Amendment 64 Oral History Project Interview, Section 1 of 2

Tuesday, April 26, 2016

Wanda James

Janet Bishop, Interviewer

JANET BISHOP: This is Janet Bishop. And I'm here continuing with our stories of Amendment 64 Oral History Project. I'm here with Wanda James, who is the owner of Simply Pure, a prominent dispensary in the Denver area. The date is April 26, 2016. And we are in Denver, Colorado, in Wanda's office at Simply Pure. And Wanda, thank you so very much for--

WANDA JAMES: No problem.

JANET BISHOP: --being a narrator--

WANDA JAMES: Very excited.

JANET BISHOP: --in our oral history project. And I will talk about this in more detail later on. But I did want to mention that Wanda is known for many things, but also she is, we believe, the only African-American woman dispensary owner in the United States currently, although we believe there are two African-American dispensary owners in Colorado. And this, we'll talk a bit about that and your relationship to the green rush, as they call it.

But Wanda, as I said to you, this is a sort of in depth oral history. So the first thing I usually do with narrators is talk about their past and how their past has impacted their present, as well. So for the record, could you state your full name to me, date of birth if you wish, and where you were born?

WANDA JAMES: Yeah. Wanda Lee James. 9/17/63. We can keep the '63 off.

[LAUGHTER]

And I was born in Seattle, Washington.

JANET BISHOP: Ah. And I think we spoke about this. I lived there about 18 years. So what are your parents' names? And do you have siblings?

WANDA JAMES: My father's name is Leonard Morris James, Sr. And my mother is Irene Joan Fox Holland. My parents are divorced. And I have four brothers.
JANET BISHOP: OK. And what are some of the memories you have of your parents or other family members and growing up in Seattle? I'm bringing race to the forefront earlier than I thought. But I know from experience, Seattle is diverse in certain ways and in certain ways not. So your experiences as a young African-American, young girl and woman growing up in Seattle.

WANDA JAMES: Well, I was only in Seattle for 11 days of my life. I was adopted when I was 11 days old. And my parents lived in Spokane. My father was in the military.

Within a month of me being adopted, we moved to Germany. So I spent the first four or five years of my life in Germany. And then we came back to Denver, Colorado. We spent two or three years in Denver, went back to England, I believe, then back to Denver, then to England, then back to Colorado Springs, then to Italy, then back to Colorado Springs.

[LAUGHTER]

JANET BISHOP: So you were the-- excuse the expression-- you were the proverbial military brat.

WANDA JAMES: Military brat. Yep.

JANET BISHOP: Yes.

WANDA JAMES: Yep.

JANET BISHOP: And so, do you have any significant memories of anywhere in your transitions from place to place? Or--

WANDA JAMES: You know, it's weird, because when I think back on my life, it's all kind of compartmentalized in different parts of my life. I mean, early on, I don't have lots of memories because we moved so much. So what I found as an adult in trying to remember different things in my past-- I mean, I remember the first day of school, which was in Germany. And then I remember, you know, being in England at different times.

And all of those memories are like it's one big conglomerate of, like, a very long day. So it's hard for me to pull them out of my very, very young days as exactly, you know, were we in Italy? Were we in England? Were we in Germany? Were we in Denver? I don't really remember all of those pieces, in and out.

I remember my father a lot. My father and I were extremely close growing up. I remember my mom off and on. My parents were divorced when I was nine-- dramatic divorce that my parents went through. My father ended up with custody of me. And from the time that I was nine years old, it was just me and my dad, until he remarried when I was 17.

JANET BISHOP: And you mentioned you have four brothers.
WANDA JAMES: So I have an older brother that-- my mom and my dad's, my full-- well, I'm adopted. But my older brother, who is 11 years older than I am. And then I have a younger brother who is 12 years younger than I am. And then my other brother is 17 years younger. And then the other one is 21 years younger.

JANET BISHOP: So quite a significant age.

WANDA JAMES: Quite a significant stretch.

JANET BISHOP: Yes.

WANDA JAMES: Yeah. I would say, if anything, oddly enough, even though I have four brothers, I was pretty much raised as an only child because, during the years that I remember being a child, I was there by myself. My older brother, by the time I was nine, had already gone to college and was out of the house. And then my younger brother, who was 12, never actually lived with me and my father. I didn't meet him until I was 35. So I didn't really get to know my brothers very well.

And then my brother that I'm 17 years older than, I was only in the house with him for one year before I went to college. And he was a baby. So we know each other. But we're not super close, except for my brother who I didn't grow up with, who I'm extremely close with and who currently lives with me.

JANET BISHOP: Oh. In the Denver area. So I do ask a question of narrators. But this takes a little twist because of your military upbringing and living from place to place. I know, from having step-siblings who grew up in a military background, it builds resiliency, sometimes, and excitement for new things. How did that impact you in terms of personality or character? And I was going to ask, please describe the community you grew up in. But you grew up in the world as a community. But do you want to describe a little of that?

WANDA JAMES: Yeah. I think growing up in the military is a community, an amazing community, to be honest with you, because what I think that it brings to the world-- a lot of people ask me well, isn't that weird? You know, you moved so much. I'm not even really sure how many junior high and high schools-- well, I went to two high schools-- how many junior high and elementaries I went to. I went to-- oh, no. I only went to one junior high. I think I went to six elementaries, I think, that I can remember.

But when you move a lot like that as a child, your best friend is either moving or you're moving. So every two to three years of your life or, quite frankly, maybe every year of your life-- because even though you may just move into a place. And you're going to be there for three years. Your new best friend that you just met, you know, two days ago, may be moving next week. So you know, there's forever constant change in your life.

And I've grown up to view that as a positive because I think people in the military, you probably do one of two things. You either learn not to get close to people because they move so fast. Or you learn very quickly how to suss out who you want in your inner circle and who you don't.
And for me, it's been that way. I love meeting people. I'm not shy about it. I'm quick to make
decisions on people that I want in my inner circle. I can feel it almost immediately upon meeting
somebody, if that's somebody that's going to be, you know, what realm of my circle that they're
going to fit into. And I think that that's been a huge positive.

The other thing that I really loved about being a military brat is, I think that we grow up with a
better tolerance and understanding and openness toward the world. Now once again, I'm talking
in generalizations because the opposite can be true. You could actually be in the military and
decide that you don't like anybody else and become very close-minded. But I don't see a lot of
that.

I would say that most of my friends that grew up military speak different languages, have a great
understanding of different cultures, have a great understanding and respect for different musical
styles, different artwork. They read books from different authors from all over the world. They
tend to date outside of their race. They tend to have friends of different nationalities. I think it's
the old adage that, you know, when you meet somebody, it's hard to call them stranger. So I
think that people who grow up in the military actually tend to have more tolerance of the world
and more understanding and a lot more openness.

And in my life, I've been amazed, when I go to places, and people who only have one type of
friend. And I find that-- and not out of purposely or whatever, but anytime I move somewhere, I
end up with, man, I end up with black, white, purple, gay, straight, transgender, rock-and-roll, country
Western people, punk rockers. So I mean, my level of friends is just all over the map.
And when I look at my Facebook page, there's not just one group of people. They're all over the
place. Except for lately, I don't have very many GOP friends. I don't know what's going on there.

JANET BISHOP: Oh. Tough.

WANDA JAMES: Yep.

[LAUGHTER]

I don't know what's happening.

JANET BISHOP: Yes. So, well thank you for explaining that. And it sounds like it built, in you,
a sixth sense of and a purpose early on of who you were, but an openness to accepting many,
many people.

WANDA JAMES: Yep. Absolutely.

JANET BISHOP: And also an inner radar to knowing how people would fit in the firmament of
your life.

WANDA JAMES: Yeah. Because you meet so many people at a young age, you know, you've
got to kind of figure that out quickly, right? You know, who your friends are.
JANET BISHOP: So I think I know some of the answer because you mentioned being very close to your dad. But who were your role models? Was it your father? Or did you have other role models outside of your military community? Or did you have a role model in the media? Or all of the above?

WANDA JAMES: You know? I mean, all of the above. I mean, hands down, by a gazillion miles, my father is the most influential person in my entire life. I mean, for a man to fight for custody of his adopted daughter in 1972, long before it was popular to be a dad, you know, he kind of set the rules on being a dad. And what a dad he was.

I mean, we played chess. We ate out together every night. I mean, he used to take me to the mess hall. You know, I mean he could cook, not very well. But he would, you know, if it wasn't barbecue, it was something else. But we ate out every night. And just being a part of, you know, his life in the military and being around him all the time. And he just always took me with him, you know, everywhere.

And I remember back in the day, everybody had CDs in their car. I'm really dating myself. And my father's CD handle, because we used to travel back and forth to Texas, was King Cobra. And I was King Cobra's midget. And--

[LAUGHTER]

I mean, he was just this amazing guy. I mean, we rode horses together. He took me outside of the realms of what most little girls would learn. I learned-- I'm an expert rifle and pistol shoot. And I was an expert rifle before I got anywhere near the military. My father was a Texan. He made sure that I knew how to protect myself. He made sure that I knew how to bowl and play sports. And he made sure that I understood chess. He made sure that I read great books.

He just spent time with me. And he was just this amazing guy that gave me all the confidence in the world. He gave me roots and wings. And great big wings.

JANET BISHOP: Thank you. That's great. And to place this for the historic record-- so you went to grade school in various places. But when you went into high school, what year was this, would this be?

WANDA JAMES: I went into high school in September of '79.

JANET BISHOP: And where were you in the world?

WANDA JAMES: We were in Colorado Springs. And I went to start at Mitchell High School. And I was at Mitchell High School through the beginning of my junior year, when I transferred to Widefield High School. And then I graduated from Widefield in Colorado Springs.

JANET BISHOP: In the spring. So your high school years were mostly in the springs. So, was your dad also your principal-- it sounds like he was your principal mentor. Did you have other
mentors throughout either grade school or high school, with the understanding that you moved around a lot?

WANDA JAMES: Yeah. You know, and it was interesting when I look back on it because I had this conversation with a friend of mine. And this is, you know, why did I go to college, because neither one of my parents at the time were college educated. My dad and I did end up graduating in the same year from college, but [?] different ?] school.

JANET BISHOP: Oh, that's interesting. Yes. I'll get to that. Yes.

[LAUGHTER]

WANDA JAMES: And then, as I got older, when people said, you know, why did you go to college-- because I believe the percentage of kids from broken families whose parents don't go to college, I think you have like a 6% chance or something ridiculous of going to school and graduating. And then when I look back on it, I realize that, even in the military, a lot of my close friends-- their parents were our parents, you know? And you intersected each other a lot. And especially in the Air Force or the Army, you ended up on the same bases. So our parents knew each other.

So through the years, I think that there was a lot of understanding from my friends' parents that also influenced me in wanting to go to college. I became a space geek early on. I am a nerd, nerd, nerd, nerd, nerd, nerd when it comes to science and numbers and science fiction. So I say that I embrace my inner 12-year-old white male kid because I was a Star Wars fanatic when I was younger. And all I could think of is, I wanted to go to space. I wanted to be an astronaut. Early on, that's all I talked about, was being an astronaut, being an astronaut, being an astronaut. So that was part of one of the reasons why I wanted to go into the military.

At, you know, nine years old, I had it all worked out. I was going to go in the military. I was going to be a Naval pilot. And then I was going to be an astronaut. And then I was going to go live in space with something.

JANET BISHOP: So you had your life plan.

WANDA JAMES: I had it planned.

JANET BISHOP: Yes. At nine.

WANDA JAMES: Had it planned.

JANET BISHOP: Yes.

WANDA JAMES: So I'm still high. I did get that part out. So we're selling cannabis. And we got the high part right. But no. I mean, it was-- so science was big for me. And being an astronaut and being in college was a big thing for me.
JANET BISHOP: Backtracking just for the record, what part of the military was your dad in?

WANDA JAMES: My dad was Air Force.

JANET BISHOP: Air Force. OK. So then it makes sense you were in the springs.

And just as an aside, sometimes interviewers interject. So I was big on Star Trek and the planets, too.

WANDA JAMES: There you go.

JANET BISHOP: I understand.

[LAUGHTER]

WANDA JAMES: Star Trek was the best show. I mean, that was an amazing show.

JANET BISHOP: It--

WANDA JAMES: Hey guys, can you let Scott in the side door, please?

SUBJECT 1: Yep.

JANET BISHOP: We're breaking now, for--

WANDA JAMES: I'm sorry.

JANET BISHOP: No. That's fine. So you mentioned your inner 12-year-old white boy, which opens the door to-- this is another interjection. But I grew up as the child of two university professors.

WANDA JAMES: Can I just stop you for one second? And I'm so sorry.

JANET BISHOP: Oh, sure.

WANDA JAMES: He just brought my dog in. Give me two--

JANET BISHOP: Oh, OK.

WANDA JAMES: Just give me two--

JANET BISHOP: OK. We're going to pause.

WANDA JAMES: Just give me two seconds. I'm so sorry.

JANET BISHOP: That's OK. Do you want to stop this? Or--
INTERVIEWER: OK. Sorry, with--

JANET BISHOP: But still resume.