fire over there or whatever. That's how we, I, found out about that.

MM: Did the air smell differently following the explosion?

TR: Well, I think it was like 3:30 in the morning, so I couldn't really tell you what it smelt like cuz we were all in bed sleeping you know I'm in my bedroom windows not open anyway because I have my air conditioner in the window so.

MM: What about the days following the explosion?

TR: The days following is smelt like boiled eggs, like rotten eggs or something it wasn't like boiled eggs because boiled eggs don't smell like that but it smelt more like some eggs that was boiled in had sat in for some time and you could smell this odor coming from it.

MM: Is there information about the refinery complex that you wish that you had?

TR: No. Because they never gonna tell the truth. They never gonna tell the truth about what it is, what they found. Nothing. So what is the point.

MM: Do you have concerns for the future of South Philly? If so, what are they?

TR: Yeah, air.

MM: What about air specifically?

TR: We should have been had some form of face mask, oxygen, something, in the case of an event like that, that we should be able to protect ourselves.

MM: And what are your hopes for the future of the refinery space?

TR: That it’s just gone. Gone because you can't build no flowers, can't grow no flowers over there because the dirt, the soil is messed up. The flood water that’s over there has oil running all through it, okay, so you can’t build like a skating rink for the kids cuz it’s unsafe over there, you can’t out no food, no supermarket over there. You can't do nothing so just pave it all off with cement and leave it like that. It should be gone. Shouldn’t be no industrial site, nothing. Nothing.

MM: And what are your hopes for the future of South Philadelphia, doesn't have to be related to the refinery.

TR: Really don’t have much hope because right now they're building all around us like we're not even here. So we may not even be here in South Philadelphia. When it's all said and done. They building these $300,000-$400,000 homes. What about the people this moving into them homes? Have they been made

aware of what our all that was over there? Have they been aware, have they been made aware that we have already died from the chemicals and all of that over the there and they keep on saying it does stuff over there is not hazardous so if it's not hazardous, why do you need a group to come in with hazmat suits on, okay?

MM: So if clean up and remediation wasn't a problem hypothetically, how would you design the refinery space? If you weren't worried about the contamination?

TR: It would be a cemented road, that would lead to the airport. Period, just be an expressway. Going wherever it needs to go.

MM: Do you have concerns related to the airport in terms of pollution and/or the highways that are surrounding us?

TR: No.

MM: So it's mainly the refinery?

TR: It's the refinery because either way don't matter to me at this point. And I don't drive so. But imagine how many days we took that road in somebody else's car windows rolled down and those fumes, all of that. There is no point. There's no point.

MM: So you already spoke about the Schuylkill River a bit. I was wondering if you had any more memories from childhood about the Schuylkill or if you could talk about how the Schuylkill and your relationship to the river has changed in your lifetime?

TR: Well, once my brother passed away, we stopped going down there was no need to go back down there anymore. You know, it's been an eyesore, been an eyesore. Everything that has happened in my life, where someone passed away, I don't relate to it anymore because it hurts, you know, so I don't care what's happening down there. They need to, they should have had that fenced off because we had no business down there. It had a danger sign up there, yes it did, I remember seeing it big as day, but we went down there anyway. But if you don't go down there anymore, like myself, it don't matter. I don't care.

MM: So for the digital tour, something that I want to do with this recording is to have you talk about the site that we did on the tour. And then I'm going to put that geo-tagged with the location when we eventually create this map.

TR: Okay, so the tour that we did in December.

MM: So if you could pretend like you're standing at the spots in which you talked so when it's online…

TR: Yeah, I talked at that one spot right there. Okay. Yeah, that's, that's no problem.

MM:Thanks.

TR: No problem at all. You want me to talk about that now?

MM: Yeah. And then I'll put that associated with the digital tour.

TR: I was explaining to the group that was out there about how close that refinery site was to where we actually lived in Tasker projects and it was relatively close. Okay, and I explained to them how I perceived it as being the man behind the curtain in *The Wizard of Oz* because when you would see that fire come up in your mind like it's Oz. You know, with this ugly face in it, you know? Wow, I don't know what else to tell you. Cuz I don't know I already. I did it already so.

MM: No problem I think I think we have a lot of information that's still very much relating to your childhood memories of the refinery that certainly suffice. So, thank you so much again for talking to me, you've answered all the questions that I had for you. Do you have any questions for me or any follow up comments that you wanted to make that I didn't address?

TR: No, only one was the one where we didn't get speak about the Schuylkill. And we spoke about that and I'm comfortable with the information that I offered you. And I'm sure right, that there is much more if you dig really, really deep but you know, I have a, I had a pretty good childhood. But then as I got older, it just kind of went down and down and down and down so.

MM: That also just reminds me, do you want to say anything about your experiences at Audenreid or your involvement and how Audenreid has changed recently?

TR: Audenreid has changed for the better because back in the day it used to be on a hill and everybody say, oh, that's the prison on the hill. Whatever that meant at the time. We, you know, I don't know I was just going to school but then we were told it was a cemetery and used to be a cemetery and then I was like are these people trying to scare us or something you know and that's just, that's just it.

MM: Okay great. Well thank you again for talking to me and taking the time to share your memories and your stories. I really appreciate it.