

## **Anna Jo describes growing up in Denver and how that shaped her life and advocacy work for years to come.**

I think Anna Jo Garcia Haynes is a product of this incredible city. I was born on what is now the Auraria campus, and I can walk to the spot where there place I was born used to be. I moved from there at probably the age of three to northeast Denver, and I have lived in northeast Denver my entire life.

My father was 55 when I was born, right at the tail end of World War II. He ran an employment agency in the old Tabor Hotel, and as the soldiers were coming back from the war, there had to be enough jobs to help them be employed. Even though he could have helped them, he was not able to keep his job going. And so he became unemployed. That was a difficult time in our lives because there were five of us siblings. Eventually, in order for us to survive, my father had to leave the family and we lived on public assistance for a good many years.

All of us had Victory Gardens. I remember that. It was to make sure that you had enough food. They called them Victory Gardens because it was related to the war. They asked us all to grow gardens. In everybody's front yard, there was a garden. We grew up knowing that that's what you do. You just have a garden, and you eat out of the garden. We had tomatoes and cucumbers and lettuce and corn. There was just everything, and everybody had what you called the Victory Garden. And most of the things we did in school was to help the war effort. And we were all considered a part of that. It was like you felt like you sort of belonged to something that was really important. So those gardens were very important.

My mother also worked, even though she wasn't supposed to because of the assistance and so forth. So, my older sister stepped in, and she was just like my mother in terms of everybody was welcome. We were constantly moving by the way, just like people are today who don't have enough money to really make ends meet. And so we moved a lot whenever there was a place that was a little bit better and maybe a little bit cheaper.

I could take you to places all over northeast Denver where I lived as a child. But it was interesting and fun. And the good thing about it is, I didn't know that I was poor necessarily. I had a wonderful childhood. I had a great experience in the schools I went to. And the neighborhoods were very close-knit, and the teachers lived in the neighborhood. In the school where I went to elementary school, the janitor and his family lived in the school. Teachers lived nearby and they were honored. They were just honored teachers, everybody thought teachers were incredible, unlike today. It was a good life.

Even though there wasn't very much income in the family, we still were able to get through. So I think I'm a product of knowing that there are a lot of people who live like that and still live like that. And I was determined as I grew older to want to try to do something to be helpful to people who lived in that kind of circumstances.

I went to Mitchell elementary. I went to Cole Middle School and then went to Manual High School and got a good scholarship from Manual and went to Colorado Women's College. I went on a scholarship. So I knew that, you know, somebody was helping to pay for me. And somehow deep in there, there was a place for saying, you know, how do you give back, you know, how do you, how do you give back to that community?

Then I went to work for the city and I worked in parks and recreation. I worked there. And then I had four more children very close together and became sort of the person who not only took care of my children but other children in the community, people who were teachers and so forth and wanted me to care for their children. And I did not know that I was doing that against the law, that there was actually a law that you have to be licensed. Somebody came knocking on my door and said, "Are these all of your children?" And they all looked so different.

I said, "No, they're not. Four of them are, but the others are not."

When she told me about it, I said, "Oh, well, great. I can do that. That's not a problem."

So I got licensed and I did that for a little while, not very long because then along came the Head Start program and I got very started in the Head Start program. And I think that's kind of where I ended up knowing that this is what is what I was supposed to do, making sure that I was helping with the little kids and that the mothers could go to work.

My life has been different in that I knew what I wanted to do and the kind of work I wanted to do. I never dreamed that the kind of work that I would do would thrust me into leadership in a way, to being a voice for the children in this city and in this state, I'd never would've dreamed that. I remember belonging to the Congress of Racial Equality because I had to in order to make sure that my kids were going to be treated effectively. So I walked every picket line there was, and I eventually became the chair of the Congress of Racial Equality. And we did incredible things in northeast Denver to educate people about what their rights were and so forth.

I kept that when I went to work for Head Start. And as I began to work in the political arena, I just remember, as a youngster, how important it was to reach out and be inclusive. But I didn't dream that what I would do would eventually become as important as it was for them, the young kids and the young families in the city.

The thing that keeps me going is that I visit the neighborhoods where I grew up with my grandmother on the westside, and my grandmother who spoke not a word of English, not because she didn't understand it, it was because she said, "I want to speak Spanish." And I remember going into elementary school and we weren't allowed to speak Spanish or I couldn't tell him what we ate. In a sense, our culture was taken from us and I was determined that I was going to keep it. I spent up the majority of my life trying to make sure that people had a fair chance, just a fair chance. Because if you gave them a chance, they could do it on their own. I think that any of the work I've done has been to that effect to say, every chance you get, take it. Don't be afraid, stand up, be courageous and move forward.