Alyson Powell Key: Alright, the following interview is conducted as part of the Georgia Institute of Technology's Everyday Georgia Interview Project. Today is June 12th. The interview is taking place at the MicroBusiness Enterprise Center. The interviewer is Alyson Powell Key. The interviewee is Shelena Hawkins, director of the Albany Department of Community and Economic Development. Thank you for participating in this project.

Shelena Hawkins: Thank you so much.

Alyson Powell Key: Okay. Uh, first question is, can you talk about where you were born and where you grew up?

Shelena Hawkins: I was born in Miami, Florida, Dade County, but I was reared in a little small town, Woodbine, Georgia in Camden County. It's along the southeast coast of Georgia, about 1400 lovely, uh, population. Um, and I always tell people Woodbine is an indication of what you will see when you go that route on the southeast coast. Plenty of woods. But I've been there all my life until I got ready to go off to college.

Alyson Powell Key: Okay. And that leads into the next question. Can you talk about your education and career experiences?

Shelena Hawkins: Yes. I graduated in 1989, uh, from Camden County High. And right afterwards I went off to college to Talladega College in Talladega, Alabama and, a small town girl, kinda got home sick and wanted to come back home. And so my mother pretty much gave me three options. She said Valdosta State, Albany State, Savannah State. So I kind of picked the school that was a little bit farther from her and ended up at Albany State and I graduated in 1997 with my Bachelor of Science and Biology. And then from there, wasn't certain what I wanted to do. I sort of had a love for science, but not certain as to what I really wanted to do. But I went back to Albany State in about 2003. I got my master's in Public Administration.

Alyson Powell Key: Science is way different from what you're doing now, so how did you end up with the career that you're in now?

Shelena Hawkins: I went back to school, after I graduated from Albany State with my Bachelor's of Science. Uh, again, not knowing what I wanted to do, but I could tell you everything that I didn't to do. I didn't want to work in a lab, I didn't want to become a doctor. I thought I wanted to become a dentist, and um just didn't know. So really I got married and started having my kids and I was a homemaker. Then as my kids started getting older, I was like, okay, time is ticking. What am I going to do with in my life? And I went back to school. I went back to Albany State and that's when I got my master's in public administration, with a concentration of my most interest was community and economic development. I still didn't know, you know, early age twenties, what I wanted to do, but I always knew I wanted to help people and so once I got into that
concentration, I just, I knew that was me. I really did. And after I graduated there in 2004, had the opportunity to do a three rotational internship where I interned at Albany State in the public administration department. I also interned for the county human resources department, and at the time, community and economic development that was housed in our city manager's office at that time, And so after that, um, I kind of figured this is what I want to do. So job opportunities, um, came from the internship.

Alyson Powell Key: Okay. Talk about just what your job is like day to day. How do you work with the community specifically?

Shelena Hawkins: Our department's name says what is exactly what it is, Department of Community and Economic Development. The city is a entitlement community, which means it annually receives allocations from US Department of Housing and Urban Development or "HUD." Uh, we received what we call community development block grant funds. These are grant federal funds and also funding sources. Home Investment Partnership Program funds or at home funds. Our community development block grant funds allows for us to administer programs in partnership with other nonprofit agencies or administer programs, our sales. We, I consider us having many divisions, but none, uh, we administered public service programs, meaning nonprofit groups or um, uh, institutions that are serving special populations like our young people, our elderly, our disabled person. We're able to provide them with grant funds to carry out their programs. Senior citizen. Also, we have our, what we call homeless programs, where we don't directly provide services, but we partner with our local agencies who serve the homeless. We provide them with funding to where if they're in one of their shelters, in order for them to transition out of those shelters in a more safe housing, we, we provide a housing vouchers to where we can pay for one program, their rents, a portion of their rents for up to 24 month. Uh, we help businesses, entrepreneurs with business loans. This building here is a MicroBusiness Enterprise Center and we call it "our incubator." When you think about a baby that was prematurely born, they're placed in an incubator for a certain time period. And what we're able to do is to bring businesses that are startup businesses, just ideas and a great business plan, but not having the necessary resources or networking opportunities. And it allows that business to be incubated here for up to five years to grow and thrive in the mainstream. And then housing is probably 80 percent of what we do. We administer or provide oversight for the city's rental properties. Just under 200 properties, a single family homes, multifamily complexes to where we are able to provide affordable housing in our city, and that's one of the things that birthed the smart initiatives challenge for the city. Housing is what we do and want to make sure it's getting better each and every day.

Alyson Powell Key: How do you think housing can be improved in Albany?

Shelena Hawkins: I think one of the things, our housing stock is about 33,000, and when I look, I'm just sometimes riding through the community, we'll see it. It's there and evident that our housing stock is aging, it's getting older and so with a large population
of low and moderate income individuals whose household income is less than $30,000. Some are on disability or have minimal resources. Their ability to be able to make improvements to their homes can become a challenge, and so with these federal funds, but we've been able to do is to administer rehabilitation programs. We started out replacing roofs and HVACs. In the summertime, it's scorching in Albany, Georgia, and so to know that some of our residents don't have working HVACs, that became a focus of ours. And then roofs, a leaky roof can lead to, you know, mold and mildew, which impacts your respiratory system, and the list goes on and on. And then another concern is lead-based paint. If a housing stock is old, you know, post 1978, then we know that the presence of lead based paint is probably there. So being able to take housing and see housing differently today, but in the future to come.

Alyson Powell Key: Okay. Let's talk about just Albany, um, in general. You know, we like to, we had the chance to walk around a little bit. What are some things that you love about the city and what are some, you know, some opportunities that you could see for improvements or further, you know, for the future?

Shelena Hawkins: I think for Albany, the “Good Life City” is what we hear and say about Albany. Albany offers a host of, looking at your, even though we have an aging housing stock, we have an existing housing stock with, for me, opportunities. I think a thriving downtown that's on the verge of, uh, increasing. Uh, we know that businesses will come when there is an educated population. We have schools that are, at once were challenged, but are coming off of certain lists and that's speaking volumes to the leadership at the school system and working in tandem with the city. I think for me what's great about Albany is the opportunity, the what I call a hidden treasures and jewels. For me, if you dig deep enough you're going find something. And so I'm one who likes to get into the trenches and see what the possibilities are. I have wonderful kids who have been educated here and you know, a mother's always going toot our own home and father about our kids, but I think that them being able to come through the school systems here and also living in neighborhoods that, you know, have challenges, but at the same time have opportunities.

Alyson Powell Key: Right. Kind of transitioning back to your personal, um, you know, life. Um, what are your interests or hobbies?

Shelena Hawkins: It's always, yeah, I saw that question. I was like, oh. I love writing. I've always loved writing. Even as a little girl. Um, I, I would, and I'm a bit of a hoarder, you know, I go in my garage and I'm cleaning it out and I'll find boxes, you know, from high school to where I find some of my poetry, but I love words and writing. So I love, you know, I tell my kids I'm going to write a book, you know, it's going to have you all in it, but um, poetry, spiritual poetry, poetry and words that mean something that can draw you in, make you feel, make you see what you don't see. And then I love singing. Three out of four of my kids are singers. So my hope and ambition is that one day, if it never makes it to the, what is it, the big stage with um, um, can't even think it, your idols.
Alyson Powell Key: American Idol?

Shelena Hawkins: Yeah. In our house as our platform, but we love to sing and it just does me good. You know, you can have a bad day sometime and I'm in the kitchen and I'm washing dishes. My husband's at work and the kids are, my kids are still at school. When they get home, I think it was just something as they grew up, to where it was, [sighs] I can breathe, and it was nothing uncommon for us to be I'm in the kitchen and they're in the living room, you know, either studying or watching television and we break out into song. And to me music is, it's ministry. It's healing. Um, and, and just to be able to connect with my kids, in that aspect. Just have, you know, it's kept me young, I hope. And it's kept me I guess excited because, you know, we'll sit and we'll, we'll take songs and they tell me I need to be quiet by myself, "you loud." But I don't know, it just does something for us. So for me that's, that's my greatest hobby. And, and being able to take, sometimes, the poetry and transition it into a song.

Alyson Powell Key: Right. Do you sing outside of home? Like do you do choir, professionally?

Shelena Hawkins: I do. My praise team at my church, I do. But again, they tell me you need to be by yourself.

Alyson Powell Key: What church do you go to?

Shelena Hawkins: I attend Cathedral of Faith Church of God in Dalton, Georgia. Yes ma'am. Under the leadership of Pastor Vivian McDonald. Okay.

Alyson Powell Key: And how many children do you have?

Shelena Hawkins: Four. I have four lovely children. My oldest is 20--she'll be 27 this month, and she is in the air force staff sergeant, in the Air Force seven years. Um, my second oldest, uh, she will be 22 on the same month, on my anniversary, and she is, she is signed up for the Air Force as well, but uh, waiting for a job opening in the healthcare field. So she's sitting, waiting already and I'm like, "Talk to recruiters. You haven't heard anything yet?" And then um, I have a daughter, Faith and she is 19. She attends Kennesaw State, Southern Polytech in Marietta. So she's going into her second year in college and it is a wide open rude awakening for her.

Alyson Powell Key: I have a 19-year old going into the second college as well, second year of college.

Shelena Hawkins: "Mama, how do I do this?" And I'm like, well independence, you know, I'm not out there. And then my son just graduated from Monroe High School and so he is preparing for his ASVAB to go into the Air Force as well. So I don't know how we, I don't come from a military background, but my oldest daughter has always been the leader of and I think they just watch her. You know, my baby girl, she
told my mom and I, "I'm not going to the military. I'm going to college." And so she's studying computer engineering.

Alyson Powell Key: Okay. Good deal. Can you talk about a significant person or event, uh, who influenced, which influenced who you are today?

Shelena Hawkins: I think that will be my mother. Um, my mother was a strong being, strong presence. Um, she was, when I say strong, it's, you straightened up, you did what you're supposed to do and she didn't have mutter a word. I lost my mother in 2008, uh, unexpected. But what I teach my kids now, my husband's mother is still living. She's in Mississippi, but you know, it's 9, 10 hours away. But we love the fact that my sister and my brother and has just the three of us talk about my mother like she was still here. Because she put so much into us that you did not realize it until you were older. Um, she taught me a spirit of excellence. She taught me structure, um, my mother was a kind and, and I'm the oldest of my sister and my brother, and so it was just funny how I just grew up really quickly. I grew up, she never had to talk to me about my education. She never had to, you know, even sign my documents when I went to school. I just, you know, parent-teacher conferences, but we look back at it as she put some, some roots in us that we can, you know, we can't pluck up, about tolerance, how to love people and treat people well. She grew up in the age where there was segregation. I think their high school, Ralph Bunche High was the first school that was integrated in our, in our community. And so my community in Woodbine it is, it's a mixed community. And so I went to the high school where there was a mixed community. And so being able to see how she treated people, from someone that she didn't know. My mother was a care.... She had many jobs. She was, I remember a life insurance. She sold life insurance. Uh, she was a beautician, she was, uh, uh, went to airline school in Atlanta, but it, it always dealt with people. She taught me really how to treat people, even when people may not in return treat you well. Um, and again, structure. She taught us how to be just good stewards, you know, focus. And so her presence, even though she's gone, the things that she left in me, it's still there. And so our children, the beauty in losing her at such a young age of 56, the beauty is that while I was growing up, she was instilling things into me that I can pass down to my kids, because every last one of my siblings and my children, they knew who their, we'd call her "Muga." My oldest daughter, um, you know, my mother was a young mother, and she was not wanting to be your grandmother called grandma, grandma, grandma. And so my oldest daughter could not pronounce, she couldn't say mother. She wanted her to call her mother. And so she'd say "muga." So now she's, you know, affectionately known to everyone as Muga. But I think that, that her love for people and her passion for people, she would just go and feed, um, elderly people, you know, help them pay their bills and being able to see that is, I know why I'm here and I'll never forget one of the times that she came to visit me and I said, "Mama, this is where I want to work at." At the time I was working for the planet department. Um, but again, seeing, she was like a visionary. She taught us how to see when you cannot even see. And so we pass by here and she's, I said, that's where I want to work at mom and I'm pointing, we, we're down here at the light and she said, "And you're
going to work there one day" and she said, "And you're going to run this city and then you're gonna come back home and you're gonna run that city." And I don't know if I'm running the city, but I do know that I'm running with purpose. So everything that I do, I want to make sure that I leave an impressionable mark, with not title and, and all of that, but in who I am and it's just having a passionate love for people. I know, I'm talking too much.

Alyson Powell Key: Not at all. This is great. Thank you. Okay. Um, so now we're going to transition to more of the Georgia Tech initiative questions. Can you talk about how you initially became involved with Georgia Tech?

Shelena Hawkins: A part of, I, I received a meeting invite from our tech group, which is our technology group and it was to sit on one of the committees and to be honest, I didn't know what it was about. I just kind of sat there and smiled and I'm hearing you about the initiative. And so Mr. Steven Carter began to tell us about the proposal and the application process and all of that. And so the question came up, what project could we undertake? And so for me, um, again, housing being the integral part of, to me, a city, your businesses want to know what's your housing state. Our department and HUD at our at our federal and local levels, they want to know what's the state of your housing. And so, you know, everybody gave their input as to what types of project we should address. And so for me, I was like, I wish there were, I said if I could have my wish list, I wish there were a registry to where, if I put in an address into some type of database, it would tell me not only the condition of the housing, if that housing had any federal or local state resources injected into it, it would be able to tell me, of course the tax data, you know, what year it was built, improvements that were made on it, but being able to expand to where I would know the infrastructure. Are there sidewalks in proximity to the house? Um, what is the sewage capacity? Do we need to improve roads in that area? Are there traffic lights? You know, just basic thing. And so from that birth, the initiative for us to make application for the Georgia Smart Cities challenge. And so that's how I kinda got pulled in on it. Still, I'm a bit selfish. I know they're the IT experts. I consider myself to know our housing inventory. So really that's how I became a part of that.

Alyson Powell Key: Who will benefit most from having the information that you just spoke about, you know, like knowing the infrastructure and all those kinds of details?

Shelena Hawkins: I think, [for] starters, with the city overall. I think in order for us to be able to plan long term for our future, we need to know what the state is sort of like, you know, you hear the president of State of the Union is the state of, of housing in our community. And again, with it being instrumental into everything that really touches, you know, some of the city initiatives, we want to make sure that we have safe, sustainable housing, want to make sure that we're thriving in our community economic development, that we're attracting businesses and we're retaining businesses. So I think that, um, overall, the city and its residents will initially benefit, but not only looking at the city of Albany, but even being able to expand it regionally. Uh, one of the things I love about our department and
being able to make it a part of this initiative is we have what's called "Fight Albany Blight." And even before that, we're, um, selected and I believe it was 2013 as a Georgia Initiative for community housing community, which meant that we worked in partnership with the Department of Community Affairs and some other groups in order to be able to network, learn best practices and be able to not just for affordable housing, but be able to make improvements to our housing stock and begin the strategic planning that it takes to, you know, make an impact long term. And so from GIHC Fight Albany Blight, and that group is a sort of like an assembly of community groups and agencies who are already doing great things in our communities, as well as city departments. We're all, and our residents, partnered together to, to me go block by block and be able to make improvements to our community. Started out with litter and debris pickup, and then expand it from there to making exterior improvements to the housing. Simple things as paint, paint brush and a can of paint can do wonders and landscaping improvements and being able to do those types of things in tandem with our residents. A lot of times, you know, we, we set policies and our communities and we identify funding, and I think we sometimes miss the missing element, which our residents. They are as much as stakeholders as the city is. And so in order for us to make the improvement, we want to work hand in hand with them. So I think the city overall, our residents, the state level, because with this being a new initiative, again, we get to toot the horn of our communities as well as the Department of Community Affairs, so the state level. And then when we're able to inject those federal funds into projects that we're now into the neighborhoods of and see the needs, then the federal level benefits. So I think it's, and then you know, again, regionally, we don't want to just, we want to be like somewhat of the trendsetters, so that other neighboring communities that may not be recipients of entitlement funds at the federal level or recipients of state funds. But they will be able to see some of the best practices and be able to take advantage of networking opportunities.

Alyson Powell Key: Right. Okay. You answered a lot of these other questions already. Just, you know, well, can you talk about how or whether this, uh, you know, initiative will affect your work or personal life? Obviously it will affect your work, but does it affect your personal life at all?

Shelena Hawkins: It does. I am a resident and I'll never forget the year that I hope my husband and I, my husband's a police officer, 20 plus years. And so again, based upon my background, I love diversity. I love exposure to it. And so we were, you know, living in a duplex and our family was growing, we had a two bedroom, duplex family was growing and so, you know, need to buy a house. And he was the only one working, again at the time I'm a homemaker. And so we began to look for housing, affordable housing. Right. And so we were able to buy a new construction home, four bedroom brick home, that was constructed with the city in partnership with private contractors. And that house was funded with federal funds and so being able to see someone who had a dream of home ownership firsthand and being able to reside in housing that's considered affordable, um, and being able to provide the same opportunities to other individuals. And not only, you know, home ownership isn't for everyone, but
opportunities. Um, and we also as a city, um, when we're looking at our housing stock, we're 60 percent, about 60, percent rental housing and about 38, 40 percent home ownership. And so putting people on one of those two paths, based upon what their goal is and agenda is, is something that I think this initiative will help us to do. We want to make sure that not only do we have available housing, but that housing is affordable, that housing is safe, that housing has all of the necessary infrastructure in order for it to be sustainable long term. So personal: I'm a beneficiary of it. And then professional, um, I want to make others beneficiaries.

Alyson Powell Key: Right. Okay. Alright. Well, just wrapping up, are there any further experiences that you'd like to share?

Shelena Hawkins: No ma'am. I just, I love what I do. Um, again, my little quote is, "Do what you love, love what you do, do it well or don't do it at all." Um, and so since I've been with the city, I've been here since 2004 and sometimes I feel like I'm getting older and I'm aging as a city employee, but, um, I think that if I could leave anything and I hope this will be shared with students and young people, having a clue of what they wanted to do, but having a passion for something and not being afraid of or fearful of the unknown. I'll never forget the opportunity after I graduated in '04. Now I have this wonderful degree, what am I going to do with it? Um, and those internships I received, I was hired as a planner, uh, through the city's planning department in 2004. And planning for me is something that I think that we take somewhat for granted, you know, we plan our vacations, we plan everything, but sometimes city planning overall is something that can help and benefit long term. And so being able to, I think, grow up through the city, with being a little country girl as well as a homemaker, and then get an opportunity for employment and then taking the things that my mother instilled into me and being able to sit in a seat. I've been in the, I guess seat of director since about 2014. But to be able to grow up through the city, local government, and provide opportunities for people who um, so challenge population, you know, we were wanting to make sure we're increasing literacy, we want to make sure that, you know, people know that there are opportunities that lie here, I think is what I want to do. That's the stamp that I want to leave for the city. That you can take a little country girl out of Woodbine, Georgia and bring her into a city with challenges but also opportunities, and help to plan for its long term sustainability, whether it's economic development, whether it's housing or whether it's, you know, public works or things like that. Transportation. Being able to allow for it to take innovation and you know, network opportunities, with like Georgia Tech, and be able to grow the city so that it's sustainable for years and years and years to come when we have, you know, uh, vehicles flying in the air and being able to say that I had some imprint on the city.

Alyson Powell Key: Okay. Well thank you for participating. Thank you for participating in the Everyday Georgia Interview Project and sharing your story with us.

Shelena Hawkins: I appreciate it. Thank you.