Jacqueline Dace

Narrator: Jacqueline Dace	Project: AAAM Oral History
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[00:00:03.00] Q: My name is Robby Luckett. I'm professor of history and director of the Margaret Walker Center at Jackson State University. Today is Monday, August 23rd, 2021. It is 10:00 AM central time. Jackie, would you please, for the purposes of our record state and spell your full name?

Dace: Sure, my name is Jacqueline, J-a-c-q-u-e-l-i-n-e, last name Dace; D- as in David- a-c-e.

Q: Thanks, and do I have your permission to record this interview?

Dace: Sure.

Q: All right, let's begin with some biographical information, some background for people. Can you tell me a little bit about yourself, where you were born, how you grew up, what your family was like, your educational background, those kinds of things?

Dace: Sure, I was born in a small town in Illinois called Centreville. I think it's about 15,000 population at max. I am the youngest of six kids, four boys and two girls and my father and my mother, both from Mississippi. My father was from Pachuta, Mississippi, and my mother was from Tupelo, so I have long Mississippi roots. We have a family reunion on my mother's side

that's coming up on our hundredth anniversary and unfortunately, for the last two years because of the pandemic, was the first time that we didn't meet in person, we continue through virtual. So I add that in because that's part of my biography, because, as far as I know, I've had all of this long connection with family, extended family, I don't know anything about third, fourth cousins, you know. So I've known them all of my life, I went to school in elementary school in Centreville, Lalumier Elementary, L-a-l-u-m-i-e-r, and then I…which was predominantly black, I think there was one white boy that was in school with us during the time I was at Lalumier. And we did have a mixed-race couple, a couple of mixed-race kids but, otherwise, it was predominantly black. And then at Wirth Junior High School, a W-i-r-t-h, I attended a predominantly white middle school, and then on to Cahokia High School, same thing, predominantly white, and I started at SIU – Edwardsville in my secondary educational career. I didn't finish, I had to…actually my father died; my mom died when I was 11, and then my father died when I was 19. Let me correct that my, oldest brother died when I was 19, my father died when I was 20, and so it kind of you know you got to work. And so I didn't get a chance to finish when I was at SIU – Edwardsville, and I started working several different jobs. I kind of slid into the museum career, because I worked at the Adam's Mark Hotel, I worked with the Better Business Bureau, both for four years each. I was a secretary for the City Hall and then I started as receptionist, security officer at the Missouri Historical Society, and that was in 1992, I believe; won't bore you with all of the trajectory of my career there, but I started as receptionist security officer became an office coordinator for the publications and research division, then became a research assistant, research associate, ultimately a curator of African American collections. In between time, I went back to school, got my degree in social studies [sociology] and anthropology at Webster University in St. Louis…Webster, Missouri and also I

served as an adjunct at Washington University, in a St. Louis African American history course that I taught for about seven or eight years. If you want me to continue in my career, I can but I don't want to keep talking and don't get your questions answered.

Q: No, this is perfect. So it sounds like the Missouri Historical Society was kind of your first entree into this public history world. What led you to that job in particular? Just the opportunity?

Dace: Looking for work. Because when I started at the Adam's Mark, I was still working full time at the Better Business Bureau, so I would work from 9 to 5 at the Better Business Bureau and then work from 11 to 7 at the Adam's Mark, and I was also part time recorder of deeds for the Centreville City Hall. So, for a brief period, I had three jobs, you know two full time, one part time. And so I was looking for something that was more stable that where I could get paid a reasonable, living wage and, surprisingly, when I left the Adam's Mark, I was supervisor PBX. And when I left the Better Business Bureau, I was supervisor of the complaint department. But reception security officer at the Missouri History Museum paid better and had better benefits. And so I was looking for work and what happened was the Missouri Historical Society was kind of expanding around the time that I started and they had begun began to get…they were part of the zoo-museum subdistrict, which meant they received tax support from the city and the county and as a result, the library and research center was added, many other departments was added, we updated our collections storage facility, all kinds of things were happening, and there were other positions that were being added, too. Because the library and research center opened, and it went from, I think at one point, having about 32 staff

members at the Missouri Historical Society, to over 130, right in a span of about five years. They thought they needed a receptionist, so here I come in as a receptionist and it was the most boring job on earth, because no phone call…everybody gets their own phone line. It was very few phone calls, you know, it was just boring, so I wanted something else to do. At the MHS, I'll say MHS, they also publish a quarterly magazine called Gateway Heritage and I started indexing the Gateway Heritage magazine, so they had been publishing it for 20 years and it had never been indexed. So in the process of being indexed, and I had to read all this history, right? All of this scholarly history about local St. Louis, and the expanded West, and I became interested in history. I did publish the 15-year index and I started, you know because I was so bored, whatever work I could do. I worked with publications, like give me your articles, I'll copy edit them, give me this, give me that. So as a result, that's how I wound up office coordinator for publications and research. You know, the research division, which was new, I was technically the first person in the research division at MHS, and a few months later, we hired the director of research. So we - it was me; Eric Sandweiss, who is the director; and we also hired a cultural anthropologist. So there was three of us in the research division, and I split time between research and publications. And ultimately, they were hiring a researcher to basically study African American history and get more collections and do blah blah blah blah blah. And so I'd sat in on all these interviews and then I finally went to Eric, the director, and said "would I be taken seriously if I apply for this position?" He said, "we've been trying to figure out why you haven't applied." And I hadn't applied because I hadn't finished my degree. So one of the contingents was for me to finish my degree. I applied, I got the position, and yeah, that's when I started the public research. Oral history, we start…you know, I get trained under Eric and John Wolford who was an oral historian, and that's where my career started in

the museum field. So I can kind of blame Eric Sandweiss and John Wolford. But thirty years later, yeah.

[00:10:11.00] Q: And you've had a few other stops in the last thirty years. Can you talk about your career trajectory and the places you've been in, positions you held since the Missouri Historical Society?

Dace: Sure, after I left Missouri Historical Society, or after the separation with Missouri Historical Society is a better way of putting it, I worked part time actually at the art museum here in St. Louis, in the education department. I left MoHis in 2008 and then 2010, I was in Chicago at the DuSable Museum as collections manager. I was in Chicago for a couple of years and then I got the position of project manager at the Mississippi Civil Rights Museum. The ground hadn't been broken, there was still a parking lot that was being used for the Mississippi Department of Archives and History by the time I got there. So I was in Mississippi for three years and I can say it was a very interesting adventure. Left there and came back to St. Louis where we opened the National Blues Museum here in St. Louis. Stayed here for a couple of years, and it was my intention of staying in St. Louis but in the time that I was there, the executive director, who was Dion Brown, who had prior been the executive director of the B.B. King Museum in Indianola, he got the position of executive director at the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, and he asked me to, after he had been there a few months, to come and be his deputy director in Cincinnati and I said no. And then he called again a couple weeks later, and I said no. Then he finally called with…I think actually, initially, he had offered me the position of collections director, director of collections and exhibits or

something like that. But finally, I said okay, and I went to Cincinnati. I was there for about eighteen months, and then after that separation in December 2019…yeah, right before the pandemic, came back home in January 2020, everything shut down. Things kind of went a little crazy, and so I was, I was actually supposed to head to another area for a position and that position is still in postponement. I was really thought I would just be in St. Louis for two months; it was funny because when I did my storage unit, they said well if you'll be here for three months, we can give you a discount. Like "no, I won't be in St. Louis for three months. I already know I'm headed to Wisconsin." Well then everything shut down. But anyway, so I stayed here, worked on a couple of consulting projects, and then this position, which is executive director at St. Louis ArtWorks, finally opened back up and I started here in March of this year. March 29, 2020.

Q: For our purposes, then of course at Jackson State and in Mississippi, I was wondering if you might talk a little bit more about your work as the project manager with the Mississippi Civil Rights Museum, which is how we got to know each other for the first time.

Dace: We got a chance to meet. I've missed a lot of people that I've met in Mississippi. I miss hanging with you and with your mother, was the nicest person in the world. And, you know, being there was interesting because, like I said, I got a strong family history in Mississippi. I was more in the Tupelo area that I'd spend time in. But in Jackson, working at the Mississippi Civil Rights Museum…I'll say this, let me preface this: I was not the right person to be the director of the Mississippi Civil Rights Museum, and that's because there is a difference in terms of my mentality, ideology, and from where I come from, than what I think they needed as

a director. So I think it was really perfect that I left prior to the museum opening. But however, having met some of the civil rights activists, many of the civil rights activists, that I met…you know, the experience, I can't tell you how grateful I am. If you remember, I was there during the time the 50th anniversary of Freedom Summer, the 50th anniversary of the murder of Medgar Evers, the 60th anniversary of the murder of Emmett Till, all of these big events that were coming up, and so, as a result, all of these civil rights activists were coming back to Mississippi. We had all of these different events, all of these conventions, all of these reasons to get together and so, I mean, I think about it all the time. Being in the in the same sphere and talking to Julian Bond, John Lewis, Bob Moses, Dave Dennis, all of those, and as well as all sitting down and talking to the individuals from Mississippi who went through the Civil Rights Movement. Who was beat, who was jailed, who was in prison…cried with them, being emotionally engage with them and learn it firsthand. To be able to sit…and I tell everybody the story, my first year there I spent Christmas dinner, I had with the Evers family. And I remember walking into the house, and I had dessert and I went in and told Reena, “What do you need me to do?” She said, “I want you to go into the living room and sit with your momma. It's your time to watch her, it’s your time to be with her.” “No, what else we need me to do?” “You go talk to your mother.” So, I went in there, and Mrs. Evers was sitting in a chair, and I sat on the floor in front of her because there was no chair by her. And so, we talked for a little while then she said “baby, go get you a chair, don’t sit down there,” and I said no, I’m fine “No, go get you a chair.” I said no, she kept insisting. I said, “you don't have a clue who you are, do you?” She said “what do you mean? I know who I am.” For the rest of my life, I can tell people I sat at the knee of Myrlie Evers.” “Oh, I ain't nobody but Myrlie.” I’m like, you don’t get it. And so, even now, I think about that moment, because…and I say that because of somebody from my

experience, I had studied the Evers family I had studied about them my entire life, Medgar Evers had been part of the course work for my students at Washington University, I've looked at the pictures of them at the funeral. They've been part of my whole life, and then for me to be there, sitting and talking to Mrs. Evers and getting to know them on a personal basis…yeah, it's something I wouldn't give for the world. But being able to help to construct that museum and walk through for the first time, when we had our conference there three years ago, I think it was, and see in some of the artifacts that I was thankful to be able to bring in, reading storyline that I helped to craft and incorporate, having worked with the design team and everybody, and seeing it come into play, seeing it in its reality, it does a body good. Let's just say that, it does a body good.

Q: What do you do on a day-to-day basis now in your role as executive director of St. Louis ArtWorks?

Dace: We actually work with young people aged 14 to 19. We hire them as apprentices, and we partner them with teaching artists. It's a job training opportunity and a art skill program. We hire them throughout the year: summer, spring, and fall; and last summer we had over sixty students that we worked with directly in our building. This summer we had six different programs going at the same time. They painted a mural in St. Louis which is right down the street, beautiful mural; they also painted, another group, developed… we had these potters, there were these big concrete potters that people put in the street to block traffic, and so one of the neighborhoods commissioned us to paint those potters. We worked with another organization in North St. Louis to work on violence prevention, so our role was to develop

jewelry that focused on violence prevention. We also were commissioned by a county government, St. Louis County police department, to paint murals to be placed on abandoned buildings in an area called Castle Point here in St. Louis County, so we did those murals. We also were hired by a law firm to create their holiday card, so we created the holiday card, so it's you know, being able to be around, I mean the work…as I was telling you before we started recording, the paintings, everything you see behind me are paintings that our youth did this summer, and they do some amazing work, I mean they really do some amazing work. So, at the end of each season, we have a summer sale and I have to stop buying everything, that's my biggest problem is that I go through and I buy. Because I want to have it as part of my collection and I also wanted…like I say, whoever I meet with, whoever comes into my office, I want to show them what our youth can do, because we're always talking about what the bad things that they're doing. But it's a nonprofit organization, so what do I do on a day-to-day basis? I'm trying to find money. I'm trying to find money to make sure that this place stays afloat because it's been around for twenty-six years, this is our twenty-sixth year, and we have a great location that's kind of on the border of St. Louis city and St. Louis County, we service. kids from the entire metropolitan area, we also provide life skills, so we bring in people to mentor them on Fridays. We had HIV/AIDS training, we had health screenings, we had dress for success, we had poetry for personal power, we have financial literacy, some of the students began to start to receive funding to open their own IRA. One of the requirements to be hired as an apprentice, because they are hired, it's a complicated process, is that they have to open up their own bank account, and so it's a life skill training program that I think, in my own limited view, that if more people knew about it, and the impact that it actually has, and the work that these kids are doing, I think people would want to support it. I mean you want to get behind

something that's positive. So one of the things that I've been trying to do is get the word out, let people know that this organization exists, that this organization is actually doing something that's structural and that is making an impact on the lives of kids and that's on the lives of kids not starting once…you know me, I'll say things that probably shouldn't be recorded…the equity and inclusion, we were talking about equity and inclusion once people get into the workforce and they're in their 30's, 40's, and 50's, let's try to create some equity and inclusion before they get there, before they get into the workforce, before when they're starting, and these types of programs can give, like I always say, access and opportunity. The kids that were serving don't have the same access and opportunity as other kids and so why wouldn't we want to get behind an organization that is doing that. So that's what I do on a day-to-day basis.

[00:25:23.00] Q: That's great. A couple of questions there just as follow ups. One, you mentioned the need to raise money. We spoke with Tee Jones at the National Civil Rights Museum the other day, and of course in her role as CFO, the various aspects of what it means to fund this work, I'm wondering if you could talk some more about that, kind of your sources for funding. I know you're raising money, is it granted based largely, or is it private donations? What is it that funds the work that you do, and also talk a little bit more about who staffs your organization and how it's made up?

Dace: Yeah, we primarily are grant funded. And that, right now, as I walked into the door - again I've only been here since March 29th of this year - there are a lot of small grants, and that can be beneficial, but it can also be quite taxing because, as I tell people all the time, the $10,000 grant takes as much effort and as much follow up as $150,000 grant. So why not go for

the $150,000? But I understand, I keep saying baby steps, baby steps, baby steps. So, we have a annual fundraiser and we did just have an annual fundraiser about a month ago, July 15th, and raised about $75,000. We are roughly run in between $600,000 and $650,000 annual operating budget. And so, what I'm trying to do is to not only, like I say, get the word out so that we can get more individual donors, and also, I want to ultimately create a membership base so that we can have a steady flow, because we don't have a membership base here. I think people would be interested in offering those types of, you know, maybe $50 from 50 different people annually can make a dent. So right now, we're primarily grant funded. I just hired a part-time grants manager when I came on board, we had a consulting company that we were working with that was doing a lot of the grants. We did, last year during the pandemic, lose two staff members, a communications person and an assistant director, and then, of course, the executive director resigned last year, and so that's why my position was not…I'm sorry, when she retired last year. I said resigned, she retired last year, and they were not able to fill that position until they filled it with me in March, so there was a long gap between me being on board and August, when the former E.D. retired. We're small; as I say, small but mighty staff. We have a program manager who I'm hiring for now, because my program manager just resigned, and we have an art therapist on staff. So, our therapists work with our youth on a regular basis, and I also have an assistant director that's on staff. We have a consultant, or contract for accounting, and then we also hire the art teachers, so dependent on how many programs we have operating in the summer, fall, and spring, we'll hire anywhere between six to eight art teachers and then of course we have the apprentices that are also hired. I think that answered your questions.

Q: Yeah, perfect. Is that work mostly after school work, are you in any schools, how do you engage the students that you work with?

Dace: In the summertime, it's 10:00 to 3:00, Monday through Friday, and in the spring and fall, it can either be after school on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, 3:30 to 6:30, but also it's only six hours, so on Saturday is normally when the programs are developed. We are thinking about, this fall, we'll probably have three different programs going, so we'll have two on Saturday and one that's virtual on Tuesdays and Wednesdays this summer. We are not physically in the schools, but we do get a lot of our student applicants from the schools. There has been, over the 26-year period, there have been times when the programs were worked out of some of the schools in St. Louis areas, but this building was acquired, which is leased, about five years ago, so we have the facility to do pretty much all of the work that's necessary. Some of the programs actually occur, depending on what it is, because we - the one thing I did miss - we did a sculpture for one of the parks this summer also that's made out of recycled bicycle parts, be about 10 feet tall when it's put together. So, some of the work that our students do, like I said, the mural that's down the street, they have to do it on site, you know. We have done murals in neighborhoods, we did a mural on the riverfront of St. Louis, which is right on the border of Illinois and Missouri, Mary Meachum Crossing, which Mary Meachum was a slave that sought freedom across the Mississippi River, and so we, you know, depending on where it is, they may be on site to do that work.

Q: So, what are misconceptions or unknown aspects of the work that you're doing there?

[00:32:00.00] Dace: You know, one of the things, that's what I always say, I think people confuse use access and opportunity with ability. And oftentimes we say, especially our young African American kids, they don't have the ability to receive the same level of education or to create the same types of work, to be innovative, to be creative, and I argue that they have it, they just don't have the access and opportunity at an early stage, and that makes all the difference in the world. Because I know, even through the careers that I've had in the museum field, it used to…one of the things, and one of my roles and goals, was always to bring in people that didn't have that opportunity to be an intern. They didn't know that interning at a museum was a possibility. That didn't get the word that this would help their career, and I can see a few people that have been that work with me early in their career that went on to do some amazing things that are still in the field right now. A couple of them are our leaders and in the museum field and I don't take that as something that I did, but I believe, firmly, that if you get the opportunity, you need to open the doors for people behind you. You need to…don't just leave that door open, but you open the door, you stand there, and you say come on in, you know, come on. Here we are, I want to show you how to do this; come on, I want to help you navigate these waters a little bit, I want to tell you that it's not going to be an easy road and, especially when we talk about in the museum field, I think people on the outside think that it's all sunshine and roses, and they don't realize the politics behind it. They don't realize the fact that it's the same, in terms of working within a museum, as any other business, you know that you have to pay the rent, you got to pay the light bill, you got to pay the water bill, all of the utilities you have to cover in addition to paying your staff, in addition to making sure that everything is insured. You know, people don't think about them when they think about the arts, or the museum's, or the education system that the fact that this is in addition to try to make

everything beautiful and creative and be this source of energy. We're running a business also, we're running the business as well and I think sometimes people don't…I don't want to say they don't want to think about it, but it's behind the scenes, it's the heavy lifting that has to be done in addition to.

Q: You mentioned the politics of the work in the museum field. Obviously African American museums in particular deal with issues that are often seen in kind of larger mainstream white society as controversial. I'm wondering how your work…what's your philosophy of dealing with controversial complicated topics, especially in the post George Floyd era that we're in right now?

Dace: You know, for me, I never learned how to play politics very well. Diplomacy is not my strong suit, and being in St. Louis and being not far from Ferguson, where Michael Brown was killed…at around the same time Michael Brown was killed, I had two cousins that were murdered, like two weeks around the same time. But they were not by police officers, by community members, and it was probably within two weeks of Michael Brown's murder…two brothers. But being in Ferguson and knowing the conditions of our communities, and I've always said that these little riots, these eruptions, these disruptions, it's always bubbling right beyond, under the surface. You can pretend like it doesn't exist, you can try to manage this community, you can try to do this, do that, but at some point, it's going to explode. And when I talk about, like right now working with our kids, fourteen to nineteen years old, the things that they see, the things that they live with, the things that they have to endure, and then they're here every day as much as possible. We don't know what type of lives many of them have, we don't

know what they go through on a day to day basis, we don't live those lives, most of us don't live those lives anymore. Even if I grew up in a predominantly black neighborhood, but my experience was somewhat different. I remember moving to Chicago and I remember getting used to hearing gunshots I remember when I got to the point I was in my living room and I lived in a condo, and it wasn't necessarily in my neighborhood per se, but I could hear gunshots and say "oh that's coming from this direction, that's coming from that direction," and I said no, I don't ever want to be accustomed to hearing gunshots as a day to day basis. I say that because I don't necessarily buy into this difficult, complex subject matter. These people, many people are living this, you know? What's complex, what's difficult is the fact that you have other people that are uncomfortable with these people's daily lives. It's the same as talking about the Civil Rights Movement and people saying they didn't want to hear about the beatings, they don't want to hear about the people that got killed, they didn't want to hear about the assassinations. I'm sorry, I apologize that you don't want to hear about it, but Reena grew up without a daddy from the age of eight because he was assassinated. These people live this, this isn't just a one-time, one off deal, and because you're uncomfortable with the fact of their life…get over it. That's what, for me, I think we sugarcoat things too much. We sugar coat it and we don't show it in its raw entirety and its reality. That's what made the difference in many of the actions of the Civil Rights Movement. People didn't care until they started seeing the kids being shot by water hoses. People didn't realize the significance and the impact of that until Mamie Till showed Emmett Till's mutilated body in his casket, then all of a sudden it's like wait a minute, this is really what's happening? They didn't care until Chaney and Schwerner…I'm sorry, Goodman and Schwerner, were discovered in the earthen dam. They were murdered, but how many had been murdered before then? If it had only been Chaney, do we really think anybody would have

cared? But the reality of what's happened, not just talking about it, and not just talk about it in this statistical realm, you need to personalize it. Let's talk about Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner, but talk about the actual individual human beings. Talk about the enslaved as actual human beings, because it wasn't a number. These are human beings, these were breathing, bleeding human beings that were enslaved, and so I think when we disconnect it from its reality of who it is and how it is, that's what makes it this continuation. As you know, having had the conversation with you, I'll be perfectly frank, it was one of the reasons I had to leave Mississippi; I couldn't stay. Because whereas I feel like the first seven galleries, we were able to tell the story, we were able to tell it in its true, authentic rawness. When it got to the eighth gallery, which was supposed to bring it to present…where are we now and where do we go from here, there was this disconnect between where we are now and people not wanting to tell the reality of where you are now in Mississippi, and why you are where you are now in Mississippi. And I fought for a lot of things and was able to get a lot of changes incorporated into that museum, and a lot of storylines that didn't want to be incorporated in that museum that I was able to fight for. But I knew I wasn't gonna win that battle, because it was too political and it was to connecting…and I understand, it's under the state of Mississippi. It's getting funded from state of Mississippi. There's some truth that just that don't want to be told in its raw authenticity that needs to be told if we are going to, if we really want to make some changes in the future. If we don't want to make changes, yeah, let's keep doing it the way we have been doing, let's continue and we'll have generations upon generations upon generations to continue to deal with what they've been dealing with. So as you can imagine, you touched a nerve.

Q: Deeply appreciate that perspective and I'm grateful for your sharing it here. So, we've talked about the challenges and misconceptions and the difficult work that you do, what are some of the greatest rewards that you found in this field?

[00:43:48.00] Dace: The people that I met, the experiences that I've had, even sitting on the board with Association of African American Museums and the changes that we've seen in the past three or four years of that association and the growth. The fact, like I said, to be able to have an impact on other generations of professionals, especially women of African American descent, and seeing them coming behind or following me in the career. I've had a couple of them that gives me credit for their career, whereas they don't have to, but it feels good. I mean, it honestly, as you know, it gives a little tingle in your spine and say "I did something that made a difference in this world." I go back and I think…I kind of call myself the Forest Gump of history, because when I think back to some of the experiences that I've had and the people that I've been around and connected with, whether it was at the Missouri History Museum or the DuSable, the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, the National Blues Museum, the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center… it's been amazing, when I look back on that career and think about the experiences that I've had and, like I said, the kids that we've touched in the work that we've done. And so, I think African American history and the museum field, it's crucial. It's crucial that that these institutions are in place because there are stories that are told within the frameworks of those entities and that are reached out of beyond those buildings that otherwise wouldn't be told and that are extremely important to the everyday cultural growth of our nation. Whether people want to know it or not, the stories are there for them to hear. So it's been a journey. I can continue to say that this has been a journey that I didn't plan on, lord

knows, if I would have written the script and somebody told me some of the things that I've been able to do, and places I've been…I have to go back to Mississippi. Having worked on a committee that consisted of Bill Winter and Haley Barbour and to have conversations with both of them that…what I tell people all the time, is people, they asked me "well, how can you deal with different cultures?" And I'm like "I worked with Bill Winter and Haley Barbour." But the point was, we were doing one thing: we were building a museum. We were building a civil rights museum. The ideology, the fact that one was far right, one was far left, and my beliefs were totally different than Haley Barbour's, had nothing to do with it. Our conversation was about the Mississippi Civil Rights Museum and how we were going to achieve that. It was some funny times, because I remember oftentimes having conversations with Haley Barbour and you know, he's the nicest person, in person, that you'd ever wanna meet and then he would go away and I'd read something in this paper, he'd say something on TV and I'm like "He got me again! He fooled me again." But just to be able to have those experiences and it's quite interesting.

Q: So, you mentioned the Association of African American Museums and I want to talk about AAAM more, but before we go there, you've also talked about how, very directly, your own career in this moment has been impacted by Covid-19 and I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about how your work has evolved to meet the demands of this modern world, especially in the era of Covid.

Dace: I don't know what I would be…how I would feel if I was actually physically working in a museum right now, because I'm concerned about museums going forward. I'm concerned about

whether or not the school groups are going to come back like they were, or the traveling groups are going to come back because, when we were at the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, that's a lot of your bread and butter, are the tour groups and school groups and seeing the museum filled with kids. I don't know if that's ever going to happen again, and especially not at museums that are primarily African American museums, so I don't know where that's going to go, I really don't. I don't know how that's going to be resolved and there are some things, especially when you're talking about in the museum field, there are a lot of things you can do virtually, but some things you have to physically be in presence to see. So, I think we need to have more conversations moving forward about what's going to happen there. Being at an art cultural center, community organization, we went from most of our programs were virtual last year, and some of them work better than others, so there are things you need to learn and to adapt around. But I think one of the things that we do here, as I mentioned, was art therapy, and so we are also like the second line of contact for some kids, so you're able to see whether or not there are any problems going on and you can put them in connection with resources. You can't do that as well on virtual. Last year, and then up until 2021, routinely in the summer we served 100 kids; this year, we came back in person, and we served 60. In 2022, I'm hoping to get up to 80 for the summer. I'm saying with the with the fall and spring, we're normally at 60 and we're down to 40 because we are able to distance in our space, as opposed to have them close up, so its impacted us in that respect, and also financially. Because many of our - like I mentioned - we get grant funding from state and local entities, whether they're government entities, and some of the state funders, their budget was cut, and so they, of course, cut the budget to how many grants they were going to release, or if they released any at all. There was one organization that didn't release any grants this summer, or this year. So

financially, it's impacted us as well. I'm hopeful that we're going to come out of this. But I think that, like I said, some of the virtual that we have learned that works, I think we are going to continue to try and incorporate that in, but some things I think, and as you know, same with you, we are "people people" and we like being with each other. There is a big difference when we are able to connect as opposed to seeing you on the screen. I miss our hugs, if nothing else, I miss our hugs, so that makes a difference, I think. That makes a difference with everything, so we'll see where it goes. I was thinking back, I look back at some of my social media posts and stuff and you know, I look back at 2014, 2016…like, it never would have occurred to me we would be here. I have a very vivid imagination and can think of some crazy stuff, but I never would have thought of this. This is beyond my comprehension, so I don't know. I think a lot of things we're…we talked about earlier, where a lot of us are making this up as we go along, so we can say what we're going to do next year…we don't know. We've come to the realization we don't know.

Q: Thanks. Now tell us a little bit about your experience with the Association of African American Museums and your history with the organization.

Dace: I started…let me see…when I was at Missouri History Museum. I started with AAAM and that was probably…I was there from '92, I think I want to say 1998 is when I started attending the conferences. Because I immediately enjoyed my experience to AAA, because it was one of the small…prior to going to AAAM I had been associated with or a member of the AAM, AASLH, and Organization of American Historians, and especially AAM and OAH, they're like 2000 people and you're just coming and going and there's no real connection and

then I started going to…it was two: the Oral History Association conference and AAAM, and both of them were 200 to 300 people on regular and you're able to actually connected and talk to people. When I started going to those conferences in AAAM, I tell people all the time, I know I didn't know anything. I didn't know anything, and I didn't pretend like I knew anything, and I would sit there and I were listen, and I would ask stupid questions, and one of the reasons why I still love AAAM is because the people didn't treat me like I was asking stupid questions. The John Flemings, the Pijeauxs, the Margaret Burroughs, you know those were the people that were around…and John Franklin…that were around, and I would ask these questions and try to get information, and they would give me resources, and they would sit there and talk to me, and these are, again, the people that wrote the book on African American museums per se. And so I felt a kinship, and part of it, too, I think, was we were going through, a lot of us were going through the same thing. I was at predominantly white institution and I'm thinking oftentimes "oh nobody can understand this, nobody knows what I'm dealing with, nobody knows…" then I go to AAAM like this reunion of people that know exactly what I'm talking about it up, and so that's where I think it made a big difference and they helped me to come along, they brought me along, and they made all the difference in the world for my career in the field and even when I didn't believe in myself, they believed in me, and I think that helped and AAAM is that resource. That's one of the things I hear from the younger people that come to our conferences, is that same connection is there. They still believe that there's somebody there that will listen to them and that's what we need to do. We need to make sure that we're there to listen and to make sure that we not only elevate it to a level that is scholarly and academic and following the guidelines of the best practices in the museum field, but we also need to keep it in its arena of being familiar and being a place of comfort and being a place where any and everybody can

feel like they have access, because one of the worst things you can do for me, especially when I was new to the field, is walk in a room and think “oh God, I don't know anything and these people are going to think I’m dumb and I’m not going to come back.” You know, and that happens far too often, so we need to make sure that people understand “hey, yeah, I was there, yeah, I didn't know this from the other either and trust me, just give us some time and you're going to find your groove,” and it may not be the same groove that I got, you and I go about things totally different. That doesn't mean I’m right and you’re wrong or you're wrong and I’m right, it's just we do things differently, and we have totally different experiences, and we get different results sometimes. So, I think that's the benefit of having AAAM and seeing somebody like LaNesha, who is our chair of our board, and being able to hire Vedet as the first full time executive director…I’m so glad that I was part of this team, part of the board that this happened under. And so yeah, it's been…and I have to mention that, she may not have mentioned it, but I have to mention that one of the first jobs in the museum field that LaNesha had was with me at the Missouri History Museum. I hired her as my researcher on a project I was doing called *In the Voice of a Child* and she blew it away. I mean from day one, she made the difference. I tell everybody, hiring LaNesha and this other young lady that I hired to be a researcher, they made me step up my game. They made me step up my game. I was like “okay, they can't beat me.” So, yeah, it's been an experience.

[01:00:09.00] Q: Well, we'll be speaking with her later this week, so I will be sure to bring that up in the questions. Just for the purposes of the record, I will note that we're talking about LaNesha DeBardelaben, who's the president of the board of the Association of African American Museums, and you also mentioned Vedet Coleman-Robinson, our executive director

of the board and also want to clarify, you are a board member of AAAM. You mentioned it briefly in passing but I did want to bring that back up.

Dace: That is very true, thank you very much.

Q: You've also mentioned a lot of people, I'm wondering if you might, as we're coming towards a close here, talk about the people who most impacted you in this field?

Dace: That's hard, because when I think back to the Missouri History Museum, there were several individuals that were crucial Mary Seematter who was in our education department when I was here. She actually taught a course in St. Louis African American history at Washington University, she was wanting to retire, and she stayed on teaching that course until I finished my degree, because she personally wanted me to take over the course and that made a big difference. Like I said, working with Eric Sandweiss, who was an architecture historian, and John Wolford, who was a cultural anthropologist at Missouri History Museum, and they helped me, especially John, in understanding oral history. Eric, you know, he was a scholar, and he insisted, as I started in the research division, insisted that I do St. Louis history and I'll never forget, he gave me these two huge reference books and I was to research that and he didn't realize that if you put a book in front of me, I'm going to read it from cover to cover and when he realized that I've read it, he was like, people normally use those for references. I was like, I didn't know, I thought you know it'd help me, and so I knew St. Louis history. So that was beneficial and then I mean, it's so many people…I can't go without the last few years, with Dion Brown. I don't think I would be an executive director if he didn't believe in me and made

me a deputy director at both basically the National Blues Museum and then the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, so that opportunity opened up and he believed in what my capabilities were. The individuals that I met in Mississippi, like I mentioned before, Mrs. Evers and Reena, and you know we just lost Bob Moses…and I mean honestly…do we have time for my Bob Moses story real quick? Okay, so when I was a kid after my mom died, actually my mom died in November and our house burned in April of the next year and as a result, me and my youngest brother went and stayed with my oldest brother until my father was able to find us a home and my oldest brother always had these books and magazines and stuff, and one of the books that he had…a magazine was an article from Ebony magazine, don't remember what year, but there was a piece in there about Fannie Lou Hamer and in the piece about Fannie Lou Hamer, there was the picture of Bob Moses, the picture of him is white t-shirt in the black rim glasses, and I immediately had a crush on him from that picture, so he was one of the first crushes that I ever had. So long story short, when I move down to Mississippi, one of the first programs that I go to was at the COFO office, Council of Federated Organizations, Jackson State, and who is sitting there but Bob Moses and Dave Dennis and Bob Moses is sitting in front of that picture with the white shirt and the black rim glasses and I'm sitting in the audience, and I promise you I just sat there this whole time with this smile on my face that couldn't be replaced. Afterwards, because I'm listening to them, but afterwards I went up to them and said I have to apologize, I know you probably think I'm crazy, I'm the woman that just sat there the entire time with this smile on my face, but I cannot believe I'm sitting here, you're in front of me and this picture is in front of me. So, I didn't tell them the full reason why that meant so much to me until I actually brought Bob Moses, and Dave Dennis to Cincinnati as part of a program at the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center and we went out to

dinner, and I told them why that meant so much to me at that time. So, oh there's been so many people, I know I'm leaving so many people out, I feel so bad because I don't want it to go down on record that I forget anybody, but you know there's been so many people that's helped lift me up and then that's helped me to get wherever I am right now. And like I said, people that believed in me when I didn't even believe in myself that's just this amazing feeling so. I don't want to forget anybody, I know that. Bill Billingsley from the Association of African American Museums. Bill Billingsley, the things that he would do for those of us that he felt like was this little sisters or his…making sure that we had the resources we needed, even when we couldn't afford to go to the conferences, he is like "I'll let you work and then you don't have to pay for this or that." It was just those types of things that was just amazing. My little sister Shirl Spicer, she's like my sounding board in a lot of ways. So yeah, it's so many people, so many people that I…John Fleming. John Fleming does things that, he'll just do it real quick and he moves on to the next person that he's going to help, and you don't take a lot of his time because you know that he's involved in a million other things, but I mean, it's just people like that it's just been so instrumental in my life. It's impossible to name them all.

Q: It's impossible to name them all, I know.

Dace: It's impossible to name them all, yeah.

Q: So what's your vision for the future of the field?

Dace: The future of?

Q: The Black museum field, the field that you're in, your vision for the future of this work that we do.

Dace: We are going to expand, we are going to grow, we are going to keep lifting, even though individuals don't want to be lifted. I think that in…I'm going to predict in five to seven years, there's going to be a reversal of thought in our nation, and the reality is going to be that there are these institutions that have been around, telling the truth that need more focus and need more support and need to be lifted up and those are going to be those of us that have continued to try to be active and to help our nation, even when our nation didn't want our help. I don't see this, I can't believe that we're going to continue to go down this rabbit hole that we are in right now. I honestly believe that the days of reality TV thinking and mindset is going to be shown to be a major fail on our nation and on our entire success and it'll be those institutions, like the Association of African American Museums…because that, hey, AAAM is blowing up, it is blowing up and I again give credit to all of you and to Vedet and LaNesha's leadership. It's blowing up and it's going to take the other institutions and other museums with them. We need to connect more, in terms of our institutions and do some cross programming and cross training and get people…I know I get lost in the day to day and one of the things that I think we need to do is think beyond the day to day operations of all institutions and try to build real connections and networks, and if we do that, and we strengthen those lines between us and strengthen that wire between all of these multiple organizations and individuals that are doing some amazing work, there's no stopping AAAM, there's no stopping us. So, we're going to get there, and, in the words of Martin, I may not get there with you, but I can see, I can see it happen.

Q: Okay last question. Recommendations, closing comments for people who want to enter into this work.

Dace: Recommendations for people that want to enter into this work is you have to know who you are. You have to…don't wear your feelings on your sleeve. You have to be willing to listen and able to get into an intellectual dialogue with individuals that have totally different opinions than you do. But if you can stand firm in what you believe in. there's no telling what you can do. But at the same time, you must listen to different voices, you have to be willing to listen to different voices and incorporate some of that into what you're doing. But don't let them turn you into a puppet and, especially I speak to those of us that are doing work in the African American field, please don't be that face and don't be that voice that is just there to cosign what other individuals or institutions want to do within our field. Don't do that don't close the door behind you, don't close the door behind you. You said recommendations and something else you said?

Q: Closing comments.

Dace: Closing comments. Robby, thank you for this opportunity. You know, it's so funny because, as somebody who has done a lot of oral histories, I think this may only be my second oral history that somebody's done of me, so it's always great to feel like you have made some type of a…something worthy of being researched, and I say that as tears are welling up in my eyes, because as I've mentioned, I am the youngest child of six. Allie Mae and Earnest. Daddy probably didn't finish the sixth-grade education, mom finished going to nursing school just

before she was diagnosed with cancer and died at 49, so she didn't even get a chance to practice her craft, and for their baby girl to be a part of a research project at a university means the world to me. It may not seem significant to other people, but this is something I always think of things that you leave behind and I think of having been a researcher and going through libraries and archives and finding names of people that are associated with me, that my legacies, my nieces, nephews, great nieces, nephews, cousins can pull up this piece in the future of something that I participated in, so I thank you for the opportunity and I thank you for believing in…you are also one that believed in me and you also are one that credits me where other people haven't, and that means the world to me, too. But I'm also grateful that people able to see people that look like me and people they look like you, true friends that Mississippi born and bred, and that shows how far this country has changed and it shows where we can go from here and we can do it, all we got to do is believe that we can. So that's it.

Q: Thank you. This is incredibly meaningful for me, and I am deeply grateful for your willingness to do this and participate. Jackie Dace, thank you very much for joining us.