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Interview

with

Joy Kemper

November 14, 2004

by Kimberly Hill

The Southern Oral History Program
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START OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

JOY KEMPER
November 14, 2004

KIMBERLY HILL: This is Kimberly Hill and I am here with Mrs. Joy Kemper in Birmingham, Alabama at the Pickwick Hotel. Thank you for coming, Mrs. Kemper.

JOY KEMPER: Certainly.

KH: And I do hope that we finish in time to get to have your good Thai lunch. I thought we'd start by talking about your childhood and what inspired you to go into education.

JK: Well, I grew up all over the United States it seems but probably not in the Midwest. I was born in Michigan. We moved to Pennsylvania and Wisconsin and then we finally moved to Nashville, Tennessee when I was about five, right after the beginning of World War II. It was an interesting change for a child to watch some of the things that I saw in the South that I did not know about. Even in kindergarten I had gone to school with all sorts of children of different nationalities as well as African Americans.

I was in elementary school in Nashville and then we moved to Chattanooga and I was in high school and middle school there and then I went to Emory University. I was pre-med. I always loved science and math. And I somehow made the mistake of falling in love and decided that I would not go into medical school, I would not apply. But I had so much chemistry and math that I decided to take that as a sideline - - because I wanted to be a mother and I wanted to be home -- and that's what inspired me to go into education. So I have to tell you in advance, I didn't set out to be a teacher. I set out to be a doctor. But back in the '50s it was unusual for a woman to

attempt to go to medical school. At Emory University I can't even remember what my graduating class contained but I did graduate premed. I took my electives [in] education so [but] I still qualified [for pre-med] because I wanted to satisfy myself and my parents so I could do that. But there were only two or three of us, meaning females that did that. All the rest were males, even in my labs and everything, [in] most of the classes I took. So it was unusual. I guess that was the other thing that maybe somewhat discouraged me because it was harder for females at that time.

KH: What made it harder?

JK: I think they were harder on us in the class and this is what you hear, of course. They picked on females to do some of the things in the medical class that maybe they didn't want to do or something. I could take it because I'm pretty tough, but it just seemed the thing to do at the time. So I became an educator and I've not been sorry. I loved teaching. It was wonderful.

KH: And where was your first job as a teacher?

JK: My first job as a teacher was in Washington State where my husband was stationed and I taught at an old Navy base. It just seems like all my life I've been connected somehow to [the] military. They had ramps instead of steps and all of the wires were underground. Of course, the coast being so vulnerable during World War II, this is why that was there, but they had made a school out of it. I taught math and science to the seventh grade. The entire school was seventh grade.

I practice taught in chemistry and then I taught some chemistry in Oklahoma where we were just stationed for three months but then we moved to Washington and I

taught there. And then we moved back to Atlanta in '61 and I again taught but this time I taught math in the high school for two years. I moved around a lot.

I moved to Birmingham, Alabama after that in '64 and taught in a middle school setting but I taught algebra and geometry. And at that time I had [maybe] four African American students. But that wasn't anything. I didn't care. I don't know why people did. After that I went to a private school because I wanted my children to get a good education. I went to the Advent Episcopal Day School, which is where the Cathedral is, and I taught there for four years. But I wanted to get back into public education. My children were old enough [that] I could put them in public school I thought and things were working out so I decided to. [Besides], they had no social security, no retirement because they were a nonprofit organization, being a church school.

I applied at the different districts around town thinking that I would be able to get a job fairly easily because I [taught] math and science, specifically chemistry. But chemistry teachers never die, they just keep teaching. Math was pretty easy. But anyway, I didn't have a job by August. And I had had an African American dentist whose children I had taught said, "Now Mrs. Kemper, if you ever have trouble getting a job," because they didn't want me to leave, "all you have to do is call me. I have some connections." So by August 1st I was becoming a little panicky and I decided to call him. He immediately got me an interview with the assistant superintendent of the Birmingham city schools, who used to be the black superintendent but when they merged he became the assistant superintendent.

KH: What was his name?

JK: Dr. Matherson, very nice gentleman. I got the appointment that same day. He talked to me very briefly and he took me in to the personnel director. And he said to him, "Now don't tell me there are not good white teachers that want to teach black children. I thought this is some other agenda that I'm not aware of.

But anyway, the director, he said, "Do you have your resume and your application on file?"

And I said, "Yes, I do."

He said, "You're hired."

I could not believe it. I said, "Yes, sir."

He said, "Would you be willing to teach fifth through eighth grade?"

I am certified to teach seventh and eighth grade but not fifth through sixth. And I said, "As long as I teach [seventh and eighth] the majority or fifty-one percent of my time."

He said, "That won't be any problem. Then the interview ended, which was very brief, and I was hired. Maybe they had talked previously and maybe he had looked up my records. I don't know. But it seemed very strange to me.

And I said, "Tell me exactly why you hired me on the spot such as you did.

And he said, "I just like the shape of your head." I thought it was a very peculiar answer and I've always thought so because I thought mine was the same shape as everyone else's.

So that was how I got hired and this was when I went to a black school in 1973. The principal of the school was Bessie Sears Estelle, the most elegant African American lady you've ever seen. There's even a school -- it's now been closed --

Sears Elementary School, that had been named after her father who was apparently a very great man. I'd not lived in Birmingham that long so I didn't know as much of the history, particularly the civil rights history, but he had been very instrumental in all of that. And I just can't tell you how elegant she was.

I called and asked if I could come to the school early. I wanted to see my room, where I would be teaching, what I would be teaching and she certainly was very agreeable to that. [I] loved meeting her and I worked for two or three days cleaning the room, vacuuming, cleaning, washing everything. It was just filthy. There apparently had been four teachers prior to me in this same room and each had left after one year. And the one thing she told me, she said, "Now, Mrs. Kemper, I know you're a good teacher. I expect great things out of you, but please don't touch the children." I said okay. I never knew why she said that. To this day I don't, except that perhaps there had been some incidents or something, previous to my coming. I don't know.

KH: Did she mean disciplinary?

JK: I don't know because you want to pat them on the back and you want to hug them and you want to do things that are, you know, meaningfully warm. But I was very careful. And one of the funny things I had done is I had put my desk, which I don't use that much [so that] all of them were facing the desk and the windows were behind them. I couldn't see their faces. So the very next day I had the room exactly reversed because I like to see their faces.

And they said, "Mrs. Kemper, why did you do that?"

I said well -- I was always honest -- "I wanted to see your faces better and this made it easier for me." I really don't have very good eyes so may be part of it.

Anyway, I had all the bulletin boards done and everything. I'm very excited about math and science. I love them. I want to impart that to my students and I want them to love it too. And I felt after I tested them that they simply had not been taught.

It was a lovely little neighborhood, wealthy people along with very poor people. It was a mixture. Titusville they called it, T-I-T-U-S-V-I-L-L-E.

KH: I've heard of it.

JK: It was over near Sixth Avenue Baptist Church, real near, right around from Elmwood Cemetery, [if] you know the area. Our former mayor lives right in that area now. I had principals' children, then I had some poor children, and there was only one class of fifth, one of sixth, one of seventh, one of eighth. And I taught all of them math and the upper grades science. (So therefore, I was within the parameters of my teaching certificate.) And they were like sponges sitting there waiting for me to teach them.

About the second day this young man, he was either a seventh or eighth grader, said, "You know, Mrs. Kemper, we've run four of you off before now and we're going to run you off too."

I remember his name was Roosevelt and I said, "Roosevelt, I'm an old salt. I'm a good teacher. You're going to learn and you can't run me off." I remember his last name too but I don't know that I should record that. He turned out to be wonderful. I loved that kid. He was great and when I had to leave he cried and so did I. But anyway, they went up five and six grade levels in that one year. They were just thirsty. They knew they were getting the math. They were wonderful. I just can't tell you how great they were.

And we did science projects, science fair projects. I'm a master at that too, know how to do that. And I'm not that good at things, I don't want you to think that, but I loved the subjects I taught. They won maybe third place in that area science fair. Probably forty schools were involved because there was an eastern area and a western area.

And we came back and we talked about it and they said, "Mrs. Kemper, we want to win it next year."

I said, "Well, I want you to too. Now you've seen one, you know what to do. They're not exhibits, they're projects and we can do it." [This was just a] little bitty school, [and] the following year they won the science fair. You have to win the top prize to win it and I think they won first and second. I think they really deserved third but they didn't give it to them. But they were ready. We had the science fair in the library. All the parents came. They loved it. The children loved it.

We learned how to exhibit the project. Many people just do exhibits, like volcanoes are exhibits. That's not a project. To maybe make a medium in which you can grow bacteria and then put your lips in it and grow the bacteria and see the horrible bacteria you can grow from different things, that's a project. There are just different things that make projects and also things that make exhibits. Lower grades can do exhibits but seventh and eighth graders have to do projects. The fifth and sixth grades the next year wanted me to [projects too], and some of them won as well. So if you build on it and you do a good project in the fifth grade, you can do additional [work on it] the next year. Well, the lead teacher was retiring and they made me the lead teacher with my room right next to the principal's office. I loved that job. I

wanted to be the principal but I didn't have the credentials. But I assure you, I went back and got them after that. In the meantime, I think there were six white teachers and two blacks and the parents went down and complained so they took me and they moved me to an all white school.

KH: What year was that?

JK: Let's see. That was in '75, I think. I couldn't believe they did it. I was doing this self-study. I was a chairperson of the Southern Association Self Study so [the principal] did ask that under hardship I be allowed to remain until October 1. The reason they moved me was because I was secondary certified. And the parents all went down to the board and they said that's not the one we want you to move. What they were doing is trying to get rid of some of the poorer teachers. I can assure you there were some and they were white. But the board chose the teacher that had been there the least and who was certified secondary, so I had to leave. I did not tell them 'til the last day because I just couldn't. I wanted them to learn as much as they could.

They sent me to an all-white school. Some of the teachers were black and they were great but I can't remember that there were any black students. The day after I got there, of course, it was not where I wanted to be. There was a beautiful science lab and how I wanted that for my children that I'd left. I'd gotten a lot of things. I had won three different grants. I'd gotten some grants for them because I had to help teach P.E. too. I have two left feet! We had this long hall between the lower grades and upper grades and we had mats hanging there and they took aerobatics and things like that that UAB provided. That was part of my grant and they loved it. We had no

gym. We had to make do with something else. And I got some other things for science.

Anyway, on the second day that I was at this white school we went on a field trip to Huntsville and their behavior was appalling. I had taken these children at my little African American school on field trips and I had gotten a compliment from the planetarium. The person who was conducting the scenes and so forth said, "This is the best class I've ever had come in this building." Because they were so grateful to be going on field trips. They'd never done that. Nobody took them. They were the best behaved children I've ever taught in my life. You know, all you have to do, or all I had to do, was go up to one of them and say, "Do you want me to call your mother?" No, ma'am, they didn't want me to call their mother and I never had to do that.

Another thing I learned while I was there, the parents were very supportive. The children also, and I learned so much from them. They did not look at me if I was correcting them. They had been taught, "Don't you look at me when I'm talking down to you." Well, we [white folks] don't do that. White people look me in the eye. But I learned it very rapidly. We'd go out in the hall because I always liked to take them away, isolate them. I can't tell you I didn't ever have a few problems. I did. And we'd stand side by side like black men do when they're talking to each other. You know, white men speak in clusters. Black men stand against the wall. So I learned to do that.

I'd say, "Now, I'm not very happy with your behavior." But we didn't look at each other. And I would tell them that this is what happened.

The other thing they did was, the first year I was there I was getting addresses and everything and she said, "I stay at so-and-so," this little girl did.

I said, "You stay there? Who do you stay with?" I had never heard that expression before. Are you familiar with it?

KH: Un-huh.

JK: I wasn't. And so they all laughed and we laughed together. It was funny. I'd never heard that. And then another time -- I think it was with Roosevelt -- another child walked up across the front of the room and he said, "Jessie," and he kept on walking. And Roosevelt came up out of his seat and he was ready to fight.

I said, "What? What happened?"

"Didn't he hear him? He said my mama's name."

And I said, "Well, I did hear him say something but what's so terrible. I didn't know that was bad either. So I said, "Look, you can say my mother's name. I don't mind. I think it's a beautiful name." So I tried. I wouldn't exactly say I was successful on that one but I did try. You learn so much from children. But it sort of diffused the situation at the time. I said, "Everybody say my mother's name, it's Aletha." And they did, you know, and I said, "You see, that doesn't bother me at all.

Another time a little girl didn't do very well on a test or something, she said, "Honky!" I'd never heard that word before. I know that's hard for you to believe, but I promise I'd never heard it. I said, "What? What?"

"Didn't you hear?"

Another little situation that happened was I got a new little student -- not little, he was big. He had just come out of family court or something where he had been

sent because he was not "on his way to a church picnic." He'd done something. They told me that he was terrible. But I don't buy that. I think you should start at zero and move on. So we're sitting there. I had tables in my room, splintery chairs. The building was horrible, the equipment was terrible, but we made the best of it -- I put contact paper on the tables and then I tried to pull the chairs out and get other chairs. At that time they were on a big savings kick where they had the heat turned down to sixty and you could only turn every other row of lights on, which was horrible. I don't know if people did it or not but we were required to do it in this school.

Anyway, he's sitting there and I'm at the table with him and I'm sitting in a chair next to him and he's doing something. I said, "No," and I touched his arm. He pulled back like I had just burned him. I said, "Oh, I'm sorry." By this time I was touching them I guess. And the other children just pounced on him and said, "Don't you ever do that to Mrs. Kemper again. She's trying to help you." And they took up for me. So you know it became a camaraderie.

Another time the educational secretary came in looking for me. I'm sitting in this room, a sea of black children, and I'm the only white with light hair. She was looking around at everybody and finally one of the children said, "Who are you looking for?"

She said, "I'm trying to find Miss Kemper." And it made me feel so good because she was looking for a person, not a color. And the children just laughed and we all laughed, you know. That was good. That was really good. And I liked this lady. She was so nice.

Anyway, when I went to my white school, we went on a field trip and we went to Huntsville. The children were horrible. They were just horrible. On the way up there a sandwich came flying down the bus and hit one of the mothers on the cheek. I saw all this. Now I'm the new kid on the block. I didn't see who did it. The other teachers were very aware and they knew the names. So when we got there I was just appalled.

The teachers in my unit said, "Well what would you do, Joy?"

I said, "I'll tell you what I'd do. I'd load them back up on that bus and take them right back to the school. They don't deserve to be on this field trip."

"But they've spent their money."

"Yes, they have, but I can tell you, if you do that, they won't do this again."

And so we loaded them back on the buses. Well, by the time we got back those parents had had time to seethe and were so mad. The principal came out and the teachers told her why we had done it and what we had done. And that parent who'd been slapped in the face with a peanut butter and jelly sandwich said, "I suppose those black children you taught would have behaved better?"

And I said, "Indeed, they would have. You can count on it." And there was dead silence. I mean that was racism. It made me furious because I would have much rather been over at the other place. We did contest it but what they told me is, "You're going to be taken out of there anyway and sent to a secondary situation." I might as well take one as the other, so I moved.

KH: How did the parent know that you had just come from a black school?

JK: I don't know. I do not know. And I'll tell you how I got sent to that school. That principal wanted to win everything and get all these accolades and she knew that my students, my few little students in my little school, had won the area science fair and she wanted a good science teacher. So she kept trying to get me. She'd call me and I told her no, that I wasn't interested in leaving. When you won the science fair with that school, your student won it, you had to host it the next year. They moved me before I had a chance to host it. So I came back and judged and tried to help them. I met them at the library and told them that I would help them pick out projects. I did that all through high school with those children. I think fourteen out of the twenty-eight in that one class got in the honors society their junior year and I was invited to that induction. I had one that came back from a Catholic school and he said, "They always ask me where I went to school." But it wasn't just I. There was a wonderful English teacher there who later became a principal and she was black. Sarah Stuart was her name and she was wonderful. I didn't do it all by any means. I don't want you to think that. There were some good teachers there. And the [students] wanted to learn and their parents were supportive and appreciative. That's probably the end of my story now, ask me my questions.

KH: Okay. I was wondering about the community of teachers. Well actually I should first ask you what were the names of these schools?

JK: West Center Street was the black school, if you want to call it that.

KH: West Center?

JK: Oh, that's another funny story I'll have to tell you. They'd never gone to school with white children. On Monday we got out at one o'clock and my son and the

principal's son both went to a school about ten minutes away. The children got out at one, so I went and got both of our sons and brought them back to the school. The children in the meantime were gone but they found out that I was bringing my son back and they all came back and wanted to see him and talk to him and touch his hair. The first PTA meeting I went to the children were there. I had to bring my [own] children because my husband was out of town. I put them in the library to do their homework. And [the students] started to going on out. I was sitting next to Sarah Stuart, my good friend who taught English.

I said, "What in the world is going on?"

She said, "You don't know what's going on? They're all on their way into the library." When I got out of that meeting they were five deep around my two children in the library, talking to them, touching their hair. They'd never been around white children before. But now my children were raised by me so they weren't [bothered]. You know, you have to teach prejudice. You're not born with it. People need to remember that on both sides of the line. It's not something you're born with. You either have to learn it or you have to be taught, period. That was West Center Street.

KH: Okay and the other one was?

JK: The other one was Wright, W-R-I-G-H-T.

KH: Okay, thank you very much. Was that a high school?

JK: No, it was another K-8 school. But I taught only seventh and eighth in that school because it was a much larger school. I didn't mind going to a high school -

- I love high school kids too but I like middle children a lot and many people don't. You have to be half crazy to teach in the middle school and I figure I am.

KH: Like my mom.

JK: Does she teach middle school?

KH: Yeah.

JK: You do [have to be crazy], you have to really. You just have to understand the nature of the beast. Plus I have children of my own. I think you can be a wonderful teacher but when you have children of your own you become a better teacher. You can be a horrible teacher but I think you become a better teacher when you think, would I want somebody to treat my child like this, is this the way I would want my child treated? And if you can answer yes, then move on. But if you have to say no, then you're doing something wrong.

KH: Well, I was going to ask about how the teachers at West Center related to each other.

JK: There were some very poor white teachers there. I'll tell you one incident. She was large, bleached blond hair that was down to here, unmarried, bitter. She walked in one morning with me. She said, "I hate this school. I hate teaching. And I hate niggers."

And I said, "You know what, you need to go home."

And they would sit in the lounge on their break. I never had time to sit in there anyway because I always had a lot to do. I never went in there with them. I didn't want to hear anything negative. I got tired of it. She taught fourth grade and in my opinion, a parent could sue for child neglect in such a teacher's room and they would

win. If they don't go up in grade score at all or any test scores, how could you possibly? I mean all children can learn. I right now am in a position where it hurts me terribly when I see things like that going on. I'm over curriculum materials for the Birmingham Board of Education and I do a lot of work with Academic Bowl and they send me out to do pupil count or monitor things or something and I see things and it breaks my heart. I don't want my grandchildren in those classes. There are some wonderful teachers in the world but about five percent of them may not be. Maybe more, I don't know.

KH: Would you mind giving me a couple of examples of some of the terrible things you've seen?

JK: Okay. These are little first graders. They're still in a readiness book, all of them, in February. That alone is a sin. [The teacher] has her desk pulled up towards the corner so that one corner of the desk touches and the other corner touches over here so that the children can't even get to her. They're sitting there in their jackets in straight lines at ten o'clock in the morning and the room is hot.

KH: She won't let them take off their jackets?

JK: I don't know. While the supervisor was talking to her I said, "Don't you want to take off your jacket and stay a while? We could just put it on the back of the chair or something." I just walked around and talked to them.

When I left that classroom I talked to the supervisor and I said, "What are you going to do about this?"

And she said, "What can I do, Joy?" I mean I wept. I don't know but those children shouldn't be in readiness books in February. I told her they shouldn't. Well, that's one.

Just recently we had to go do body count because you have to make sure your count is sent in to the state correctly. This lady, I had nothing to do with her at all, but she was in the school and she was just humiliating this one little girl. "Get to the back of the line!" And: "You can't stand in a straight line!" You don't have to talk to children like that, there are just better ways. I just don't like to see children berated. I just don't. I think you can make children happy and love school and love their subject. That was just recently. I've seen a lot of things. Sometimes we audit schools for materials or a text or something and they'll be sitting there drinking a Coke or eating something and the children aren't drinking a Coke or eating. I never, never ate or drank in front of my students unless I had enough for everybody. On a hot day I'm sitting there drinking a cold Coke? Don't you think that's pretty terrible?

KH: Yeah.

JK: I do, too. They'd have food stashed in their drawers and they'd say there's nothing in that drawer. I'm saying, we have to look in all the drawers, in their cabinets. And messy rooms! Now, some messy rooms, there's a lot of teaching going on. I can't say that quality is an acid test because it's not. One time we went to a room that she even had some taxidermy in there and she had a reading loft and I mean the room was [really messy.] And these children didn't even stop. They were doing creative writing and they didn't even notice we were in there they were so intent on what they were doing. Coming up to her and she was helping them and she didn't

even notice us either. So chaos is not always bad. But anyway, those are just things that I've noticed. I want children to enjoy school. So far my grandchildren have done all right. Woe be the day. I don't know what I'll do. But anyway, I even taught both of my children at one time. I taught both of them math.

KH: In the school where you were working?

JK: In fifth grade, I taught my daughter. In seventh, I taught my son. They're both very good in math. I just think they happen to be good in math. I don't think I deserve any credit. But they said, "What are we going to call you?"

And I said, "Just call me mother." Some of the other kids would accidentally do it anyway. If I was the only math teacher that was the only one they could have. You remind me of stories. I'm talking too much, aren't I?

KH: No, it's fine. We still got plenty of time on the tape. I was wondering where your grandkids go to school?

JK: They go to Mount Laurel.

KH: Is that a public school?

JK: Yes, it is. It's a brand new school, just opened this year out in Shelby County.

KH: Okay, thank you.

JK: They just got back from Belgium though. They've been in a (Dodd) school for three years. And my daughter was so worried that they would not be up to snuff. And they all made straight A's the first grading period. They all three were in the Knights of the Round Table. It's sort of a medieval looking school because it's in the town of Mount Laurel, which is a real ritzy section. But the children come from

very poor, very wealthy--it's wonderful. It's a perfect mix of everything. My granddaughter got student of the month the first September and my grandson in the second grade is getting it for November. It's always a surprise, but when your parents and your grandparents and your uncle are all there, you know one of the Mott children got it! And so it's a surprise to him and funny enough he gets it next Thursday on his birthday.

KH: That's nice.

JK: I have one more. He's the oldest one and he's 5' 7" in the fifth grade. His parents are both very tall. My daughter's 5' 9" and my son-in-law is 6' 6". Barely made it to be a Navy pilot because he's so tall. But they're both good parents. They read to them all the time. They see their parents read. They have a lot of family support and that means a lot to children. And they know school's important and they don't miss school unless they're very ill or something. I think some children take it lightly and parents just keep them home for any reason. And you can't do that. You have to put school first as much as possible.

KH: Well, we could go back to West Center Street for a little while. What did the principal do in response to some of these poor teachers?

JK: Not enough. But I've learned since I have been an administrator myself it's very difficult. You have to document everything and you're the one on trial. There were three black teachers, Stuart, another. Anyway, there was a black teacher who was a very intelligent man who had gotten his master's at Columbia University. But he had sleep apnea and he just did nothing with the children. It was just horrible. I would go into his room sometimes to take something and the children were awful

because he was asleep. I would go in and put it on his desk and leave. I wasn't going to wake him. That was not my job. But he taught the P.E. because he did very little else. He was a social studies teacher. So they had him watch the playground, [that] is really what he did. He wasn't a P.E. teacher.

One day they came running in to tell me that one of my students was hurt. They thought her leg was broken. So I went running out on the playground. It was during my prep period. She had somehow gotten her leg in one of those merry-go-rounds that goes around and gotten it twisted up under here and sure enough, it was broken. And he had his foot up on the thing and was standing there, waiting for me to get out. Now he'd been in the lunchroom drinking ice water when it happened. And every time he put his foot up there she would do like this [wincing] because it was moving the bones. I said, Mr. _____, "Called the paramedics!" And they were there quickly.

In the meantime when the other children saw it happen, one of my other students -- they were all running to see, you know how children are -- fell and hit his stomach on a rock. No one knew this. His name was Roy. I didn't even know he'd fallen. I think I was still out working with her or doing something. I can't remember how this happened. But he never came to me and said, Mrs. Kemper, I'm hurting. But he told Mr. _____. Bleep that out later.

He said, "Just go on home, you'll be all right." So his cousin helped just half drag him home. Well, by the time he got home he was in so much pain his grandmother, fortunately, took him to the hospital. So I had two children in the hospital, one with a badly broken leg and the other with a ruptured spleen. Had to

remove his spleen that night. Well, we went out to the playground and got Roy's rock where he'd fallen and it was about like this. And I had it on my desk. Everybody called it "Roy's Rock." He had his spleen removed and in a couple of weeks he was back unlimited and everything. He was a sweet little boy.

At the end of the day everybody had gone and here he comes running back into the room and he said, "Mrs. Kemper, may I have my rock?"

I said, "You sure can, Roy," and I gave him his rock.

But the principal used to say, "If you need any help, just tell Kemper over here. She'll get the state militia!" And I would have. Whatever it took, but I they were there. They did all the right things. They got her leg out of there. It was jammed up under there. I was freaking.

KH: Yeah, I think that's why merry-go-rounds are pretty much outlawed now.

JK: Right, unless they're real close to the ground and solid and they can stand on them I think and ride. But those things are terrible. Just ask me, I'll tell you. It was horrible. She was in a cast from hip to toes for a long time. It was bad. And on crutches. She should have been in a wheelchair really when she first came back because it was awfully hard for her to get around. But we accommodated her somehow. I can't even remember the details of that but we did. Anyway, those are some of the things.

I had three different principals. I had Bessie Sears Estelle the first year and she retired. I was at her retirement party and did most of the emceeing for her. She asked me to so I did. Even a state senator came.

Then the next year I had Willie May. He knew every child in the school, went around picked up paper, did everything. This accident happened on his watch and that day he said, "You're going to teach all the P.E. now, Mrs. Kemper." I was so mad I was ready to eat fried rocks.

So I came in the next morning. He said good morning. I said good morning. I went right to my room. He came right behind me, pulled up a chair right beside mine. This was like seven-fifteen, seven-twenty, before the children got there.

"You're mad at me, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am."

And he said, "Well, I'll tell you what I did. He's not responsible. I can't get rid of him and I need somebody out there that'll take care of those children. The board gave you to me to use the best way I could and I'm going to have to ask you to do this." And I thought for a minute and thought he's absolutely right. I said okay.

He said, "But I'll tell you what. I'll be out there helping you every step of the way. I'll be out there with you. If I can't be there with you, it'll be a rare occurrence." And believe me, he was. And they won the track meet that year. He was a wonderful athlete himself. He could sing. He was a little bitty guy. He reminded me of Sammy Davis, Jr. And lo and behold, last year they had elections for board members. Prior to that the city council had appointed five. There are nine districts so we elected nine different and he's one of them. So he's on the board. He's a retired principal now. He and I are the same age. I'm a little bit older than he is but I'm still working. I don't know why. He is a board member and very supportive of me and nice because he knew, [he] cared. So it seems funny how things come around

so he is a board member. He's now the vice president of the board, as a matter of fact, just elected Tuesday night.

The following year I had another new principal whose wife I had taught with when I'd worked in Jefferson County for one year before going to the private school. He was very nice but I just didn't work with him long because I didn't stay there that long.

But you see [West Center Street] was a good experience for me. It was the best experience I've ever had in teaching. I went to a workshop one time -- and this did bother me a little bit --the speaker said, "When you hear African American children making grammatical errors or saying something incorrectly, do not correct them because they're hearing it at home and when you correct them you're correcting their parents." I never agreed with that because if it were a white child I would do the same. If they misspell a word you correct it on the paper. I felt that he was wrong. I think you should try to be an example to all children no matter what and to speak correctly and use good grammar. I did think he was wrong, but I did try to temper it after that and not say things. But I never agreed with it. I don't know how you feel, but what he said was we're putting their parents down, which was not my intent ever. Never did I think about doing that, but maybe that's what we were doing.

And some of them had superstitions that I couldn't understand. I'm not saying African Americans had more than others, but we were on our way to a science fair one time and I had the children in the car with me. There was one little girl who was just brilliant, IQ over a hundred and fifty, but came from a rather quaint family background. Grandmother and mother were sort of back woodsy -- not stupid by any

means, because that's where she got her brains. We were passing a funeral and at the time we stopped. And so she said to me, "You know, if you point at a funeral the end of your finger will rot off?"

And I said, "You know what that is? That's a superstition. Because we'd talked about superstitions in science. I said, "So I'm going to show you something. I'm going to point at that funeral procession." And all year long I'd say [whispering so it is barely audible], "it hasn't dropped off yet." And it still hasn't! This is the finger I pointed. And she took it very well because I wanted to prove to her that's just a superstition. But there were some colloquial things and expressions that I learned. I wish [I had noted down]...

End of Tape 1 Side A

JK: ...insight. A black child is told not to look you in the face when you're correcting them. They stay where they live -- stay means the same thing. Those are some things, I mean just anecdotal records of any kind that I could have made that would have helped the transition. And by the same token, I think it would have been nice for an African American teacher who went into a white setting to do the same thing. But I didn't do it. I'm very sorry. But it didn't occur to me at the time that it would be so different. It was different but it was the same. And let me tell you this: the first day I was there they looked like children, they acted like children, they thought like children, they were children. And that's what everybody needs to look at wherever you are. They're children. I mean think about it. I don't know if you ever do this but I think about those little Iraqi children that are all caught up in things.

KH: Yeah, I think about them too.

JK: Or Afghanistan or any of these countries that are so war torn and have been for years and years and years. They don't know anything else. You know, they're children. They're just children. That's all. So, okay, I've had my piece. You have anything more?

KH: Just one thing I don't think I asked before. Why did you stop teaching at Wright?

JK: Because I got this job I have now. It's a twelve-month job. I had two children that needed to go to school, to college, and I knew that I had an impending divorce. I did miss teaching. I still do. I loved it. But it was a matter of economics. And I like what I do because now I serve all the schools and all the children and all the teachers. But I do miss them. But I do Academic Bowl and things like that so I do have some contact with them. When I go into the schools I always like to talk to them and children are very receptive. It doesn't matter where you go, high schools, middle schools, elementary schools. And some people say, oh, I'm afraid to go to that school. I've never been afraid in my life to walk into any school. They're children. And I know some children can be destructive or mean or bad but it's never happened to me and I'm not going to ever be afraid. I'm just not going to let that happen. You waste a lot of your life if you're afraid. I mean, I live alone. I'm never afraid. I'm sure not going to be afraid to walk in a school.

When I first went to work in this department, the curriculum, it was housed at the service center, which is where the mechanics and the painters and the electricians and all those people go out of, the carpenters. It's not any longer. I'm in a closed school, which may reopen again and I'll have to relocate. But anyway, I won't be

there. I'm going to retire. I'll never forget I was sitting with the foreman one morning, seven o'clock-ish. I'd been the first professional person or college educated person in that building. Here I was a woman. And they said, "Well, we just want you to know one thing, Mrs. Kemper. Those schools wouldn't be there if we weren't here."

And I remember saying, "You've got that wrong. You wouldn't even have a job if there weren't children out there." And it took him back. He couldn't answer me, because they wouldn't. They just thought they held the schools. "No, you wouldn't even be here. There'd be no money, no jobs, if there were no children." So that's how I feel. It's up to us to take care of these children and get them where they need to go.

One of these funny things [happened] when I went to Belgium. My daughter is real good friends with this girl [in Belgium] whose husband graduated from Hayes High School, which always has been an African American school. And they could not believe [the coincidence!] In fact, she spent the night at her house real recently. She's undergoing chemotherapy at UAB and my daughter's an oncology nurse. She's a mother right now but she's done a lot with Cynthia. I thought, how neat, and so we started talking because he graduated from high school in 1980. I knew his principal and all these teachers that he'd had and everything. So here we are in Belgium talking, because I've been in this job and I know all these old principals. I've been around so long I'm just a fixture. Anyway, he's nice. He's a major in the Airforce, this young man is that graduated from Hayes. Maybe he is a lieutenant colonel. I think he is because he's the same rank as my son-in-law but my son-in-law is a

commander. You know, they just have different ranks in the Navy than they do in the Airforce.

KH: Yeah, my dad was in the Airforce.

JK: Oh, was he? Okay. So you traveled around a lot too.

KH: Some. During my childhood.

JK: Where were you born?

KH: I was born in Virginia and I spent about the first four years of my life in the Philippines. Otherwise, I've been in Texas most of the time.

JK: Oh, okay. Well, they've been in Texas too, Corpus Christi mainly because, of course, they have water there. The Navy seems to have to have water. What did your dad do?

KH: He was a chief master sergeant. And he said he was a cook for a while. Not much evidence of that. [Laughter] But he's been retired for twelve years.

JK: Well, my son-in-law retires then, I think, maybe. But we've got to get these children through college so I don't know if he can retire or not. My daughter will probably go back to work and then I'm in "The Drop," which is a retirement program that you get a lump sum at the end of three or four or five years and that's all going to go to them. That's why I'm working. It's easier to get up every morning when you're doing something like that.

KH: Well, I just have one more general question and then we can go. What's your opinion of race relations in Birmingham now compared to back in the '70s?

JK: They're certainly better. They are. They have a long way to go. I think that you will find, and I'm sure this is true everywhere, that the educated people, both

black and white, are the most liberal and have no problem. It's the lower class or the lower levels that want to blame somebody for something that create, I think, in my opinion, the problems. I don't know exactly how to say this, but just like the Mexicans. I don't know if you have those. You live in South Carolina right now?

KH: North Carolina.

JK: North Carolina, okay. I love North Carolina.

KH: We actually do have a large Mexican population.

JK: Right, you see them working so hard. Maybe they're illegal aliens. I'm not sure. I don't know. But they're a threat to some of the working class people who aren't willing to work that hard. And I see this happening. I think the intelligent, fair people just don't see color, you know, or race or ethnicity or whatever. You have to know it's there. You recognize it. But enjoy it. Like my children were in Europe for three years. I mean, they got to meet Polish, British, Czech, Spanish. It was wonderful and how kind they all were to the Americans on 9/11. They all met in the center and the American flag was in the middle. All of them were at half-staff. You have to rotate the flag but the American flag immediately took precedence. And when that horrible train robbery happened in Spain, the same thing happened for Spain. Let us all work together. By the way, I have to tell you, they were on a NATO base. So all of these countries were represented by NATO. And you know, put the children together, they have no enemies. I wish we could see that. I think Birmingham has come a long way. I think we still have a long way to go. But we do have that civil rights museum. And of course, I'm in a school system that is probably ninety-nine percent African American, maybe ninety-eight percent. I didn't bring those figures

with me but it's quite high and probably only a third of the teachers are white anymore. And I will tell you this: Other systems on the outskirts that are majority white, they steal our teachers from us. They find a good one and offer her a bonus, or him. But I think it's better. I think we have further to go certainly. It's not panacea, utopia. It may never be but I think we've come a long way from hoses and dogs. My ex-husband got sprayed by a hose, secondary spray, one time when he was in Birmingham. He didn't know what was going on. Not hard, he just got a little. He got wet but he said it was horrible.

KH: I've heard what it feels like, like a thousand needles.

JK: Stinging, yeah, needles sticking in you. And then the dogs and things like that. We had the Ku Klux Klan here. My first secretary in this job I have now, her father was in the Ku Klux Klan and somewhere in their possession was the seal of the Ku Klux Klan. I shouldn't have even told that, but she didn't stay long. Now bear in mind, my father was a Swede. He just died. He was ninety-eight, died in March, and my mother was from Indiana and my mother's grandfather, my great grandfather, fought in the Civil War and he wore blue. So I come from everything. I just think we ought to all be able to get along, don't you?

KH: Un-huh, that'd be nice.

JK: Wouldn't it though? Okay, anything else?

KH: No ma'am. Those are all my questions for you.

JK: Okay.

KH: Thank you very much.

JK: Oh, you're so welcome. I hope it helps. But see, mine's not negative.