

Interview

with

VALERIE J. MILLER-COX

April 10, 2005

by Gerrelyn Patterson

Transcribed by Emily Baran

The Southern Oral History Program
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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Citation of this interview should be as follows:
"Southern Oral History Program,
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Wilson Library,
The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill"

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Interviewee: Valerie Miller-Cox

Interviewer: Gerrelyn C. Patterson

Interview date: April 10, 2005

Location: Ideas Coffee House in Durham, North Carolina

Length: 1 cassette; approximately 60 minutes

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

GERRELYN PATTERSON: This is an interview with Valerie Miller-Cox in Durham, North Carolina. It is April 10, and we are in Ideas Coffee Shop. The interviewer is Gerrelyn Patterson and this is part of the Spencer grants project on school desegregation in the South and will be used as a part of the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The tape number is 41005VMC. Okay, Valerie, tell me when you attended Hillside?

VALERIE MILLER-COX: That's a good question. I graduated in '75 so it really was just tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grade. That would have been '72, I think it's '72 to '75.

GP: So tell me what you remember most?

VM: What I remember most is that Hillside is a school that I almost didn't get a chance to go to because my parents moved. Then our new housing area, it was county schools. Durham was kind of a smaller area for city schools. We moved when I was in the seventh grade and we had to pay twenty-five dollars to go.

GP: To Hillside?

VM: To Hillside. I was in elementary that first year. Then in junior high, you had to pay fifty dollars. When it came to going to Hillside, they were going to have to pay

seventy-five dollars and mom said, we can't afford to pay seventy-five dollars for you to go to Hillside. Lo and behold, the Lord worked it out, because they changed the districting. So we got to go, my brother and I got to go to Hillside. That's the school my dad had gone to and several of my uncles had gone and they always talked about it. A couple of the teachers and counselors went to my church. So it was just so important that I went there because I liked all these people and they were all great people, in my opinion, and very intelligent. So I wanted to grow up to be like them. That's why I had to go to Hillside. I was trying to work it out and the Lord worked it out. They changed the districting so I got to go to Hillside. What I remember most is just the teachers and the history that they had with them, because most of the teachers had taught our parents or some of them, the grandparents also. That's one of the things that I liked most about it is the stability of it.

GP: Were you in any activities?

VM: It took me awhile. I was in the band. I think that was it. I started out playing flute in junior high and then I switched to b-flat clarinet in junior high, and then I changed from the b-flat to alto clarinet. Then I went from alto clarinet to alto saxophone.

GP: Wow! You play all that?

VM: I *could* play all of those. (laughter) That was then, this is now.

GP: So Mr. Edgerton was the band director. Tell me about him.

VM: Mr. Edgerton was absolutely wonderful. He was very inspirational and he worked with you. I wanted to play the b-flat clarinet, so my parents struggled. They were able to afford to buy me a clarinet, a b-flat, but as time went on, and I got into like the symphonic band and the marching band, things like that, in symphonic band I was playing the alto clarinet, and so they couldn't afford to buy me that. So they had issues there. He made sure he found out what you wanted to do and worked with you so that you could

work into your areas that you were trying to move into. Then, if you didn't make, he even suggested it, because that's how I ended up being the alto saxophone, because he thought I would be to play that and would be good at it. I'm like no, and he said, sure you can, just try it. If you don't like it, we'll keep you on the b-flat clarinet, on the alto clarinet. What I ended up doing was once I learned it, I loved it. In marching band, I was alto saxophone. In concert band and symphonic band, I was in the alto clarinet and bass clarinet. They all have the same keyboarding so it's not really—

GP: A big jump.

VM: It's just they have different tones and elevations. But he wrote the music and we played the music. That was just so impressive to me and I think it was my eleventh grade year, we were like state champions, if I remember correctly, for symphonic band. You had to go through all these competitions. I forget. It was thirty years ago. But he was always there and always teaching and always helping. I made little comments like I would like to be a flag girl and he was like, well you can be one. And I was like, no I can't be a flag girl. He was like, yes you can. I was like, no I can't be a flag girl because my legs are too skinny or (). He said you would be good at it and you have to get over that. I was like no, I can't do that, show my legs, uh uh. So I ended up playing the instruments.

GP: Were there other teachers that you can remember that made an impact on you?

VM: There were several. Everybody loved Mr. Gattis, who was English.

GP: Was Mr. G's Swing School there when y'all were there?

VM: I think it was, because that was another thing. I wanted to get into drama but I never did. With band, it didn't quite allow me the time to get into that with all the studying and stuff. When I was in the seventh grade, I found out I was diabetic, so that was stuff I had to deal with too, being diabetic and being in school and taking the insulin and all type

of stuff like that. But I think it was because several people were in it, but I didn't get an opportunity to apply or participate.

GP: So Mr. Gattis was English.

VM: Then we had Mrs. Corbitt. I forget her first name but she was really good too. She was an English teacher. Of course, we had Mr. Herbert Dark. He was French and Spanish and he was about four feet tall, had a little pot belly and one leg was shorter than the other, so he kind of walked on his tippy-toes. To me, now we would say he needed speech therapy because he talked with a lisp, but he was so wonderful with the French and the Spanish. It was just so amazing that he knew both French and Spanish fluently. I chose Spanish and I got awards and everything. He was at Shephard Junior High when I first started and then he eventually moved over to Hillside.

Then my other favorite is Mr. Alston. We always called him Prop because he was such a professor. He was one of the assistant principals. He could walk into any classroom and immediately, everyone knew that they had to pay attention and they had to give him his respect, because he was a man that earned respect throughout the school, through our parents, our grandparents, and our aunts and uncles, who all talked about Prop when they were in school. It was just so impressive that here was a man that could walk into any classroom, no matter what, and take over and start teaching.

GP: Really?

VM: If the teacher wasn't there, he could teach that class.

GP: That is impressive.

VM: Any class, if it was the sciences, math, English, history. He walked into any class. He would start talking to the teacher. That was so impressive. It just gave you such

pride. Of course at that age, (), you know. But as we got older or something, we learned to be, I've learned to appreciate.

GP: Since you're talking about the teachers, do you remember them telling you certain things? Do you remember certain messages about the kind of person you were going to be or what they expected from you?

VM: One of my teachers I forgot to put on there was Mrs. Cousins. She was our black history teacher. Pam Grier is her cousin. So we got a lot of history about Aunt Flossie Mae and her family and how they grew up, and the history of black people and what they had done to make America be America. But of course, the credit was not given to us, but there were so many things we learned, about the stoplight being invented by a black man, and different things like that. That was basically her message, was always this is our history that you aren't being taught. This is what you can do also. It was always you can do this. Why are you not applying yourself to do this because you can do it? All you need to do is focus. All you need to do is just do it. Stop saying I can't. Get rid of that "I can't" in your vocabulary.

GP: So can you tell me a little bit about what it was like to live in Durham, like where did you grow up? You say that you all moved and I'm not from Durham, although I've been living here for awhile. So I'm still getting the bottom and East End and all that stuff; I get confused by all that. So kind of give me a picture of what everything was like.

VM: I've always been in southern Durham.

GP: Is this southern Durham?

VM: This is southern Durham. I grew up in Mutual Hights Apartments until sixth grade, and that's on Fayetteville Street. You know where Fayetteville Street and Cornwallis start?

GP: Uh huh.

VM: Those are Fayetteville Street apartments—

GP: They're white?

VM: Mmm hmm. And there's a cemetery right across and so we were in the projects, which then was a positive thing.

GP: Mutual Street?

VM: Mutual Hights Apartments. Mutual Hights Projects, I think, might have been the official name. Then we left there and then in the sixth grade is when Martin Luther King had been assassinated, because when we were moving, you had the curfew and had to be in the house by seven.

GP: Yeah, I heard about that a little bit.

VM: We had all kinds of stuff going on. We were in the process of moving into our house. My mom and dad purchased the house which is right behind Beachwood Cemetery in Forestview Hights, which is behind Fisher Hights. This is where my parents are still living today.

GP: Oh are they?

VM: Uh huh. Then you could walk to school. You didn't have to worry about, () my mom and dad took us to school every morning and we walked home afterwards, my brother and I. He was two years behind me because of where his birthday fell in (). I had gotten in a little bit early. I kind of cheated. I got in in first grade. Then we had Scarborough Nursery School, which was also black only, and they had first grade there so I went to first grade there. So when I went to Fayetteville Street School, I was there for three days in the first grade and then they moved me to the second grade. So everybody started

rumoring about "she's smart, she's (), she must be smart." So I had to live up to that and I really wasn't. I had to live up to that all the way through.

In high school, I was next to the youngest, and I think there was one other young lady, Andrea Green, who was younger than me in the twelfth grade. We were both seventeen instead of being eighteen like everybody else. She was in the band with me also and we all went through. Her dad worked at North Carolina Mutual and my mom was at North Carolina Mutual. It was just so much history in Durham. I went to White Rock Baptist Church and so we always learned about the history of Durham and the Hayti area and where all the black businesses where. Even in the 40s and 50s, that was something really to be held up, because you didn't have black-owned businesses then. It was just so much history in Durham and especially in this area, because Central is in southern Durham, and then where I grew up, and a lot of my teachers stayed in that area too.

GP: So in the church they talked about all this kind of stuff too?

VM: Mmm hmm. I had a minister that was really big on history, especially African-American history. We had a lot of that. () and I went to the same church and there were so many of us that I remember from high school, and their parents and their family. Everybody went to Hillside.

GP: So everybody, if you were black in Durham you went to Hillside?

VM: Mmm hmm.

GP: So what kind of things did you and your friends do when you were in high school?

VM: Study, band, study, band, study, band. (laughter) I mean my senior year in 1975, it was such a big thing because you always, as a senior, you have senior skip day. Of course, they tell you "you better not do it" and if you do it, you could get in trouble and all

this stuff. Of course, students always do it and we planned it. Our teacher, Mr. Gattis, had told us how wonderful he thought it was that we were able to all come together as a unit to plan something so successful. I think if one or two students--. And this was black and white, everybody skipped and we went to Duke Park and we had a picnic and played frisbee and everything was just so perfectly planned, but a lot of the stuff like that, I didn't really get to participate in because I was like no, my mama will find out. My mama will find out. My daddy will find out, nooo. I was not a risk taker.

GP: Right, I understand.

VM: So that's why it was really good too, because a lot of my friends were risk takers and I wasn't. We kind of supported each other while we were taking our risks. Most of it was all school and band, school and band. I didn't really participate in any of the other extracurricular activities. I always wanted to be in drama, I wanted to be in the choir, but I can't carry a note in a bucket and acting, I just, I have a phobia about being out front. So I couldn't make myself do that. I wanted to be a cheerleader. I wanted to be a majorette. I wanted to be a flag girl.

GP: I was a flag girl.

VM: But you had to be out front. (laughter) So you accomplished your goal.

GP: Well I was in the back the first year I was a flag girl, then I could get myself together. Okay, so you were talking about your class and it sounds like you had a really tight class in 1975. I heard you say "black and white together." So *Brown vs. Board* was in 1954. Some of the other people that I've interviewed, like in the mid-60s, said that there wasn't really an impact on Hillside. There weren't white students even in 1965. Now you graduated in 1975 and you were there for three years. Did you see, do you feel that Hillside changed in any way because of school desegregation?

VM: I think so. By then, there was definitely integration.

GP: Okay, so there were white students there.

VM: There were definitely white students there. I know a couple of them moved in the band and there were some of us in the band, black and white. We were all like best friends. They picked us up, we picked them up going to band engagements or where we had to perform at the games, going to the games and (). Of course, the white parents gave their children cars, right?

GP: Of course.

VM: And a lot of the black students had cars too, since () was in the '70s and we hadn't quite gotten to where we are now, where every student has a car. We were able to get a ride from each other and everything. But there were definitely white students and there were quite a few.

GP: What was the feeling about having them there?

VM: I think to me, I never was on the opposite side of it, there were issues that would come up. Students would have problems or little arguments and stuff. That happened with black and black, and white and white. We had several students that were gay. That was—

GP: Scandalous, I'm sure, in the mid-'70s.

VM: Very much so. They dressed as females and came to school. But we had a lot of differences, but we were pretty much, as far I know and as I can remember, we were receptive of the differences. They were different but you know. There were fights in school, but it was high school so there were going to be fights and things like that, disagreements and stuff.

GP: But you don't remember there being a huge amount of racial hostility in the school?

VM: I don't.

GP: Do you remember any of the white students complaining about having to be there, about having to go?

VM: I don't. I wasn't in the area if they did. In conversations I had with my friends and stuff, it was never really an issue. Like I said, I think by being in the band, the ones that we knew, because I remember there was an issue of a student and I think he was, I guess, sort of Iranian or something like that, and he had made a comment to one of the other ladies in my classroom. She went to class. She came in and he grabbed his book and moved it to the side. She said, you're just as black as me and put her arm over next to his arm and said, look it, you're just as black as me, so don't be acting like you're not black, because you ain't nothing but black. He didn't say anything. He just kind of turned. But you know, little incidents and stuff like that that happened, but as far as there being like racial discord, having meetings and things like that, there wasn't anything that I can recall.

GP: Do you recall things that had always been a part of Hillside changing in any way? So like the band, did the band change its style once white students were integrated? Did the cheerleaders change their style once there—I'm assuming there were white cheerleaders too. Did the activities, the stuff that makes Hillside Hillside, did any of that change or were the white students, did they just become assimilated into the black culture of Hillside?

VM: I think a lot of that did happen where they kind of became assimilated to us. Some of it may have changed, but I wasn't really aware of a lot of it, because like I say, I didn't involved in a lot of extracurricular activities. But our cheerleaders were still the

cheerleaders. They weren't doing all this standing on each other's shoulders and hold each other and flip up in the air. We're at Hillside, we're black, and we're not trying to stand on somebody's shoulder and flip over in the air. I can't even remember the cheers now, but they were your typical high school cheers that you had, especially for the black schools. I always remember the movie with Goldie Hawn, when she was the coach of a football team at a lower-income black—

GP: And the black cheerleaders, uh huh, that was Hillside?

VM: That was Hillside. They were rocking. That was Hillside.

GP: Okay, I understand.

VM: Now today, I have a niece that's at Jordan High School. Her biggest fear is that, she's a cheerleader, and they do all that up-in-the-air stuff and flipping and flipping over and all kinds of cartwheels and things. So when she said, we're playing Hillside. Aunt Valerie, are you coming? I need some support. I said, why do you need support? She said, because they're going to be rocking and you know what we're going to be doing. I said, well you know you guys are really professional at what you do and stuff, and you just have to have confidence in that. She said, uh uh. They're going to show us up. They're going to break it down and we're going to be over looking like white people. I said, well Ashley, you are at a white school, because Jordan was the white high school when I was growing up. There were black students there, but it was typically your white high school.

GP: Jordan was the white one?

VM: Mmm hmm.

GP: Hillside was the black one.

VM: That was the black.

GP: What was Durham High?

VM: Durham High was white.

GP: Okay.

VM: Then they integrated, and so there were black students at these schools. But I think for them, it may have been a little more racial disharmony, because it was a white high school, where Hillside was the black high school. The white ones were being shipped into Hillside, so I think we had a stronger, with the teachers and everything, and you had white teachers and stuff too, but the majority of the teachers were still African-American when I was there. The principal was black. The assistant principal was black. The counselors were black. You still had your black foundation.

GP: I'm trying to think about what you just said, in terms of you said it still had a really strong black foundation and black culture. Were you still getting those same messages about who you are as a black person?

VM: I think so. Let me say, that was something that was really important when we had our black history, because a lot of schools didn't have black history as a course, but Hillside did have that.

GP: So you got those messages there?

VM: Mmm hmm. And you got it among your teachers and stuff too, especially when you have your one-on-one.

GP: Do you remember school desegregation having any impact on your family at all, or integration? Because this is mid-'70s, MLK was shot and all this stuff. Do you remember their being discussions in your house about "don't go downtown" () or that kind of stuff?

VM: See the main thing I remember was, like I say, when we were moving. I was in the sixth grade then, and that's when Martin Luther King had been assassinated. There was the curfew and everything and fires and different things—

GP: In Durham?

VM: Mmm hmm, and burning and all that type of stuff happening, because people were fighting against his assassination and everything. But other than that, I remember my mom and my aunts and my uncles always talked about when they were in school and how they were being spit out, as they had to walk to school and the white kids were on the bus riding to school, and they would spit at them and stuff like that. So there were a lot of experiences that my mom and dad went through that I didn't have to go through. Because I had several friends that were white, and they never, you know of course you have your typical black family Holy Grail law book of the Bible "don't marry across race lines."

But then eventually, because my mother's father was a minister, and her mother, my grandmother, was really a rock. She always tried to teach us of equality and not thinking you're better than someone else, but judging people as people, not by the color of their skin. She, I know, would have had much more of a hard time with race issues, because when my grandmother was coming up, that was in the '20s and '30s. There definitely wasn't any crossing of the races or anything. My mother, she didn't have too much of it either, but as integration came, she seemed to have dealt with it very well and we did.

GP: So why do you think Hillside is such a unique school?

VM: That's a very good question. I don't really know. The only thing I can think of is, and this is a discussion we've had several times in my husband's family and () my husband's family, he grew up in Mt. Airy, which is—

GP: Mayberry.

VM: Mayberry. His grandfather and his aunts and his uncles, they owned a black school. They were taught in the black school, and then eventually they had to go to the white school and stuff like that. We've always had that feeling or conversation over the years that integration was one of the worst things that happened to us as a black race, because a lot of our children now aren't getting that push that the black teachers, because the white teachers think we can't do, so they don't push our kids to say you can do this. Why are you not doing this? Why don't you work on this project and get some extra points? Whereas our teachers, the black teachers at Hillside, pushed us and put us in these special groups and suggested certain things and gave you power of suggestion, just saying I remember your mama. I remember your daddy. I remember your daddy's family. I know them. You don't want me to have to call your grandma. So you had that attachment from (), but the past, not the present but the past. They knew your family.

I know I remember my next-door neighbor, she's a retired teacher from the Durham school system, and she was telling me about how when she was a teacher at the beginning of the school year, during the summer, they got information on who their students were going to be in their classes. Their job was to go and visit each of the homes to see where the child was coming from, what was going on in the homes, because they knew that each child, it's not necessarily that they're dumb or stupid, but just may need a different () of being taught. You just can't do that now because the population has grown so much in the area and everything. But I thought that was, I said did they really? She said yes, we had to go and visit the homes to see where they were coming from and what was going on in the homes. Then that would help us to be prepared for what they needed once they got to our classroom. I think a lot of that carried over for the teachers, because like I say, most of our

teachers were still African-Americans, and our principal, our assistant principals, our counselors, they were, if I remember correctly, all black. I think that's something that they had learned from their parents, their parents and grandparents. You always pass it on down. Then you start teaching and you talk to your kids or to your students and stuff, and that's one of the things that I think today, is one of the biggest problems.

That's what I was saying with the integration. Now you have a lot of, even in the black school of Hillside, I haven't been there in years, so I don't know what the ratio is of black teachers to white teachers, but I think white teachers aren't as comfortable. You're more comfortable with your own kind because you know your own kind, you know your culture, you know your habits, you know what to expect. Our teachers and stuff knew we could do it. They just () different push. Then now you have a lot of your white teachers that don't know and aren't trying to learn. Therefore, the children, the students are lacking, because they're not getting that extra push. I made this comment because a few years back, about three years ago, before I got an award at work as employee of the month, I think—

GP: ()

VM: And when I went to receive the award, it was also awards night for students. This was in Chapel Hill, so it's basically white students. It's the number one school district in America kind of thing. Most of the awards for black students were in sports, cheerleading, and music. But for our Asian and white students, it was academic. Every one of those students, Asian and white, that got up there, they thanked their certain teacher, because that teacher pushed them to work on some special project that they didn't want to work on, but the teacher said you can do it. You really need to do this. So my question that I asked to myself is are these teachers doing the same thing with the black students? Are

they pushing them the way the black teachers would have pushed us to make us realize, you don't think you can do it but you can do this? I don't know that that's happening.

Then now too, I think also some of it is our black students now have really, really, really gotten put into this, I don't know the word I'm looking for, but they're into false identity that they don't want to be smart, because if you're smart, you're trying to be white. I think our black teachers growing up at Hillside helped you to realize you can be smart and you can be still popular. You can be smart and still be prom queen. You can be smart and still be able to accomplish what you need and not have to give up the social part of it either. I think a lot of our students now are kind of more into the social part of growing up.

I don't know if our white teachers, and there are some out there, I'm not saying there aren't any, but there are teachers that are there to help the students, who really know that they're there to help the students and not for the money. So when we were at Hillside, you pretty much felt that it wasn't about the money they were getting. It was about what they could do to help us become better adults, because as I think one of my teachers may have said, I can't remember if it was one of my teachers or one of my family members, because I had several teachers of course in my family, and it was what we teach our kids is very important because once we die off, they're going to be the adults. You are going to be us and you are going to have to teach your kids and their kids, and there's a trickle-down effect. You want to be able to be there.

About fifteen years ago, when I was working at Family Support Network, I worked with a lady that came in, she was a white lady and she worked in the Durham school system. One of the comments she made too that I found very interesting is that there's a missing generation. I said, what do you mean by that? She said, because now most of the children are being raised by their grandparents, because the parents are on drugs or they

have mental disabilities and they are not there. That's my age group, a lot of my age group people. I have a brother who has a drug problem. I know his son is being raised by the mother and our parents, which are the grandparents. So there is a missing generation, but I hadn't really accepted the strongness of that statement until she made it. It was a white lady. She was just talking about in general, white and black, but typically you think more about black parents, especially in our age range, being in the drug and mentally-disabled group, where when we were growing up, you weren't mentally disabled, you were just like crazy or you were just bad. (laughter) I could add a couple other phrases on there. But you were bad or you were just like () you could do, but you weren't focused. That statement has always stuck with me. I always think gosh, you know, that's my generation that she's talking about. That's us, where our parents and our teachers worked so hard to get us to where we are now, and Martin Luther King worked so hard to get us to where we are now.

We've become too white, where like when I hear about suicides, I always think that was something you never ever heard of in the black community, suicide. You're starting to hear of it now more and stuff. It's real interesting. I know there were a couple students, because one of the students that was a year behind me when I was at Hillside, committed suicide because his parents were getting a divorce. He felt, I guess for some reason, it was his fault and so he thought if he eliminated himself—

GP: They would stay together.

VM: They would stay together. I don't think it worked. I mean I think they're still divorced. That's kind of some of that first little signs of that integration part, I think, where you kind of () be more receptive of other culture. Of course, that's all just one black woman's opinion.

GP: And that's all I need. Okay, so that was a lot about kind of what you think was lost, that schools like Hillside (), particularly since you went to school when there were white students there. Do you think you gained anything from the school being integrated, from it not being all-black?

VM: I think I did, because some of the stuff I gained, because like I told you, a lot of my friends--. I think it's easier for me to deal with white people. Most of my jobs I've had have been in pretty much white-dominated areas or people, coworkers. I think it made it easier by getting at a young age, to kind of be around people and realizing people are people, black or white, and that you have to get to know the person, and not just look at the color of their skin.

GP: So what do you think future generations should learn about what Hillside has done for the Durham community? When people say Gerrelyn, I know you've been talking to people about what it was like going to Hillside, so why was it so important, what should I tell them?

VM: You should tell them it was so important then, at that time. I hope some of this still carries over with some of our black teachers that are still at all schools, not just Hillside. But I think it was just so important that you had that history and that stability and that caring that you felt, even though as a teenager, you are the smartest one there and the teachers don't know anything.

GP: Right.

VM: But as time goes on, you realize if it wasn't for Mrs. So-and-so or Mr. So-and-so, what would be? And that's where like I'll go back and think about Mr. Gattis, Mrs. Cousins, Mrs., oh what's her name? I just told you about her.

GP: Mrs. Corbitt?

VM: Mrs. Corbitt. And there were so many others too. Like we had Mr. Lucas as our principal. We had Mr. Lawrence as one of our counselors. He was my counselor. I still see him now and he still remembers me. I think that's so important. I think it's still important now, because most students go through that. You're really impressed when you see a principal or a counselor or a teacher and they say, Valerie, and can call you by name. Sometimes, they may forget and you say, I was Valerie so-and-so and I was at Hillside, and they say, I remember you. It's so wonderful. That still goes on now, but at Hillside, these were teachers that taught our parents, because my dad went there and all of his brothers went there. My mom wasn't from here, but she had a brother that came up here when one of the older sisters came up here and he graduated from Hillside. They're from Wilmington. It was just such a family tradition and you had that, like I said, attachment and the teachers knowing the history of you and your family and being able to work with you and keep you on track. It goes back to that "a village raises the children," and I felt we had a real strong village at that time with some really good leaders and participants and teachers.

GP: Anything else I should know that I haven't asked you?

VM: You're asked me a bunch, darling. (laughter)

GP: I know. You can say nothing else.

VM: Like what else can I think of? Let me see here. Oh my gosh.

GP: Are you still connected to people from Hillside now?

VM: Not as much as I would like to be. When we see each other, we're like, oh! ()
The reason I was at the meeting that night was because I had run into one of my classmates that I didn't know had moved back to Durham. She was telling me about the class reunion and so I gave her my information, and she made sure it was passed on. I got the email

about the class reunion meeting and so I was there. So when we see each other--. I think it's so sad when you have such a good relationship, but with your lives, everybody gets pulled in so many different directions and it's so hard to stay in contact. Even my best friends, we used to like, () one of my other friend, I was trying to contact her and I can't find her number anywhere and I think she's not listed in the phonebook. I'm not listed in the phonebook. It's hard to keep in contact with each other, but when you see one another, it's as if it was like no time missed, and you can go back and sit and start talking and start remembering. You have that camaraderie and you have that wealth of being taught by all these great teachers. This is an experience that we all experienced, that we know about, not just being told about but we experienced it.

GP: Hillside is a common bond.

VM: Mmm hmm. That's why it was so sad when they tore the building down. That was such a hurt. I called one of my aunts who stays right down the street from where the old Hillside was, and I was trying to tell her to go up there and get me some brick. She never did get up there and give me any of those bricks.

GP: So you don't have any bricks?

VM: I don't have any. I was like oh my God. Because one of the teachers in Chapel Hill, she's over at the alternative school, she's the lead teacher, they won't call her the principal but she's the lead teacher. I think she grew up in Durham and she knows about Hillside, and I never did find out if she went to Hillside. She's such a wonderful teacher but she's in Chapel Hill. She's one of those black teachers that, "Did you hear what I told you? This is what you need to do. Come sit here next to me," and you're like yes ma'am. I'll get myself together.

GP: I'm going to stop the tape, but explain to me the fascination with the bricks because it's just a building.

VM: It's just a building.

GP: Right, I don't get it.

VM: But Hillside, I don't know, I guess it was like a monumental building, because this is a building that my grandparents went there, my parents went there, I went there, my children went there. I know a lot of people I graduated with have children that are graduating from Hillside, but they're not graduating from the old building, the institution that was there when we were there, and they didn't get to walk those halls, and know about which locker rooms you go to, to hide out from the teachers when you're trying to skip class. It's just, it's one of things like it is a symbol, but it's also a fact. It's so important to just have something to hold onto, I think. For me, that's what would have been so wonderful, to be able to have that brick, and put it up on display, and have some nice little, and I have a cousin that's absolutely—

END OF TAPE I, SIDE A

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

VM: --gotten a brick. Did Barry get a brick?

GP: Barry has a brick.

VM: I knew he would ().

GP: Then almost everybody else from the other classes that I've spoken to has a brick. But I didn't get the brick thing.

VM: I think it's just because it was such a monumental building. It was a monumental experience. It was something that's there that you can hold onto and have, like if you have a picture of your mom and dad, if it got burnt up in a fire, you'd be like they're there in your heart and they're there in your spirit, but there is something that you can look at that says this was real. I think maybe that could be part of it too, but I know that's probably what it would be for me, but I didn't get a brick. That's why I was like, Aunt Estelle, can you or Uncle Clark go get me a brick? But they had ().

GP: If I had one, I would ().

VM: I know, and I was trying to (), I asked the lady that I told you was a teacher, and she lives in that area and she's one of the people that had to move because the law () with building and stuff. I asked her, did she get a brick. She said, girl you know I got a brick. I said, do you have an extra? She said no. I said (), you don't have an extra brick that you can give me?

GP: So you don't feel that way about the new building? Does the new building have any—

VM: I have no attachment, none whatsoever. Like I have a girlfriend, and she would have been really great to be here, but she's in town this weekend because her aunt passed. She could give you a lot, but she graduated in like '77 or '78, but her sister

graduated with me in '75. If Sharon had been here and Sharon had been talking to you for like, how long you say you talked to Barry, five hours?

GP: A long time. (laughter)

VM: Sharon, you'd probably be here until tomorrow. But her aunt is a teacher at the new Hillside. She's one of those strong black teachers that kind of help you keep your sense of history. There's a lot of, I think, family in this. Like her aunt, I think, they're related to Shirley Caesar, who's related to somebody else, who's related to somebody else. I was like, how do you know all this? She said because my aunt blah blah blah, and my aunt da da da da. I was like okay. See a lot of my aunts and stuff like that are on my mom's side. They're from Wilmington.

GP: So they don't have any sense of history.

VM: And my dad is from Durham and grew up there, but you know how men are. All his siblings were brothers. He didn't have any sisters. I think there is one sister, but she was raised by an aunt or something somewhere else. It was eleven on my mom. It was like ten or so on my dad, his brothers and sisters. His mom was married twice, but they all went to Hillside.

GP: So it's just that family connection and that brick symbolizing that this was a real thing that you went there.

VM: Mmm hmm. I don't know if that really explains it, but that's the best way I can think of it. But it's just like having that something, then you know, like I said, it's just a symbol, like your wedding ring. It's just a symbol, because I remember when my husband and I got married and I was going to use just a ring, just that ring. He had given me this stone in a different ring, and I couldn't find what I wanted with an amethyst. So I had it set in this ring, and I said, well I don't need a wedding band. I can just wear this. He

was like no, you have to have the band. I said why? It's up to me to let people know that I'm married. He said, they'll just think that's a cocktail ring or something. They won't know you're married. I said, well it's up to me to pass that message on. I think I have a very good verbal ability to let them know I'm married now, you can't go anywhere. So I ended up getting the band.

GP: Because it's a symbol.

VM: Because it's a symbol. But often, I don't wear my ring and he doesn't wear his either, because he's a fireman and being in fires and stuff, you can't have jewelry on. A lot of times, I will forget mine and not wear it. So he's like, where's your ring? I said, where's your ring? And he'll just hold my hand and say, oh well mine is (). I said, but they know we're married, honey. They can look at us and tell we're happy.

GP: Well I'm glad you explained that to me, because I did not--. I wanted to ask in a way that was respectful, because I felt like well, the building is down the street, so what's with the brick?

VM: But now the building down the street is Hillside and I'm so glad, because we had to fight to keep it Hillside, the name Hillside, because they were trying to change that too and that would have been taking away our black history. That's part of Durham, the black history of that. The building is absolutely beautiful. I've been in there a couple of times. My husband had gone there. He went to the Million Man March up in DC and he came back, and he was volunteering to help and everything. It didn't last long. I said why ()? He told me, that's a badass school over there. He said, I can't help them. He said, they need to be up on the farm where I grew up and realize that everything isn't given to them; they have to earn it. I think that was a lot of the other messages that we got as students when we were at Hillside. There's nothing given to you. You have to earn

everything you get and just because you're black doesn't mean people are going to just take pity on you. You've got to earn it. You've got to work much harder to get the same things that other people get. You've got to earn it. One of my buddies, Derrick, and I don't know, have you spoken with Derrick ()?

GP: His name came up; I think Laura mentioned it, but haven't talked with him.

VM: Because Derrick and all of us were there, and he had several brothers, and I don't know if his mom and dad went there or not or if they moved here, but he was in one of those houses right down the street near the front of Hillside. Derrick was our band director—not band director, our major drummer when we were at—was he the drummer? I don't know if he was a drum major. I think he was at Hillside and then he was also our drum major at Central. Somehow he became a drummer; I don't know how.

One of the things Derrick always had a problem with is like a lot of us don't know how to handle leadership when we're put in control. It's not like do as I tell you to do, just because I told you to do it. You've got to earn that. That's something I think he learned at Hillside as the drum major, because we gave him a hard time, and now he and I are like best of friends. I couldn't stand him in high school. I was like, ooh, Derrick (). I always tell him this story. I say, you know I didn't like you when we were at Hillside. He said, I didn't like you either. (laughter) But now we're like best of friends. He did my wedding video. Now, when people are getting married, I'm always like, go to Derrick (). That's who you want to be the videographer and stuff. We can talk about school and everything. I think it helped us to be better people too. But there's a lot of lessons you learn and I think he may have had some conversations. I can't say he did, but Mr. Edgerton probably talked to him a couple times in reference to being a better drum major and getting people to do what you want them to do and stuff like that. I can't say he actually did, that's just what I

have thought. Those were things that--. They had that knowledge and they were able to pass it on and encourage you to be able to learn and you didn't always learn by being taught the stuff that's in the books. It's just life experience and things like that too.

GP: Now that you brought that up, I've got another question. (laughter) Then we've got to stop. You had it wasn't always stuff that was in the book, but life lessons. You also said earlier that you grew up in the projects. I know there was a broad range of people that went to the school. Was everybody treated the same, regardless of if you lived in the projects or if you lived in the ()?

VM: () because you know a lot of the people, their parents were doctors and dentists and teachers and things like that. I got the feeling that a lot of us, there were times where you kind of felt that things were done a little bit different, but I think that was more among us as students. See my other thing is I went to White Rock, and that has always been labeled as a bourgeoisie church, black church. That's where all the uppity black people go. I was not uppity and my parents weren't uppity. There were some that could be more refined and I think that just being refined doesn't necessarily mean you're uppity, but I tried to pride myself and learn how to be able to communicate with people on all levels, whether they're trash people or in the projects or up there on the hill or in one of the gated communities, and try to be able to communicate with everybody. That's pretty much what I always did and I think a lot of that came from family, having that self-confidence and stuff. To me, it seems like a lot of us were treated pretty much the same. Like I said, a lot of the students did have doctors and teachers as parents, and nurses and things like that. I think we all pretty much, to me, were treated on the square level.

GP: Alright. You want to tell me anything else or I'll stop the tape? (laughter)

VM: I don't think there's anything else I can think of. Of course, if I keep sitting here, I'll probably think of something else.

GP: I'll stop the tape then. Alright, thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Emily Baran. November, 2005.