

**Joyce Crowder** ( Farnsworth House)

***Interviewed by Shaunté Smith and André Hankerson*** (2003)

My name is Joyce Gayle Crowder. My nickname is "The Reverend." When I was younger they use to call me "Red" because my hair was red. And the people at the bowling alley use to call me "Split," so I've had a lot of nicknames!

I was born in Alabama City, Alabama —a cotton mill town — on September 9, 1935. When I was born I had gray hair, all gray, and the neighbors were sure I was going to be an idiot! In the town where I grew up, ice and snow was a great rarity. There were wonderful bushes, trees and flowers. It was beautiful to live in and to look at. The earth itself changes colors. Some of it is dark, rich soil, then there's red clay. But it was very stifling if you were a non-traditional person. In the town, everything belonged to the textile mill ... that's why they call it a mill town.

My favorite season is Spring, because it's when everything gets renewed. I like all kinds of music, but I prefer disco. My favorite song would be Saturday Night Fever! I really love sports. I truly believe that in high school, sports kept me sane. I liked basketball, softball, bowling, tennis, I liked them all. And I continued to play sports even after graduation. My favorite color is lavender.

I grew up in a large family that got smaller. I lived with my mother, my sisters, and brothers, my mother's husband, and then anyone else who needed a place to live. Sometimes there would be twelve or thirteen people at our house. I had three brothers and three sisters, and niece who lived with us who was like another sister.

I went to a small school, that was just for the cotton mill children. When I came home from school I would read a lot and I liked puzzles. I use to make-up crossword puzzles and sell them to magazines. And, I liked nature, bird watching. I liked to have a garden. I was always busy as a child. I loved to ride my bicycle, and of course, I had to do homework. Most of my activities were solitary. Pets? I guess my chickens were my pets. Some of them were guinea hens ... they had very tiny heads, so if they got hit on the head, they would die! I also had bantams.

When I was little, I had very few neighbors because of where our house was situated. But I would play with what neighborhood kids there were, with some of the kids from school, and I had three or four cousins and a nephew who were close to me in age. I also played alone ... I would bury treasure, then try to find it. In 1945 during the Second World War, I use to pretend I was in the Army.

In high school, I persistently took college prep, hoping to go on to college. I refused to go into the mill, even to visit. I finished high school and college. After I finished high school I went to work in a Five and Ten Cents Store for \$3.50 a day. Then I went to work at the Post Office for Christmas, but I got fired because the Postmaster chased me around the desk, and of course, it was my fault. Then I worked as a tax preparation

person and a free lance writer, which worked out pretty good but I would never be able to make a living at it. So finally I went to work in a hospital, and when I became a Catholic convert, I started nurses training and wanted to join the convent.

While I was a nurse, I worked in a lot of high intensity areas like the CCU, the intensive care unit, and in experimental chemotherapy. Then, I was a Montessori teacher for a while. So, you can see, every time I got bored, I looked for something new to do. I went to Harvard Divinity School after a mystical experience. I graduated after four years, and was ordained a minister in the United Church of Christ. Then I worked as a street minister and at a small neighborhood church until I became sick.

I've lived here in Boston since 1966. When I first moved here I lived in Mattapan and Dorchester. Now I live in Jamaica Plain. Where I was born, the population was much smaller, and people were more spread out, so even if you were poor, you weren't crowded all up on top of other people. And the weather in Alabama was a lot warmer. It's easier to live, and Southern cooking is much superior to here! I like the fact that in the South, you know where you stand with people, but in the North, they pretend to like you when they don't.

Was there racism? Well, my godmother was a Black woman named Edith, and I loved her truly more than my mother. Edith always came when a child was born because the doctor was always drunk, and he never got there in time. There was an old Southern superstition that whoever takes the child out of the house first, the child would look like them. So when I was born, Edith took me out and walked around the house with me so I would look like her! There's more segregation up here than anywhere I've ever lived. It's not just racism, it's anyone who can't contribute to the economy. If you're old, if you're injured, if you speak another language, if you've ever been in prison, you're nothing to people up here.

I worked with the Aids Action Committee for five years, and I took care of people with Aids. The first man I took care of was a street person whose partner had kicked him out so he was living on the street before he died. We took up a collection of money in the gay bars to raise money for a funeral. The first few years when people were getting Aids, folks were really afraid because nobody knew much about it. I've had people turn around and walk away from me just because I took care of people with Aids.