

TRANSCRIPT- KAREN LYNN PARKER
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Interviewee: KAREN LYNN PARKER
Interviewer: Nicete N. Moodie
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Start of CD 1

Nicete Moodie: My name is Nicete Moodie. I am here at the home of Karen Lynn Parker. Today's date is February 18, 2007. And the time is approximately five after five p.m. Ok Ms. Parker if you could just state the basic information: name, date, family, and so on.

Karen Parker: My name is Karen Lynn Parker. I usually go by Karen L. Parker, because when my folks were mad at me they would go "Karen Lynn Parker, come on down here." So that's why I usually don't go by my middle name. I was born in Salisbury North Carolina. My father Fred Douglass Parker and my mother, Clarice Holt Parker, were also from the area, and they were both teachers. And I spent a faire amount of time in Rowan County with my grandparents on my father's side. They were Fred Harrison Parker and Mattie Clement Parker. They had, I guess it would be a small farm in Spencer, which is kind of a suburb of Salisbury as such. And, we moved to Winston when I was about seven--no-- about five. So I started in Winston Public schools around that time. We left Winston; mom got a job in, a teaching job in High Point so we lived over there

for about three years and then my parents build a house and we moved back to Winston from my sophomore year in high school on. Let see; my grandparents on the other side were John Calvin Holt and Odessa Manuel Holt. She died before I was born so I never met her. Nice picture of her up there. And-- [Pause]. That's a general back ground. I am 63 years old right now. I was born December 21, 1943. In general, my general background of the last few years: I left North Carolina after I got out of school my first job was in Grand Rapid Michigan

NM: --Oh wow!

KP: and I was a copy editor reporter for the *Grand Rapids Press*; then I moved to Rochester, New York and I was a copy editor there. On my interview there I met the man who would later become my husband and the father of my son, I met him on the plane.

NM:--Oh wow! [laughing]

KP: Peter Kuttner and he persuaded me to come out to California and marry him. I was married to him for about ten years. We have a son, his name is Jonah Evan Kuttner and he is now at UNC-TV and he lives in Raleigh. After that I was home for about ten years with the young child and I went back to work for newspapers again in 1978 and that was with the *Los Angeles Times*, and I was there for about fifteen years. I got tired of L.A.

When I first moved there, it was a very-- rather pleasant place; I absolutely preferred it to New York.

NM: Los Angles?

KP: Yeah

NM: What year did you move to LA

KP: '67--1967.

NM: Oh in '67

KP: And, it was more laid back, easy going, people were a lot friendlier. By the time I left, crime was a big concern, traffic was horrendous. And even though I went to work on off hours—I had to be at 2:30—traffic jams were more the rule than the exception. Creeping along the freeways at 20 miles an hour was normal. And then it finally got to the point where it would get gridlocks, where an intersection would get blocked no body would move for hours.

NM: Now before you got to UNC, was there any controversy, was your parents steer you in that directions, were they supporting you because they were very few African Americans at the campus, very African American women; I believe you were the first to graduate undergrad at UNC so how did they feel about that and how did you feel about that?

KP: Well, Oh! how that came about was right around the time John Kennedy came into office, John F. Kennedy, and that was about the time that the Greensboro sit ins started, the Greensboro four. And the whole segregation things was kind of breaking loose, and lot of people were thinking more about its time to stop this segregation stuff and the schools in the South were at least being challenged to admit black students. You can't say 'you can't go to the University of North Carolina because you're black.' The contention at the time was or the popular sentiment was that we did not have the intelligence to go to a university.

NM: That is what they said towards African Americans?

KP: Yes, and then plus in the segregated tenor of the day, most black students wanted to go to historically black colleges or universities because there was a sense of belonging. Because one thing about being one of the handful of blacks on a predominantly white campus is socially you can be very isolated. A lot of people just don't like that. My parents, being both teachers, realized this was happening. And our high school got the best students and encouraged all of us to go into predominantly white schools; the ones of us who they knew would probably be admitted because..

NM: Academic record

KP: Academic yes. And we could pass the SAT and all that stuff. So I was apart of that and my parents actually encouraged it because they believed I would get a superior education in the predominately white schools.

NM: As opposed to predominately black schools?

KP: Yes. And I think at the time that was absolutely true.

KP: Every now and then somebody would dis you (on campus of Women College) and of course we all expected that, that was the times we were in. And I think, I remember what bothered me was we were picketing segregated restaurants in Greensboro right be the campus and they were a couple of girls who I thought were my friends who crossed picket lines in front of me and that upset me. But a lot of the white students were right there in the picket lines with us. [Pause] Matter of fact it was more of them than there were of us. Demonstrations were sort of breaking out all over the South and we had some

big ones with A&T and Bennett and kids came from Greensboro College and Guilford College and Women's college (UNC-G). We had huge Civil Rights marches in that time. And we all had to be careful about the Klan because they would come and threaten to do bodily harm to people.

NM: Now when you were in school, receiving the scholarship, becoming editor, did you know in your mind, did you know you were embarking on the path that is going to be talked about for years to come, like I am the first to do this, did you come with that mentality or did you just do it and not realizing it.

KP: I had no idea that I was the first African American woman undergrad to stay.

NM: Oh, you did not know that at the time?

KP: Not at the time. Somewhere between half way through the of the semester I figured it out, but I did not know that then.

NM: Interesting.

KP: One thing I was determined to do, and that really, really meant a lot to me, I was determined to prove that we were not ignorant. Not only am I as smart as you, I am smarter than most of you. I think I graduated in the-- about the upper ten percent of the graduating class of '65 and if I hadn't partied a lot I could have been the upper eight.

NM: [Laugh] We will get in the social scene in a second bit, but in your class were you the only African American?

KP: There were six of us.

NM: Six other blacks in your class?

KP: Me and five guys, one of whom was my cousin, Larry Poe from East Spencer. Who is a retired Admiral, retired CIA; still works up in Washington; done some pretty fantabulous things. He was the rear Admiral in charge of all of Naval intelligence for the whole country; he was the military attaché in Paris. Not bad for a poor boy from East Spencer.

NM: Did you know your cousin was at UNC when you got there?

KP: Yeah. He transferred from Livingstone College.

NM: He transferred as a junior?

KP: Oh ok, so he came in the same time you did as well

KP: He was always borrowing money from me and then I could not find him. That was the big joke. He would borrow twenty dollars. Twenty dollars!!!! He would borrow \$20 from me on the basis that I was his relative, and I would lend it to him and then I could not find him for weeks.

NM: I guess having him there, did that make it any easier; someone you knew you could talk to at least or have lunch with or...

KP: No, because I did not see him most of the time. At the time there were the people on the main campus and I think they called it the South campus and there were a couple of new dorms-- Ehringhaus was one of them and they were brand new. And he was over in Ehringhaus and that was considered to be far away from the main campus, where I was and I did have no reason to go over there unless I was looking for him and he stayed away from the main campus instead of going to class. And the size of that campus; It was easy for him to avoid me. The only phones were like a phone on each hall, and somebody would answer the phone, "Larry Poe here?" and if he didn't want to be there he did not

have to. He could easily avoid me if he wanted to but he eventually paid back all the money. I still tease him about that.

NM: Tell me a little more about the social aspects on campus. You said you partied a lot, so how was that?

KP: Well, the male to female ratio was 12-1. And I would joke and say any woman who did not have a date did not want one. And of course there were white students who did not bother them at all that I was black; especially the northerners.

NM: Were there a lot of northerners on campus?

KP: There were a few. And I went out with white guys. The black guy, except one of them was my cousin and one of them I hated. I would not have gone out with him if he was the last man on earth. I am looking forward to seeing him this fall. He was a male chauvinist sexist pig and somebody said he still is.

NM: Oh wow, that is very interesting.

KP: Yeah I am looking forward to running into him. I will not say his name. That left the senior class. The junior class, there was a couple guys in junior class. And I was just so arrogant as a senior that these guys, the juniors and sophomores, how dare they ask me out. The mere sophomores, what kind of nerve is that? I don't go out with them. But I did go out with one guy. We are still friends until this day. We never were going to get serious about or anything but one guy was in the ROTC and he needed a date for something. I went out with some of them, they were white guys. And I partied with--the Civil Rights Movement got a lot of whites and blacks together who probably would not

have been otherwise. And that group was very very integrated. It was Blacks from town, it was Blacks from campus; whites from campus and some of the other school around the area. So that was a very integrated scene. And I got use to running with that crowd. We were sort of called Beatniks. We were before the Hippies, we were just after the Beatnik culture of the fifties and the term Hippy had not been coined yet and we were right in between there and no one know what to call us. But I kind of ran in the anti establishment thing. I stopped wearing the campus uniform which was --

NM: Campus uniform?

KP: Yeah, Weijun loafers, Villager blouses, wrap around skirts was the typical outfit, I called it the uniform. The boys wore gant shirts, khaki slacks and weejun loafers. There were certain things that people wore.

NM: So you were more depressed from being away from home?

KP: No, I liked being away from home because they had a leash on me at home; I had freedom down there. I was depressed, I could not figure out my place in the world; on the planet; I wanted to make changes; I wanted to do things; I wanted to prove points and what I ended up going to campus shrink about was, I was adopting a new social order, the one on campus, and giving up the one I came from. And what the psychiatrist ended up telling me was I don't have to throw away every thing I learn from my parents and I don't have to adopt everything you see here on campus, you can have a blend of the two, pick and choose. So it was culture, it was morals; it was behaviors, a lot of stuff. And they had quite a hold on me, a guilt trip hold on me and I really had to break loose to become my own person.

NM: Really, so your depression was not really triggered as far as the racial tension or...

KP: Oh that was part of it; it was a whole lot of stuff going on.

NM: OK

KP: But I just could not find my place in the whole thing. Where am I? I can't be apart of the campus here, I can't be a part of the campus there. Where am I? Who am I? What I am I suppose to be doing. I don't have a home; I don't fit in anywhere that was bothering me. Now, the white friends that I met, and the girls in the dorm, four of them are friends until this day. I would trust them with my life and they would trust their life with me. They are that exceptional human beings.

KP: We were having a party, it was the people from the Civil Rights Movement and we were having a part, it was the fall of '64 and we were at some house right out side of town, out in the country, that part of town is now in town an there were a lot of people from the Civil Rights Movement. And a bunch of us went out in the back yard and some people were in the house and all of a sudden we heard 'Ping' 'Ping' And somebody said, there shooting at us get down.

NM: They were shots?

KP: Rifle shots and the bullets were ricochet off of the trees in the back yard. And the Klan shot out all of the windows in the house. Nobody got hurt because they all hit the floor, all the people in the house; in the back I remember somebody yelling 'Get Down' and we all had a couple of beers and we are going "what happened!!!!" and all of sudden we realized hey they are shooting at us. This is serious stuff. And what my finds did, and this was so touching. It was me and another black person I can't remember who it was.

They put us on the floor of a car and they all piled in on top of us so the Klan would not see us. Aint that nice? They were going to protect us because they figure the Klan was going to go after us first if they were going to do that.

NM: How many African Americans were at the party, do you remember, roughly was it a lot

KP: I don't know, more than four or five. We were hanging outside; it was a warm night in September.

NM: And they must have saw white and blacks mingling...

KP: They say people arriving and it was an integrated party and that's why they shot it up

NM: Wow!

KP: So it's kind of funny now. Not many people have the privilege of getting shot up by the Klan [laughing]

[End here]