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LORETTA AUGUSTINE-HERRON INTERVIEW
OBAMA: IN PURSUIT OF A MORE PERFECT UNION
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Loretta Augustine-Herron

Community Organizer

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Interviewed by Teddy Kunhardt

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ON SCREEN TEXT:

Loretta Augustine-Herron

Community Organizer

Growing up in Chicago

01:00:12:16

LORETTA AUGUSTINE-HERRON:

I was born on the far south-side of Chicago, right off of 95th Street, in an area called Lilydale. My parents were- actually, my mother was born in Mississippi and my dad was born in Arkansas and they met up here. My mother was actually raised in Chicago. I think her parents moved up when she was about five. My childhood was basically pretty carefree because the area we lived in; everybody knew everybody. It was like small town, USA. I went to Frank L. Gillespie Elementary School. Some of my mother's teachers were my teachers. And it wasn't really built up that much. It was like we had some wide-open spaces to run through, and we had a really nice park. Contrary to popular belief and to a lot of other people's experience, our

community was pretty well endowed with parks and places to go. And our family was pretty much church-based.

Changes in the South Side of Chicago

01:01:33:21

LORETTA AUGUSTINE-HERRON:

The community has been-- it's built up. They have added a school, Turner-Drew Language Academy was not there when I was coming up, and that was in Princeton Park, which was right across 95th Street. They have a Chicago Housing Authority--housing development there, which are the Lowden Center. And the area that we used to run through and go snake hunting, and have our little bug zoo and things, they're all homes and things now. It's kind of where there was a barrier of just fields and vacant lots and things that were from about 98th Street to 100th Street, all of that's filled in, so it's just community extending to that area.

Being a teacher

01:02:40:04

LORETTA AUGUSTINE-HERRON:

I'm still a teacher. I'm still certified. I keep my certification. This is the first school year that I didn't work at all. I'm a special ed teacher, which I take a lot of pride in that accomplishment and the children that I work with. And after I retired in 2010, permanently, then I started to sub so I could be more selective. But I just I- I get gratification from working with children and seeing what they can do, where they can go, you know.

Searching for a Community Organizing Director

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LORETTA AUGUSTINE-HERRON:

Our church was part of an organization called CCRC, Calumet Community Religious Council. That was made up of churches from the far south-side of Chicago, and into the south suburbs. And we were on that board. We were part of that organization. But at some point, our concerns were very different. Number one, we were a poor community on the south-side of Chicago, and the community churches that we were working with were more affluent than we were, so our needs were different. And so, there was a split in the organization. And so, the churches on the south-side became a separate organization. And we didn't have a director, we were working with Jerry Kellman, and we went in search of a director.

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And community organizing for us was so new and different. There was actually no one in our community that we could tap as a resource for a director. And so, we went looking for a director. In fact, Jerry Kellman did the search. And he brought in three or four candidates, but none of them fit the bill for what we needed. Finally, he brought in Mike Kruglik. And Mike- Mike was nice, but he wasn't African American. And part of what we were looking for is someone who looked like us, thought like us, and understood our problems. The bottom line is that we felt very strongly as an example to us, we needed somebody who fit that bill. So, Jerry told us he had one other

prospect, but he had to go to New York. And when he came back, he brought Barack with him. And so, our board of directors' interviewed Barack.

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I remember it was in a- a- a conference room at St. Helena of the Cross church. And we interviewed. It was- it was a good interview. Part of it is that I've interviewed a lot of people and I've seen people take your questions and kind of toss them up and throw them back at you. This was not the case. Barack was very straightforward with his answers, and very thoughtful. And even- even when it was something he didn't know, because we're talking about organizing, and he would- his answers were like, "I'm not sure about that, but these are some things that we'll learn together." I liked that. I liked the honesty and everybody else did. And when he finished the interview and he left, we talked about it. And I remember at the beginning of the interview, me and my friend Yvonne, when he walked in, I had turned to her and I said, "Yvonne, those people in Altgeld are going to chew this guy up and spit him out," because he was so young. But when the interview was over, he had flipped it in such a way that we understood that he knew how to handle himself, and just his personality was what we really needed. We needed someone to kind of encourage us, and to make us want to do the things that we needed to improve our community and empower the people in the community. That's what community organizing is all about anyway, it's empowerment.

Jerry Kellman

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LORETTA AUGUSTINE-HERRON:

Jerry Kellman is a community organizer and when we first met him, he was organizing around churches. So it was a church-based organization. And actually, he is good at what he does, as far as bringing people together and organizing churches. Because number one, in the Black community, the church is usually the base of everything. That's where people get their strength. That's where they go for encouragement. And so during this time, to bring those churches together... And this was something new for us. He had the wherewithal, the knowledge, to organize in such a way that we got strength from coming together. As a matter of fact, I think when we started out, we must have had maybe 15, maybe as many as 20 churches that came together. This is power, and Jerry understood power. And so basically he was an organizer who came into our community and brought us resources.

The background and mission of the community organizers

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LORETTA AUGUSTINE-HERRON:

If you go back into the 80s, what had hap- what really happened was that we were losing jobs and economic resources. Our community strength was that people worked for steel mills, they worked in factories, and those were big paying jobs. People working for steel mills, they were making money hand-over-fist, but what happened is that those steel mills started closing as we started resourcing those jobs out to foreign countries. And so as the steel mills closed and the factories closed, people were out of work. When people are not working, the last thing they're thinking of is going to church. Our

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churches were full and gradually, that membership dropped off. You cannot preach to someone who's hungry, they're not hearing you. So you have to attend to their needs.

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And so, we organized around churches and their congregations. Our idea was to bring jobs and resources to the far south-side of Chicago and the southern suburbs. We needed an avenue to reach them, number one. You need something to offer people. You can't just say, "I want to interview you," because they don't want to talk to you. Why should they? You have to see what is in their best interest. Number one, if they don't have a job, you have to have a way of offering them some kind of hope. And so with CCRC, when we were still one unit together, we had a plan to open what was called the Regional Employment Network. And the Regional Employment Network was, I would say— I want to say a plan to open a way of placing these people in jobs. I'll put it that way.

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It was—what it basically did was—and we got a grant through the state. I think about a half a million dollars, and it was administered through Governor's State University. And we basically would interview these- these laid-off workers, dislocated workers, and we'd interview them and look at their skills. If they had transferable skills, some way of transferring those skills into other industries, then we could refer them for jobs. If they didn't, we would refer them to a training program. We'd write a resume for them and then make the referral. This basically gave people hope. Number one, if they could be placed in other industry, that was great. If they needed other

skills and training, then we provided that for them. So that's what we were basically doing at the time that Barack came to Chicago. In fact, we had had a big rally. It was hundreds, if not thousands of people that were there. We had representatives from the Archdiocese and the other churches, we had politicians where we introduced the Regional Employment Network. And after that, then we started the program.

Naming the Developing Communities Project

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LORETTA AUGUSTINE-HERRON:

After we had split with CCRC, and we had interviewed Barack and accepted him as our director, we still didn't have a name. And so we were meeting with Barack, it was about three or four of us, and talking about the fact that we didn't have a name for our then, new organization. And he said very thoughtful, "What do you think about Developing Communities Project?" And we talked about it because it fit, because we were developing our community. And so it was a good fit for us. So we accepted that name and that was the beginning of DCP.

The importance of having a Black leader for DCP

01:15:02:19

LORETTA AUGUSTINE-HERRON:

Part of it is-- I say this in cooking all the time, so I'm going to use it. Presentation is everything. Part of it is that it's nothing wrong with us meeting and working with other ethnic groups, but the other part of it is that

we don't always need someone else to show us the way. What does that say to our children? What does that say to us? The bottom line is there's someone that looks like us, talks like us, understands and has experienced what we have experienced, to work with us. There's someone there that can show us the way. And so, it means a lot to us; and more than us, it means a lot to our children, that they can. They can be the leaders. They don't always need somebody else to show them the way.

Communities DCP served

01:16:18:09

LORETTA AUGUSTINE-HERRON:

Altgeld Gardens is a Chicago Housing Authority project. And I-- when I first got married, actually, I lived in Altgeld; block 17. And um, it was basically low, no-income families that lived there. And um... To some extent, it was—it provided housing and resources, limited resources, for residents. We had a health center, and of course we had, I think, two churches. One, Our Lady of the Gardens, which was my church at the time in the community. There were schools, and it was pretty much contained. And um... Basically, it was poverty on top of poverty, and family on top of family. It's like the parents lived there, the children lived there, their children lived there, and it was kind of a vicious circle. Our organization, DCP, consisted of about 11 or 12 catholic churches. And at the time, they were all catholic churches. They were not all located in Altgeld. We had all over the greater Roseland area; St. John De LaSalle, Holy Name of Mary, St. Willibrord's.

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So it was quite a few churches in a wide area. It was a juggling act, if you really want to know the truth, because all of us were hurting, all of us had needs, and every church in every area had their specific needs. Even though people put a lot of emphasis on Altgeld because it was the only housing project in his area, and where everybody consistently, were poor and needy. But the others, nonetheless, suffered because of the steel mill closing, and the plants closing, and the loss of jobs, and the lack of training. But each church specifically had their own needs. So as we met and talked about the needs of the different areas, then we had to devise ways to meet everybody's need. It wasn't easy because you can't play favorites. As a representative, I represented the Altgeld area. And so yes, my emphasis were more on Altgeld. And we were looking at pollution, asbestos, lack of training, lack of jobs, you name it. It fell under our umbrella. But other areas had similar problems, and then specific problems. So, when you talk about Altgeld in general, it was one specific area in his area.

The community's response to Obama

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LORETTA AUGUSTINE-HERRON:

I think people liked him. He is likable. He's sensitive to people's needs. He didn't try to ram things down your throat. When we had our board meetings he listened intently to what was going on. And he usually would come up with a suggestion. Sometimes we had our own suggestions about our own needs. We were living in the area, so we knew, usually, what was going on. But a resolution, you know, is- is the difference between having a problem,

changing that problem to an issue, and then coming up with a resolution. So problems are so broad, we knew we had a problem, but what to do about it? How do we make it small enough so it becomes a specific issue that we could address, and then coming up with the resolution and then who could we go to reach that resolution. He was not only good at it, but he was really good at working the board to make us do our job to help come up with that resolution. Because we knew the players better than he did. You know, he was the new guy in town, but we knew our state reps, we knew our aldermen, we knew the politicians. And basically, it was a matter of coming up with some kind of resolution for our problem, but then you go back to playing captain may I, because they had somebody present a bill, or pass some kind of law that would help us or resolve it, or help us get financing, then you got to turn to whoever was in charge of that.

Obama as a strategic planner

01:22:02:13

LORETTA AUGUSTINE-HERRON:

He planned everything out. He knew. He always knew. He was never guessing. He did his homework, he researched it. At some point, the people that we knew, our politicians in the area, the power players, he knew better than we did. I'm wondering did he sleep, because he knew these people. He knew pretty much their temperament. I remember there was a state senator, Charles Hayes, I think he was state senator. He was pretty sharp, but we went, and we met with him, and when we came out of that meeting, we had his agreement to work with us. And that wasn't always easy because a lot of

politicians, they know their base well. They understand how the game is played, and they understand their power, but they understand their limitations. I remember that meeting. It was really -- it was a good meeting and we learned a lot. And a lot of times, we were learning basically, where we fit in the scheme of things; what we could do. And when I say it was an empowering type program and project, it was because we always had the power. We never knew we had it. Part of it is, you talk about the power of the vote. You talk about power, organized people, organized money. We were organizing people. We didn't have any money, but we had the power of our congregation, and we had the power to pull in the people in our community, which gave us the power of the vote. It's one of those things where things that, at one time, you didn't realize, suddenly you understand where you fit in the scheme of things.

Obama's character

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LORETTA AUGUSTINE-HERRON:

Well, it's one of those things when you look at personalities, and the fact he had such a gentle way of working with people. He had an understanding that was far beyond his years. He was in his early 20s when he came. But he had patience and an understanding. Part of it is when you tell people what your problem is and they come up with some resolution that's way out there; you know it's not going to help you, and they try to ram it down your throat because they don't really understand. They're listening but they're not hearing you. He listened and he heard what we were saying. When I say he

did his homework, he did his homework. I know my daughter called me when he was running for president, and she was in the Air Force, and she was saying, "Mommy! I know that guy! He was at our house, sitting at our table drinking coffee a lot of times." But that's what he did. He got to know the people he was working with. He got to understand what their problems, what their stresses were. He understood all of us had other jobs; we had families. We had concerns about children's education. He got it. And that's how he basically worked with everyone. He actually listened to what you were saying.

"Obama's Mamas"

01:26:34:01

LORETTA AUGUSTINE-HERRON:

Well, part of it is that we cared. He was so young. He was our children's age and it meant that we had a true concern for him. It's like we followed him a lot of times because we were concerned about where he was going. The man seemed to know no fear. I was born and raised in Chicago. There are areas that I don't go after dark, and I'm hesitant to go when it's light. But he, "Well I'm going to this meeting over here." "No you're not." So he say, "Oh yeah." And it's like, "I'll be alright." I say, "Yeah, you will because we're going to be there." So basically, we kind of followed him pretty relentlessly, to a lot of places, a lot of meetings that we felt like, "This boy is in harm's way." And so we felt a paternal... I don't know. Oversight, so to speak, for him. We basically, we're very concerned about him. We knew he didn't have family here. We

knew the city much better than he did. We really were concerned. We were concerned as though he was our child.

When Obama left Chicago for Harvard

01:28:15:05

LORETTA AUGUSTINE-HERRON:

As a parent and a child relates, you want them to further themselves. And I knew he had a lot of potential, but you have to develop that potential. So he didn't just jump up and run off somewhere. Basically, he met with us, he did his, what we call, one-on-ones. And he had set up an appointment with me. I met him at the office. I don't remember exactly... right before he left. Anyway, we had that meeting, so I left work early and I stopped by his office, and we talked about this, that, or the other. Finally, we got to the point. The point was that he was leaving DCP. He was going to Harvard. He had that need to get his... I think it was his master's. So I wasn't surprised. I didn't feel that sense of loss because in that conversation also, he said, "But I will be around. If you need me, you'll always know where to reach me." And he always made sure we knew where he was at. We always had a way of reaching him or talking to him if we were concerned about anything. So I always knew he was there for a resource, and I always knew that there would be a need to go further. And so, I- I was happy for him. I was concerned about who would replace him, but I didn't really have a sense of loss.

Impact of Chicago on Obama

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LORETTA AUGUSTINE-HERRON:

I'm not sure you could say it- that it toughened him though, because he was tough. You didn't see it because of that gentleness he had. But he was tough. He knew where he was at, he knew where he was going, he knew who he needed to meet. He knew the alliances we needed to have, and so tough is not the word. I think what it basically did was strengthen his knowledge of the society and of politics, and basically, an understanding of how, quote-unquote, the game is played.

Harold Washington

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LORETTA AUGUSTINE-HERRON:

When Harold Washington got elected... you know about the Council Wars. And it- it was- the first term, it was bad. There was that blockage in City Council and you couldn't get around it. It brought us to a standstill, so to speak. Although all of us had, in my community, in the African-American community, that love and respect for Harold, Harold was a good person. He had a wonderful personality. I did a walk-through once with him when we were opening up an employment and training center in Roseland, and he seemed to- he always had that smile and very congenial, and we kind of walked and talked through... Set you totally at ease. But still, we weren't able to really move things through the city council as he probably would have liked. During that second term, when things were picking up and beginning to work, and there was a sense of cohesiveness, to a certain degree, but that's when we lost him. But no, Harold Washington actually did a lot for our

community, for the way we thought about ourselves and what we could accomplish. So that was... a time of learning. People feed to their base. And so, the white alderman had to support their base, who were not supporters of Harold Washington. On the other hand, you'd have to know the climate and how things were in front of the camera and behind the camera. Because you would think it was everybody knew what side their bread was buttered on, so to speak, but outside of city council, they would be friendly. "Hey, how you doing? Such and such a thing." You know, it wasn't that ongoing battle. But everybody had that need for the support of their community. So, the perception is not always as real as the reality.

Race in politics

01:34:32:14

LORETTA AUGUSTINE-HERRON:

When Barack became president, he still had this sense of fair play. Now all through his organizing days, this was a kind of a argument between us. It's like for me, to the victors go the spoils, number one. And he was always, "Well, we have to be fair, and we have to include some of the other players in the community." For instance, when we got the appointment of the Southeast Environmental Task Force, I was co-chair with a lady called Maria Montez. She was the president of the board of directors of UNO Southeast. I was the president of the Developing Communities Project. And because we worked together to force this appointment, we were co-chairs. But on the other hand, Barack insisted that we basically, appoint some of the other members of the community, who had fought against us, in the interest of cohesiveness. And

we were like, "Why? We battled them all the way. If we did not have that peoplepower, we wouldn't have been able to have this council appointed." And he says, "Well, no. You have to do this because you want to mend fences." Okay. He becomes president. For me, you won. Your programs, your projects, run them through.

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But he wanted a consensus. He wanted to mend fences, and he wanted to be inclusive. But on the other hand, while you're trying to play fair, you've got Mitch McConnell who says, "We're not passing it. It's no need in you sending it because we're not going to pass it." They didn't care whether the American people suffered, they only cared with the perception of not working with this president. And it was all about race. You can dress it up, you can dress it down, but it was all about race. They didn't want to work with him. It wasn't even a Democrat and Republican thing. It was all about race. And so, even though he won two terms in office, and this is the part that gets me. Maybe because they kicked it around, "Well, he's not actually African-American. He's mixed. He's this, that, or the other," but he won that first election. Surely, by that second election, everybody knew this man was Black, but they still voted for him. Why can't you work with him? You know, you have so little concern and respect for the American people, you can't even pass things that are good and healthy for us because you can't see past your prejudices.

Attending Obama's inaugurations

01:38:10:15

LORETTA AUGUSTINE-HERRON:

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I met Michelle when he was running for state senator. And um, they had a rally down on the lakefront. So I went to that. And then I uh- the next time I actually saw Barack was at his wedding. I thought it was a really nice wedding. He was married right on 95th Street. I think Jeremiah Wright was the pastor at the time. It was nice. It was a nice reception with everything. After all the preliminaries, him and Michelle came around to everybody's table and they greeted their guests and everything. He got to our table, and it was me and Yvonne, and Margaret. We were running buddies. We were everywhere together. He was like, "How's everything going? Is everybody treating you alright? Do you have everything you want?" And we were like, "Yeah." I said, "Yeah, for now." I remember telling him, I said, "However, I have one request." And he was like-- because he had this easy way, this laugh. This laugh was so matter of fact, just easy. And he said, asked me what my request was, and I said, "When you become president, we want to be at one of the inaugurations, inaugural balls." That's what it was, because we like to dress up. But anyway, we wanted to be at one of the balls. And he laughed. She laughed, they laughed. And he goes, "You got it."

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I went to the one in 2012. I didn't get an invitation to the one in 2008. I was working at Turner-Drew Language Academy in Princeton Park at the time, and I wanted to go. And so, I was a little disappointed, but actually, only for a minute. Because at the time, we had - the children I was working with, they were just all enthusiastic and pumped up because we had a Black president. And at some point, it made me think, did I really want to be there? Or did I want to be with these kids who were just excited out of their minds? So yeah,

I wanted to go. No, I didn't want to leave them. So actually, for the inauguration, we had our TVs set up, we had pizza, we had everything. I had a million questions from them. A lot of them did not realize that this was the area where he organized in; that across the street was Reformation Lutheran Church, which was one of our churches that he worked in. And so, it was just meant for me to be there with them and to experience this with them. And I think I really got more out of it than if I had gone to Washington. Now in 2012, he sent us, me, Yvonne and Margaret packets. We all had packets and invitations. We got to go to one of the balls; not the White House Ball, but one of the balls. We went to the inauguration. We were up close. We had tickets for the bleachers for the parade and everything. So I went with my family. And it was a good experience; something I really appreciated. Later on, he was in Nashville where Yvonne lives. And so, she got to talk to him at some rally they had. And she told him, she says, "You know, we were at the inauguration." And he said, "I know. I sent you the invitation." And she just laughed. But it's good to know that he never really turned his back on our organization, or on us. And that's a good feeling, because no matter how much higher than president of the United States can you go? But you don't forget that path you took to get there and those people you met along the way.

Obama entrance into politics

01:43:05:08

LORETTA AUGUSTINE-HERRON:

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I always thought he was going to be president. It's easy to say because people say, "Hindsight is 20/20." But even when we had our meetings, and our strategy plannings, and our training... I was telling Yvonne. He was training us one day, and I said, "You know, he is going to be our first Black president." And she said, "You think so?" I said, "Oh yeah." It was something about him that I really always believed that. We've come a long way. You look at the way a person responds, what they do, how they do it. And so you know that they're going to keep climbing up that ladder, but he still had the personality and the knowledge to be president. And people seem to always-- people like Barack. I didn't know exactly what his plans were, but I knew that he was learning the system and he never said, "Well, I need to do this," or "I need to do that." But he kept meeting people and understanding how everything fit together. And the other thing that I looked at though, every time we had a project or a program we wanted, we had to sit down with a politician and play captain may I. You know, we wanted to do the Employment and Training Center. We sat down with representatives of the city. We met with the mayor. We met with people who were over Employment and Training Department for the city, but it was always a matter of taking our ideas to someone in politics and trying to get approved. What I saw was though, because we always were playing this game of captain may I, because we weren't actually sitting at that table where the power was, and for him I think at some point he realized that he needed to be at the table. And I think that's when he had his political aspirations. I think that's where it came from, and I guess once he got there, and it's nothing like timing also and I think the time was right for him to take that step into politics.

Dreams from My Father

01:45:52:00

LORETTA AUGUSTINE-HERRON:

Part of what happens is that he was always laid back and calm. I was excited. We were making a difference. The bottom line is that, you know, I was doing things that I had never done before. I was meeting people that I never thought I would meet. I was being appointed to projects and boards that I never thought I'd be appointed to, and I was giving my in- was not too excited to give my input. I was always in touch with reality. I knew my community. I knew what the needs of the community really were. And my questions were pertinent. I came from a community that was inundated by waste and pollution, high rates of cancer, asthma, and all of those things. I knew what I was there for. So, when we talk about that, I understood. I was not so excited, even though he was always laid back and I was excited, but I was never so excited that I didn't remember where I came from; who I represented and what the needs of the community were. In the few years that we had Barack, we had so many adventures, so many challenges. I know he had a lot of disappointments, and I say that because he stepped in, we weren't trained, we knew what our needs were, but we didn't know how to get them. So, he took a bunch of middle-aged people and he trained us to understand our rights and our responsibilities, and we didn't always get it. He was always focused, but sometimes we would get kind of blown away by the celebrities, the status of meeting with the mayor, meeting with the governor, meeting with the House of Representatives, that we kind of lose

our way. And he was like, "Did you get this?" No. And so, there's so much to remember. So many things that I feel that we accomplished.

Public and private relationship with Obama

01:48:43:05

LORETTA AUGUSTINE-HERRON:

He asked me questions and we talked about my family, but we talked about his family, too. He talked about his grandmother. He talked about his sister. He talked about his family in Africa. And so he was pretty open with sharing, too. Part of it is you got to give some to get some, and that we kind of shared things with each other. I think he was pretty open with me. We- we had conversations that basically talked about the organization, what we wanted to do, and then we had personal, private conversations. And with those, they were just that. It's just like talking to your doctor. It's like you hear and that's what you do, you hear. You don't share. They're not to be shared. So I think we had a public and a private relationship. I actually felt pretty close to him.

Obama's visit to her school as a senator

01:49:50:01

LORETTA AUGUSTINE-HERRON:

I remember that when he became state senator, that he came to visit my school, Turner-Drew Language Academy. I'm sorry. Countee Cullen Elementary School in Roseland. He came and he met my students, and he looked around the school. He visited a classroom and he read to the students. And when he left, he met with the principal and it was just basically, fact-

finding. He had a thousand questions. He wanted to know who he was working with and who he was dealing with. And so when he'd left, and I remember, is one of the things, the most I regret out of the whole time that I worked with Obama, because he had come and did me a favor. He asked, "Is there anything you need?" And he had done so much for me. He had trained me. He gave me insight on politics, community, all kinds of things. I had a wealth of training and information from him. He doesn't owe me, I owe him for all the things he gave me. But he was always, "Can I do this for you? Do you need that?" And at the time, I was actually getting ready to relocate to Mississippi. And I- I remember telling him, "No, you've done so much for me. I'm going to be alright." And so when he got ready to go, I wanted to give him a hug. I'm not soft and cuddly all the time. I'm not one of those huggy, huggy people, basically. But I wanted to hug him. And I didn't. I just kept it professional. I regret that to this day, that I didn't hug him. Because that was, I think, the last time I saw him in person. But that part, because I just- don't know. All I could think of was, "All I need is for my students to see me hug this man." And so that's one of the only regrets, out of the whole time.

The work she did with Obama

01:52:28:07

LORETTA AUGUSTINE-HERRON:

I've met with him, I've talked to him, we've done things together; some good, some frightening, that I actually regret. The rest of it was basically things where we rallied, we did good. We broke up meeting behind closed doors. I mean we uh... we-we were- they were having secret meetings about the

O'Brien Locks and waste management. And they were cutting deals. That's when we had the alliance with UNO. And we met. It had to be 200 of us. We got word about this meeting that morning and we got 200 people together, just like that. And we met and we walked, we didn't even drive, we walked to the bank where they were meeting upstairs, in the conference room, and we slipped up the stairs. We was quiet, quiet, quiet. And we got there, and we opened the door. Not a word. We filed in until we packed the room. People were sitting at the table, but they couldn't get up because we had packed the room. Mary Ellen read a statement about meeting behind closed doors. And if there was anything that was going to be decided about our community, we would make that decision. Then we turned around and we filed right out; not a word. We laughed. It was really funny, funny, funny. But you're talking about a sense of power. You know, and these are the kind of things that Barack thought about and we did, that made us feel like we were in control.

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And out of that, we had another rally where we had a couple of thousand people. We had representatives from the mayor's office. We did this presentation where we told the community, the mayor, his representatives, everything. If anything was going to be decided in the community, we were going to be the ones that decide and we demanded that he appoint this council, this committee. It was things like that. Mostly everything we did, it was- it was so victorious, so empowering. It was learning to lobby, going down state, taking parents who were all the way down, they were saying, "They're not going to listen to us. They're not going to listen to us." He trained parents on the bus to Springfield to lobby. And when we got out of

there, boy, you couldn't stop these people. That's what he did. He was uplifting. He- he showed us the way to make a difference in our community.

Obama's mother

01:55:34:14

LORETTA AUGUSTINE-HERRON:

She was a nice person. She was kind of subtle in her mannerisms, but she was just a nice person. Basically, I know she was supportive of him, but it was just... I don't think we had a long conversation. We had the basic, "How are you doing? It's good to meet you. I've heard a lot about you." She was just very pleasant and really nice. I just remember, I didn't know what to expect. I knew his mom was white. And um, I don't think-- And I think I had met one of his sisters before then; one from Africa had come here. But no, she was just a really nice person, you know?

Asbestos in Altgeld

01:56:46:05

LORETTA AUGUSTINE-HERRON:

We did tackle it and we met with representatives of Chicago Housing Authority, but nobody knew. I mean, the secrets of Altgeld are so many. Number one, it's located next to a dump. On one side, waste management and on the other side there's a sludge plant. And sometimes, depending on the way the wind is blowing, you can't take a deep breath. But at the time, we were meeting with parents. Alma Jones was principal of Wheatley Child Development Center at the time, and we were meeting with parents over

there when one of the parents came into the meeting and she was talking about people in these protective suits, and they were doing something over in some of the apartments. And so we went to investigate. And we got some kind of implication. Somehow, we found out that they were removing asbestos. But they denied it. It was like, "Oh no. We're just doing some basic upkeep and this, that, or the other." And so, we- he organized, actually, a meeting down at CHA. We got this little school bus, and we got the parents who were going, and we drove down there. I was on my way to work actually, and we stopped by to see how the project was going; how they were doing with their turn out and everything, and he commandeered us. So we went down with them. We got down there and they didn't want to see us. They didn't want to talk to us. One of the ladies who had started this whole thing, her husband didn't want her to go because he was saying that it would just cause a lot of problems, but we went anyway.

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And then they hustled us. It was basically, they were sending their staff and they were going around trying to buy people off, "Don't you need a new refrigerator? Don't you this, that, or the other?" And here, we have the babies who needed diaper changing and whose noses running and everything. It was a fiasco to say the least. But they did meet with us, and we were able to talk about the complaints of the asbestos. At some point, they did finally acknowledge and did a clean-up, but it wasn't really forthcoming on their part. Basically, if we had not discovered what was going on, I can't tell you to this day, they would still have it. My daughter died from leukemia. And uh,

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basically, with all of the pollution in that area, the rates of cancer were really high, out of line with other communities. Asthma was at an all-time high.

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And other environmental diseases were also at a high point out there. And basically, nobody seemed to care. You know, we weren't told. We were not advised. It was like when my daughter got sick. Cancer didn't run in my family. It was like out of the clear blue sky. And then I started finding out about other people who had cancers, and as I said, asthma, and it all went back to the environment; whether it was asbestos, whether it was pollution, as far as the Waste Management dumps were concerned, whether it was from the sludge plant, which was right across 130th, across from Altgeld. Nobody seemed to care that these people were being inundated by all these different environmental diseases. In fact, when they were talking about going into O'Brien Locks, we had a meeting at the high school. We had this politician, and I'm talking about the pollution, the effect, and he's talking about ... advancing into this area and adding pollution to it. I think his reply to me was that, "Well, we have to do this before you can do that." You know, it's like, "If you can't breathe, so what. We do need to make these advances." It was just crazy. The amount of disrespect they had for the lives of people living in that area.

Altgeld Projects today

02:02:40:09

LORETTA AUGUSTINE-HERRON:

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So with the advances that we made, as far as-- they have not gone into O'Brien Locks, and that's the only really good thing I can say about it. Pollution is still there. I was back in Altgeld when I moved back to Chicago, that was like in '06. And they were digging up some kind of material that was buried in Altgeld, that had a lot of radioactive material or something in it. And then, you know, as far as the advances that we've made and things that we were able to either stop or at least identify ... I still hear people talk about these not being advances. That people that live in Altgeld are still at a poverty level, and still not making advances as far as education, employment, training, and things like that are concerned. And sometimes I have to shake my head, because part of it is that this was not an overnight sensation-- not an overnight project. These programs, and they still do the asthma program by the way, but these programs were meant to be ongoing because the makeup of a Chicago Housing Authority project, is that it's for poor and disadvantaged people. So those people that you never hear about, that have been trained and who are now professionals, and they're so many professionals that came out of Altgeld, you would not believe, but now they're no longer eligible. You have to move. So that now you're replaced by families who are poor and disadvantaged. And that's the vicious circle. So when we think about projects and things that we do, sometimes maybe it should be rethought. Whereas that you integrate families who have done well with families who are doing bad, so that families that are not doing well have something to see and encourage them to do. But it's not the nature of the beast. Chicago Housing Authority, it is what it is.

The job of a community organizer

02:05:35:00

LORETTA AUGUSTINE-HERRON:

I think Ms. Palin made a comment about community organizing and, "What's that? He's just a community organizer." But you can't undermine the value of a community organizer, when it's furthering the needs of the people, and bringing in programs, projects that are needed. You know, whether it's healthcare, whether it's employment and training, whether it's to improve the schools in some way. And apparently, Ms. Palin did not understand, or did not know what community organizers do. But for me, if you don't know-- when I don't know anything I am so busy trying to find out what it is, what it does, how it's of value to a community. And I will tell you, Barack was one of the greatest resources our area ever had. He changed the way that we thought. And that is part of the job of a community organizer. Not only to empower and further the cause of the people in the community, but to change the way people think. It goes from, "I can't," to, "I can," and, "I will." Once people start thinking in terms about who they are, what they can do, their own self-value, and what needs to be done to improve a way of life, then you can make progress.

Navigating race

02:07:37:14

LORETTA AUGUSTINE-HERRON:

Everybody expected him to step into office and right away... And actually it did. It improved our way of thinking, for some of us, our way of life. It

improved a lot of things, just the fact that he was president. But what people tend to forget, that he was not the African-American population's president. Barack was not just the president for African Americans. He was the American president. He was a president for the lowest of low, the highest of high; everyone. So things that he did had to include everybody. And I think so often, people forget that. But for African Americans in general, he was a role model. He was someone who actually made the most powerful position in the world. For our children it meant they could achieve their goals. You don't have to play sports to make it. You can be an accountant, you can be a lawyer, you can be a doctor. Set your goals high and you can make it.

Election night 2008

02:09:10:09

LORETTA AUGUSTINE-HERRON:

I was crazy. I was so happy. I was so elated. I went down to Grant Park with two of my grandsons and my daughter. I did an interview that day, right behind the stage he came out on, and they were asking me how I felt and what it meant to me, and things like that. And I was just so excited. I just knew that I was here for this special time in history, that my grandkids were there with me to witness it, to see it. I was just full of pride and joy, and expectations.

One of Obama's greatest moments as president

02:10:05:04

LORETTA AUGUSTINE-HERRON:

When they took down Osama Bin Laden, and I was watching because they had pictures of him, I guess it was him in the situation room, and he was sitting there, and he was calm. He was Barack and just that was his personality, but he was very calm, and I was telling someone because they were in touch with him, and they were saying, I think the report was, whoever the soldier was, says we have him in our sights. And I didn't hear what he said, but I knew what he said. He said, "Take him out." And I was looking, I knew very calmly he said that. He did that. Part of it is that it was horrendous. Some of the things that happen the way without conscience, he attacked people, he was a murderer, and I think that presidents make hard decisions and that was the decision to make.

Charleston church shooting

02:11:24:00

LORETTA AUGUSTINE-HERRON:

I do remember that moment, and I was – just a sense of sadness came over me. And to this day, I feel that sadness every time something happens, things have changed so much, and I feel, even starting then ... there seems to be no sacred place. I don't know, I just... and maybe sometimes, we don't remember the bad times, the sad times, but I just remember that sense of sadness, just sadness, coming over me. And that is a time that, if you witness it, it would be hard to forget the tears of a president at a time like this.

Obama as a father

02:12:47:01

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LORETTA AUGUSTINE-HERRON:

I will--actually, let me say this, I think his daughters are absolutely adorable and I've watched them, as the nation did, grow and mature in the White House, but I'll go back. So, my time at Turner-Drew Language Academy, when he was running in 2008, to a comment of one of my students, and he said, "Ms. Herron, you know Obama?" I said, "Yeah, I know Obama." He said, "Well, I tell you one thing, his daughters sure are fine." I was so tickled; I didn't know what to do. But you know, I've watched him as a father, a caring father. And one of the things that has stuck in my mind, is that they were back in town at Halloween time one year and he was taking his younger daughter to a party. I don't think they were trick or treating, but she had her own costume on, and he was taking her to a party and I think the press was following him. And I remember him turning your thing, oh, wait a minute. No, this is off-limits. And he just stopped it and he went on and walked her to the party. That's what parents do. They allow their children to be children, they're protective of them. And I think him, and Michelle were very protective of their children, allowing them to grow up as normally as possible.

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And then as we turn to him being the president and the father of a nation, I think he was protective of us as citizens, as people, and concerned for our wellbeing, our economy. And if you realize, if you go back in 2008, we were at a crisis when he entered the office. So, he brought us back. But he was mindful of our economy, of our health, of our personal rights. And I think he did a good job. You know, it wasn't a thing where he was mindful of African

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Americans, he was mindful of Democrats. He was mindful of people and of our basic needs and of our basic rights as Americans, and for that, I have to salute him. You know, even though, you know, sometimes things did not go the way he wanted it to go, he didn't throw up his hands. He still kept going on doing the things that he felt was right and in doing that, he did protect us as citizens. He protected our needs, our rights, our education. We did have some joys and we had some sorrows, and he was there, and he felt the things that we felt. Our joys were his joys, our sorrows were his sorrows. And the one thing that I know and that I feel that he was there for us every step of the way.

A personal message to Obama

02:16:58:11

LORETTA AUGUSTINE-HERRON:

I'd probably just say, "I really--I love you. I respect you." I still care about, I do care about him. I care about his well-being. And I remember once, and maybe he will remember it, I was so concerned about him. We were doing a rally, we were doing something and I was concerned for his health and welfare, and his safety. And he looked at me and he said, "I'll be alright."

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