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Interview

with

MAXINE ATKINS SMITH

October 9, 2000

by Elizabeth Gritter

Transcribed by Elizabeth Gritter

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

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For Related Documents, See the Interview of Maxine A. Smith by Elizabeth Gritter on July 26, 2004. (Interview No. U-69)

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MAXINE A. SMITH
INTERVIEW SUMMARY AND TRANSCRIPT

Technical Details

Date conducted:	October 9, 2000
Interviewer:	Elizabeth Gritter
Interviewee:	Maxine Atkins Smith
Place conducted:	Memphis, Tennessee, at Mrs. Smith's home
Transcript length:	34 pages
Recording length (approx.):	Approx. 1 hour and 15 minutes
Compiled:	Transcribed by Elizabeth Gritter and edited by Laura Altizer in Feb. 2005.

Biographical Information

Born in Memphis on October 31, 1929, Maxine Atkins Smith graduated in 1949 from Spelman College with a degree in biology and received in 1950 a master's degree in French from Middlebury College. She taught French at Prairie View A & M University from 1950 to 1952 and French and English at LeMoyne College from 1955 to 1956. She, along with Laurie Sugarmon (now known as Miriam DeCosta Willis), attempted to integrate Memphis State in the summer of 1957. They were denied admission because of their race. After hearing about the incident, Memphis NAACP branch officials called them to serve on the board. Smith was a full-time volunteer for the branch until she became its executive secretary in 1961, a position she held until 1996. Smith served as a member of the Memphis school board from 1971 until 1996. She is currently a member of the national board of directors of the NAACP and chairs the organization's education division. She also sits on the Board of Regents for the State of Tennessee.

Notes on the Interview

Dr. Vasco Smith, her husband, sat in on the interview, and made some comments.

Notes on the Interviewer

Elizabeth Gritter conducted this interview for her honors senior thesis on the civil rights movement in Memphis from 1955 to 1961. She graduated from American University in Washington, D.C., in 2001. Born in 1979, she is a white female and is currently a graduate student in the history department at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Main Topics Covered

Biographical and Career Facts; First Experience with Activism; *Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954 Supreme Court Decision; Beginning of Memphis NAACP Involvement; Voter Registration; Memphis NAACP Membership Campaigns; White Political Leadership; Black Electoral Political Mobilization; School Board Election; Memphis Direct Action Movement, including Sit-ins; Medgar Ever's Death; White Reaction and Resistance to Civil Rights Actions; Memphis Black Community Involvement; Her Personality

ELIZABETH GRITTER: This is Elizabeth Gritter interviewing Maxine Smith on October 9, 2000, in Memphis, Tennessee. [I'm putting the] microphone up so it's close enough. So I just have a few background questions at first that I saw from kind of constructing a biography of you. I was wondering where you were born and what your date of birth was.

MAXINE SMITH: I was born right here in Memphis, Tennessee, October 31st, 1929. In fact, I live on the same street—

EG: Really.

MS: But it was on the other end.

EG: Oh sure. Yep. I was wondering what year you graduated from Spelman College.

MS: 1949.

EG: Okay and that was with biology, you had--?

MS: I majored in biology.

EG: What year did you graduate from Middlebury?

MS: In 1950, and I did a master's in French.

EG: Okay, great. Just to kind of start out, I was wondering what your first experience with activism was.

MS: Well, let me say, early on, with indignation, anger as a very small girl perhaps it led to activism. When I was less than nine years old, my father was hospitalized. I know I was less than nine, because I was nine when he died. I am one of three siblings, the youngest of three. When we would go visit my father at the veteran's hospital and ask for him by name, Mr. Joseph Atkins, the clerk in the window said,

"Niggers aren't called mister to white people. So, don't do that anymore," something to that effect. The next time, my mother went one day and the three kids went from school. I asked for Mr. Joseph Atkins. She said, "I *told* you not to say that. I'm not going to give you a permit." I said, "I don't care. I know where my daddy is." So I don't know just how much that, you know, an eight-year old kid--seven or eight, probably eight years old--being told that. I *never* recovered from it. I guess I was ripe and ready by the time. There are other incidents, similar incidents that I can mention.

Okay, let's skip on to actual activism. I just meant demonstrations. You mentioned Russell Sugarmon's election.

EG: Yeah.

MS: Although the sit-in movement had not started then, we were deeply involved in politics. "Get out the vote" and that type of thing.

Vasco and I returned from--. He was in service paying Uncle Sam two years when we married. That was from '53 to '55. We were very anxious to--. We could hardly wait as time came closer for his discharge. Just wait and wait and come back to Memphis. Counting the days almost. Some time just a day or two before we were packed and they were moving us, we just questioned each other, "What are we so excited about?" Memphis was a *completely* segregated city. We didn't have jobs. We didn't have a home. Our mothers were here. And why are we so anxious to get--. You know, ( ) it's home. So it's always good to come home. That's the atmosphere. That was the atmosphere in '55. Despite the '54 Supreme Court, May '54 Supreme Court act—

EG: *Brown versus Board.*

MS: *Brown versus Board*, what was that Kansas? No movement, whatsoever,

had been made in Memphis to comply. Vasco was stationed outside of St. Louis and it was--. The difference in cities. I don't notice that much difference now. May not but at least they were not rebellious. As I remember, it was just a day or two after this great announcement was made in their paper, I think it was the *St. Louis Dispatch*, I'm not sure. It was, "School system gets ready--or is prepared--to put into action the mandate of the Supreme Court."

But we're back in Memphis now in '55. We immediately looked for the NAACP, which was the only civil rights organization here at that time and practically now. The others come and go, which I have no problem with. So, I guess they had 300 members. It wasn't always easy to find. Well, you know, who knew about it or where do you join the NAACP? But we found it and began attending meetings. Still do, the fourth Sunday of every month. [Laughter.] Just changed places once. The YMCA, which happens to be right across the street from where we still meet, kicked us out. We were a little too--not rebellious--active or whatever. They just weren't in tune with the NAACP. So there was a black church right across the street that welcomed us, and we've been there ever since.

Okay, now, when we got here in '55, when we got back home, there were less than 10,000 blacks registered to vote in Memphis and Shelby County. That was one of the biggest additions. I mean, I think it was record setting. In the late fifties, which still hasn't stopped, we have put on gigantic voter registration, voter education drives. In the meantime--.

EG: Were you director of that?

MS: Hmm?

EG: Were you director?

MS: Yeah, I coordinated it.

EG: You coordinated the registration?

MS: Uh-huh. So that, yeah.

EG: From how long? What dates?

MS: Oh, gosh, it never stopped. In a few months, now maybe I am--.

VASCO SMITH: She was at a voter registration meeting yesterday.

MS: An NAACP () nationwide, and we had training for four states here on Saturday and Sunday.

EG: Sure. So when you started getting involved with the NAACP, you right away went to the voter registration?

MS: Well, that was--. Let me see, let me tell you how I got involved in Tennessee. I was rejected from Memphis State at that time. Russell Sugarmon--you mentioned him. His wife--they're since divorced--would say, "Maxine, come and go to Memphis State with me."[1] We both had six-month-old babies. I said, "Suppose they take us." She was Phi Beta Kappa from Wellesley, and you've seen my educational background. But we weren't quite good enough according to them.

EG: Right. Right.

MS: But anyway, we went on our own. You know, I was just a member of the NAACP. We just went as two young mothers. I don't know how it made the papers because we didn't know anything about press conferences or anything like that. We just went. But somebody out there must've known that this was just pure racism. Two applicants with our qualifications being rejected because of our scholastic backgrounds,

and it made the paper. I don't know how. From this, the NAACP called us to serve on the board. As I say, the NAACP was very small here in those days. I don't think they had any women on the board. I think they probably wanted some women. So, that's how it started. This was in '57, now. My total involvement with the NAACP--. Laura had the good sense to get away. [Laughs.] Not that she--. I mean, I was a volunteer.

This was in '57. The NAACP had been kicked out of the state of Alabama somewhere in those years, and the field secretary--now that was after the long bus boycott. They asked for the voting lists, and they wouldn't expose them. For eight years, the NAA was out of business in Alabama. Each state has what they call a field secretary that covers the state. So, they sent that field secretary--these are national employees—to Memphis to head political action. So, I guess, Mr. W. C. Patton from Birmingham--he passed on not too long ago--really was my beginning teacher.

EG: Really. He was the field secretary of--?

MS: In Alabama.

EG: In Alabama.

MS: See, we had an office. This was in '57. He directed for the whole region then political action "Get out the vote." We're not partisan--very political--but not partisan. We still don't endorse candidates. "Get out the vote," registration, voter education, voter participation--all those things were involved. I was a volunteer down at the NAACP office. He asked me would I coordinate that effort, which I did. In two or three months--Vasco, you can ( )--. You'd get on stage. I think that we had registered over 50,000 black voters. That pace continued. Oh gosh, I guess we're at 300,000 now.

EG: How were you able to register that many, and what were your strategies?

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[1] Russell B. Sugarmon Jr.'s then-wife Laurie Sugarmon is now known as Miriam DeCosta Willis.

MS: We had what was called–too bad it sort of went away--the Shelby County Democratic Club. But Russell [B. Sugarmon, Jr.] will tell you more. Did you get Russell? Are you going to interview [him]?

EG: Yeah, I'm going to talk to him later.

MS: On politics, he's a genius. He was the chief strategist. That club was countywide and--we really had a state component of it--was divided by precincts. Some eighty-some, I don't know, predominantly black precincts gave us the structure. Each precinct had workers or a president or whatever you, with workers, in-the-street registration–then it was it. We knocked on doors. We went through churches. We went, but the precincts gave us the neighborhood structure, and it also included organizations. Churches were given a program. Greek letter organizations were a group. Everybody was given a goal and a program. We had very active civic clubs in those days that had the same sort of structure in a sense, as a precinct club, that the political group had. They were neighborhood-oriented so we had two shots at the same neighborhood, which one may not have been inclusive of all but close enough. We had labor organizations. We used everything that was organized with a big percent of black citizens.

In those days, this is the late '50s now, blacks were not fragmented to the point we are now. We had nothing. We wanted everything. So, it was just a, I can't say chore, but a task of fulfillment. We knew we were going somewhere. We had about a third of the votes in Memphis. Now we have over half. We just worked. We walked the streets. We maybe had some telephoning. But it was perhaps almost totally face-to-face contact.

Memphis was a little different from other cities because of the old Crump machine. You know, that machine government. I hate to say anything good could come

out of machine politics. But Crump, E. H. Crump, he died when we were at Scott, about a year after we married. We were at Scott Air Force Base. But he controlled Memphis and Tennessee, gosh, for years and years and years. () But black folk, I said, voted. The better is, black folk were voted by Mr. Crump because they thought Mr. Crump would know who they voted for. He had methods of calling them to the polls. I think it may have been in the watermelon, whiskey days that I wasn't involved--. But this had started early on in the century. I'm saying that to say we at least were acclimated to the political process. We had been to the polls unlike in many of the cities that couldn't go. See up in Fayette County, right up here--Tent City–a predominately black county at that time, they wouldn't even let them go. But Mr. Crump sent us and [we] voted. Generally, I think they voted his way because he stayed in power a long time. It's just, I think, in the last month or two, probably his only appointee from way back then died. What's the—and somebody is running. He had won in the primary. He had just won again this year and on and on. () There's a race that just shows the lasting influence of the old Crump machine.

EG: Oh really. Wow.

MS: He was probably 115, but he was still there. [Laughter.]

EG: So you were saying you were acclimated, so when they went actually to register to vote, were there any obstacles from, like, the county officials?

MS: Not really. Not at that time. I think a lot of complacency was there. You know, I can't really describe what it was like. I guess I was in high school or grammar school when all this got started. But I think we were ripe for seeking all the things. We were very uncomfortable being *completely segregated in all walks*. See, this was pre sit-

in movement. We saw the ballot as the voice of our people.

By '59, Russ--very, very bright, very bright--one of the most brilliant people I know. There may have been some more. Let me backtrack, but to show how determined they were not to have a black in a position, any position, any position. We didn't have *any*. He was obviously the most qualified in any way that you could imagine. There were several whites in the race. The newspapers ran a campaign against Russ, just to beat Russ. They encouraged the others--not just the newspapers, but the powers that be--encouraged the others to get out. And in newspaper articles--I sure wish we had, I don't know if we still have that in my papers which are at the city library--describing without a question Russell Sugarmon is the most qualified candidate, but after all he's colored. I mean they were that blunt. But it was a fight. It was a galvanizing fight. It was a call to arms for black people. We didn't let up.

EG: What was your, what sort of actions did you take in the campaign?

MS: Oh, that was a part of our big voter—

EG: The registration.

MS: Voter registration, voter participation, voter education.

EG: Yes.

MS: In those days, we could get a *fantastic* turnout. You know, turnout across this country now is so pitifully low. In our last election, primary election, it was less than 25 percent totally. In those days, we could get ninety percent of the black vote out with -- no seventy-five percent I'll say -- with about ninety to ninety-five percent voting alike. It was complete faith in each other, determination and everything you might want to ascribe that to. And then, I'm working two ways: Nonpartisan, I'm the NAACP volunteer.

Politically, we have our Shelby County Democratic Club. Basically it's the same people as far as leadership is concerned.

But we were so impressive--that organization. It's success led to its failure because the white community did everything to break it up, to fragment it. It succeeded. Just an example, one year--. And our registration was continuously increasing until, I think, '64 was the first time we peaked over 200,000. Vasco ran for school board. You know, that's when you picked the first five out of--whatever, it was seven, I forgot--the highest number. They changed every voting rule they could. Well, before Vasco ran, there was Reverend--. Who was the pastor of Mt. Nebo Church?

VS: Love.

MS: Reverend Love. Was it here? Whatever.

EG: Roy Love was it?

MS: Roy D--. That was Roy Love, uh-huh.

VS: She already knows it. Maxine, she's pulling your leg?

MS: Yeah, I know. She knows a lot.

EG: Oh, no. [Laughter.]

MS: But he nearly won. So, instead of running the first top, whatever number the school board was at that time, we started running by numbers. Area one, I don't know, you had to register to run against a white person.

EG: Really?

MS: Well, that's how it got--. But that was changed because we had learned to single shot. We just voted for one. Roy Love came within--I don't remember the number--but a very few votes from getting elected. They ( ) as we saw. You start

running by positions–that's what they called them.

EG: Oh running by—

MS: Positions meant nothing, had nothing to do with geography, but just to hinder a black from winning. We were still coming on. We had excellent voting records. We would--. There was a big lever, lever [pronounces two ways]. I always get that word. We would teach our people just to pull--. So, you had your Democrat or whatever, Republican. Rather than having to remember, and it may not even have been by party. It had to be, I guess. We could just pull one lever. So many of our people had problems with literacy, poor education, sometimes almost no education. Anyway, we'll have some names hard to spell and you or I couldn't spell. Well, that was part of it. I'm getting them mixed up. Then we voted by—maybe before I've forgotten—by numbers. I'd say, "Mr. So and So, you're going to vote for number one, five-one, whatever." Then, they took the numbers off. So the more--. Every time we began to get a little more of a threat to the white electorate, the law would change in a way to our political detriment. All right now, that sort of gives you a background for ( ) voter education and participation—

EG: Oh definitely.

MS: And involvement. Vasco, I think he ran for school [board]. We put our *best* out there, and that was to further encourage voter registration. Another dear friend of ours, who's passed away now, A.W. Willis [Jr.]—I know his name—has come in and ran for mayor. Now that was getting on over to '67. But I'm saying the progress. See I don't like to lose. I was up in an NAACP meeting, the state meeting up in Brownsville or Jackson, Tennessee, and somebody rode up there to tell me that we had decided, I think

Vasco had agreed to run for school board, which is fine. But I expected him to win even on the ( ). Vasco, ( ) those pictures of Smitty, our son, "Vote for my daddy." [Laughs.] So, that's been a long, long time ago. This is probably still in the fifties or very early sixties. But a number of our professional or different people were--. I was the only one that expected us to win. ( ) Numerically, I knew we couldn't. Within me that kept the force that all I had--this was probably true of all of us--until finally we succeeded in forcing the city to change the charter which--. Well, this was in '67, but I'm just trying to get to the end of politics, a point where we first started getting elected.

EG: Right.

MS: When the school board--. Well, they changed the city charter—

VS: ( )

MS: POP. That's what I was going to say. Since you were a part of it, that's what I would say. We forced the city through an organization called POP, which included--.

EG: Did that stand for something, POP?

MS: Yeah, what did, People--

VS: Program for Progress.

EG: Program for Progress.

MS: There was something. It must, because it was POP, something like that. ( )

VS: Program for Progress.

MS: That doesn't sound right.

EG: Okay.

MS: But it was something and that's the idea. Vasco, you'll think--. We have

our senior moments. I would like him to go since he was actually a participant and saw the conniving, devious ways, the promises they'd made to eliminate. But that'll be your story baby. But that was the beginning of districting rather than just a position by numbers in a way that would guarantee--because of our living patterns still are to a certain extent--black elections. It was minimum. So to make this long, long story, we have a predominately [black] city council. Four years after this, we started--. I was the spokesman for the NAACP for the school board. There had never been a black school board member.

EG: Yes.

MS: Gosh, we went, the day we--. This is later too because that was '70-'71. But I'm just the evolution of--. We went, about five. I could hardly get five people to ride down there. There was a group in the audience of mostly white women. By the time we got there, it was late. The reporters were just standing and looking. We weren't looking for reporters. I asked to be on the agenda, and I gave fifteen demands. All these white women stood up and cheered. They thought I'd brought--. [Laughs.]

EG: That you had what?

MS: That I had brought them [the reporters], that they were with me. But they were not. [Laughs.]

EG: Really.

MS: There was an organization–somebody should mention that too–Fund for Needy Children. In fact, the young man that's going to interview me tomorrow is Osama Lewis who was a member of that, that's just kind of ().

EG: This was with the school board in 1971 when you--.

MS: This was probably '68.

EG: Oh '68.

MS: Because that led to a six-month--. Well, the boycott actually was in '69, which eventually led to the school board being restructured. See, it's a creature of the state. For districts simultaneous with the city council. So, that's history. Three districts were all we could possibly--. One may have been shaken–this one, where we live--because it was probably predominately white or close to fifty-fifty. I think it was actually sixty-forty. It was a little bit more white. But we were amazed when during the first election, '67 election, Fred Davis --was one of our first black city council [members]--won in this district. It was four years later that the school board and more blacks, but it still was not a safe district. As blacks have moved in and whites have moved out, well, it's a sure thing now. Well, in fact, the whole thing has been restructured ( ).

EG: You were elected in 1971 to the school board?

MS: Um hmm and I stayed there until 1996, six four-year terms. Now, as I said, it's predominantly black. It's five-four, I believe, at this moment. The city council is seven-six. The only thing and Vasco will talk about the county commission, which is--. You know, we have two problems. We have the city and the county. We haven't cracked that nut yet, but it's just one more white than black. Now I, well, look at the flavor of power, and then the mayor. You know the story. The first superintendent [Willie Herenton.] I was on the school board–one and the same. We had to tear this city upside down again because, despite his qualifications, they were not ready for a black superintendent who is ( ). After he left the school system, [he became] the first black mayor. Others had run before. So, politics has been one of the prongs in our movement.

Now, to go back to the early sixties, the sit-in movement.

EG: Yes. Yes. Were you aware that it was going to happen when they had the first sit-in at the public library?

MS: Really, the kids sort of--these were college kids primarily. There may have been a few high schools kids. They sort of planned that on their own. We had some idea. We were, I won't say—well, in a sense, they were in our jurisdiction as youth councils are. We didn't hold them back. As I said, I think that was unique for the sit-in movements across the country that started back in North Carolina. Actually, the NAACP never gets credit for that, but the first sit-in was by an NAACP college chapter.

EG: Oh, it was. Really?

MS: Yeah.

VS: Greensboro, North Carolina.

MS: What city? I've forgotten.

VS: Greensboro.

MS: I just can't remember now. But anyway--

EG: So you didn't know they were going to sit-in or--?

MS: Well, we knew. It was ready for it. We sort of knew it.

VS: Maxine, you may have forgotten. Actually, you were in--. I was practicing [dentistry] at that time, working. You were actually in a board meeting where plans for the NAACP were being made to start sit-ins.

MS: Oh, yes.

VS: But the kids just got ahead--.

MS: Just got ahead.

VS: ( ) They just jumped the gun.

EG: Oh really. They did.

MS: Yeah, that puts it in proper--.

VS: You were in a meeting when they just--. When you got the news that they were sitting in--.

MS: The very first one was at the library down--well, at two branches of the library. One was at the main branch at McLean and—

EG: Peabody.

MS: Peabody. Elizabeth knows more about the city than I do. The other was downtown.

EG: When did you first hear about it? Did they call?

MS: Yeah, they called because we had to go get them out of jail. [Laughter.] So, we said, "It's brewing." This was March 1960 when ( ). I think it was '60—

VS: '60.

MS: 1960. ( ). So that grew and grew. Sit-ins--. We covered *every* public facility, accommodation--.

EG: Did you coordinate the sit-ins?

MS: Yes, I coordinated that movement. Yeah, I was their chief volunteer.

EG: Did you sit in at all?

MS: Yeah.

EG: You sat in. Where did you sit in?

MS: Oh God.

VS: Everywhere. [Laughter.]

EG: Everywhere.

MS: Now, he actually was arrested more than I because being the coordinator, I had to be there to get the kids. Every morning, we would--.

VS: Incidentally, to interrupt again. She doesn't refer to this very often, but she was a full-time volunteer for a number of years. She was not being paid for it [at] all. She just did it. I think that's as much important as anything else because I don't think you find that kind of story in a person with that kind of dedication and so forth, putting in that much time and effort, and who also had the intelligence and the ability--.

MS: Darling, you are embarrassing me. [Laughter.]

VS: Well, that's the truth. You were a volunteer for I don't know how many years before you got any pay at all.

MS: Well, they put me on the payroll in '62, but we didn't have any money. [Laughter.] I was supposed to make $300 a month. But see I was there ( ) we didn't have any money. I don't know when it was that I finally--. Sometimes I might get paid two or three hundred dollars, but I would do it again. It was, when I look back, I would give a little more. In '62, they gave me the title of executive secretary, and I retired in '96. So, that was 34 years supposedly. The dedication didn't stop one way or the other. Since '55, when we got back to Memphis, as soon as we could find the NAACP as I told. I would say it's been a good life. I have been in circumstances. You know, I often say, Maxine hasn't done that much, but I have known people who *did*. I was the last person to touch and kiss Medgar Evers when he was heading home. Vasco had been called to Jackson, Mississippi. They were, this was--. Our sit-in movement was an 18-month movement, '60 to '61. I think '60. I'm getting this, it's either '60-61 or

'61-'62. I'm thinking right now. This was a little because Medgar was killed in '63. So this was after us. We, as I said, stretched it out to public facilities, accommodations, department stores, train, bus, rail, parks, everything. We didn't leave anything unturned. Officials who would turn their backs on us when we tried to negotiate in a civilized way were brought to their knees. ( ) Stores on Main Street that we picketed–well, Vasco always says Bry's -- we picketed down to the last brick. [Laughter.] Because they ended up--. We had different hours and schedules for the sit-ins. Well, it was picketing and sitting-in during those early years, the very early '60s.

EG: Was there any violence from the police or brutality?

MS: Very little. Now, that's something I think the redneck leadership in the white community. And we had perhaps the most learned, sophisticated leadership in the black community. But they--. Like, let me give you an example, our chief of police, Armour. God, he hated us with a venom. But when schools were first ordered--. See, there are so many stories along the way. This was in '61, I think. They picked four schools. Four of us, Russ Sugarmon, Maxine [Smith], Jesse Turner [Sr.], I don't know who the fourth one was--. Was that A.W.?

VS: ( )

MS: I'm not sure. I know his kid. He ran ( ) just before he was ( ). Have you talked to Billy?

EG: Billy who?

MS: Billy Kyles.

EG: Oh, no.

MS: He came to be with PUSH. PUSH I don't think was, no, PUSH wasn't

formed until after Martin Luther King because Jesse Jackson was here.

EG: Oh, the Rainbow PUSH, okay.

MS: Yeah. We had to take these kids, say, a half hour before. We had to go and hand walk. It may have been a half hour, one end was the same number of hours. They maybe got there first and left late, last, whatever it was. I was getting off the police. We had to walk these kids. It was amazing. These six-year-old kids. They just had the spirit we had. It was embedded in them. These cops just like you walk in a line as you were approaching the school. Oh, you could hear muttering nigger this or anything they wanted to--. But Claude Armour, the police director--no nonsense, complete segregationist. He had defied them to do *anything* to those kids and to keep peace. That's what the word, a mandate from the top can be good no matter what the reason is. It was very, very difficult to get our kids--. It's such a long, long story.

EG: I know.

MS: We went knocking on doors when they finally decided--. See, we had filed a school suit by then. The people sitting in the courts, you know, judges, school officials--. You know, I'm a born optimist--just lying, "We don't have a segregated school system. It just happens that all black teachers and students are in one group of schools and the same for whites." We follow the Tennessee People Placement Law, which had twenty stipulations. Crazy as heck. I sure hope that's in some of our papers. But it's a long--. In fact, it's not completely out of court now. But, it's a long process of lies and whatever.

Of course, the school board didn't like me because I'm a member of the board. They thought that I was a *spy*. The executive secretary of the NAACP being on the

school board, you know, tried to find reasons to have me legally taken off, but they couldn't. The president of the John Birch Society was one of the first too. [He sat on the school board at the same time as Mrs. Smith.] [Laughs.] *Not* that I compare us in any way with them. But we've made it. We've made it. ( ) We don't have the quality of people running for office [now] like the Julian Bonds in Georgia or--. Nowadays, it's out of self-aggrandizement. We could've--I'm getting in Russell's [Sugarmon's] territory. Back when John F. Kennedy [ran], Tennessee went [for] Nixon. They could count and plot the black precincts in Memphis and knew that nearly 100 percent or whatever percentage of black people--. ( ) We were not looking for anything, not looking for anything. Russ [Sugarmon], A.W. [Willis], [H. T.] Lockard, Ben Hooks–I don't know if Ben Hooks was here then–but any of them could've gotten an appointment because we were active. But, we never thought about it. Never thought about it. Odell Horton who lived right around the corner was [the] first federal judge. He was a young man, bright, honest, and we sent his thing, and he was a lawyer just like ours were. It just never occurred to us that we--. We never asked *who* would go through the door, but all we wanted to do was *open* the door. And I must say we opened many a doors.

EG: How were you able to have such a unity? I mean reading about Memphis and all that--. It was just incredible how strong the NAACP was and they [scholars] said that SNCC wasn't active or CORE.

MS: No, they weren't here. They've made efforts since. I think first of all it's dedication. Then, I have a problem with folks calling me a leader. I'm a participant. But see, if you're going to call me, Russ or any of—they certainly deserve to be--

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

MS: It was being absolutely, a people *absolutely* denied access to anything–jobs. Those things, I think. Memphis probably was a little more united than others, but somehow with those--. Well, luck too. [Laughter.] We somehow made it. In a sense we were the model for other communities.

EG: How did you form strategies? What was your decision-making process?

MS: The four or five of us did live here then. Even after we left we--. But early in the movement, on the floor of my living room, [Laughs.] mostly ours. Jesse Turner who's gone, oh gosh. His son is here now, president of the same bank he was president of. Five or six of us--. We would map out--. A. W. Willis had the most imagination. Sometimes on the demonstration, we dressed like convicts. [Laughs]. The day that, Vasco could tell you, he [Vasco] was arrested on the bus. We had several teams catching different bus lines. They were just popping up everywhere. The police were so frustrated.

EG: Was that the freedom rides?

MS: No, that was just the Memphis transit, the local buses.

EG: Right, because I saw that there were "neighborhood freedom rides." Is that what they were termed?

MS: Well, the freedom rides. I don't think we called them freedom rides. No. The Freedom Rides came about '64, but this was before. We didn't know the terminology. Vasco, we never called your buses--. I was out of town when you got arrested. I got home and he was in jail. We didn't call them freedom rides. It was the same. We just rode the buses, and he [Vasco] will go into more detail on that. I was just

telling her how the police didn't know which way to go. [Laughs.] They'd get a bus of--. "You darkies" are on there. Then someone would call, "They're over here now, they're over there now." We just kept them frustrated. We kept them guessing. They knew we had darn good participation. Darn good leadership.

I never will forget. Before the kids went out, I would always give them this lecture, "You can't be violent. You cannot hit back. You cannot cuss back. You are on a mission, and you have to prove yourselves." The peace. I don't know how I did it or how the kids did it. Generally we had almost no violence from 500 arrests. But there was a kid that--. I don't know where he is. Big, strapping boy. He was about 15 years old. He was in high school. And the hot seat was that Walgreen's or ( ) at Madison and Maine. A lot of sailors hung out there, military. It was a big naval base. Those young white guys--they would pour ketchup on those kids. They would tear their clothes. They would burn them with cigarettes. Once this young fellow--as I say he was big--. He jumped up and got three of them and beat the living hell out of them. [Laughter.] And the last they saw, they said, "It was trail dust, Mrs. Smith. Running down Main." But I had to call him in. I had to take him out of the line. I wanted to give him a medal. [Laughter.] ( ) But that's discipline.

She was just asking how Memphis was able to come together in such unity. An example, politically, Clement, who was Clements? His son is still in—

VS: Governor.

MS: Well, his son is ( ). He was governor [Frank Clement]. We supported him statewide. He won with 100,000 black votes [which] gave him more than enough margin. All right, the year of the Civil Rights Act, '64, he decided to run for—I don't

remember what year because we had put him in the governor--the U.S. Congress. Ross Bass who represented our district was one of the three or four whites who voted for the Civil Rights Act. Clement decided to run for this seat. In his politicking, he said, "Now, had I been there"–now, he's speaking to the white community, not thinking about 100,000 black folks who made him governor--"If I had been your congressman, I wouldn't have voted for the Civil Rights Act." So, he *didn't make it*. We have no permanent enemies, no permanent friends. It's just permanent evil and discrimination and racism. But that shows how we could--. We weren't tied to anybody. Nobody could, nobody's ever offered me or offered us as a group pay offs.

I have folks say, some of my fellow politicians now--. ( ) I said, "Nobody's offered me anything." I was very sarcastic because I don't think they would question my integrity, not just mine, but I'm talking about our group. A lot of that's happened now but oft times when ( ). As I said, we didn't ask for ( ). We wanted politicians to hire a person as a result of black support. You would hire a person. Now, it was *token*. But that proves that in too many instances [he] looked at the white man who hired him as his savior, his reason for being there, rather than the thousands of black people who had voted for him. That was the beginning of the fragmentation. They'd go out and form their own group, organization. They may not have been in our--. They didn't have to be in our organization, of course, but we just--. ( ) Russell will tell you. If Vasco ran, and I ran, and the screening committee said Vasco was going to be the candidate. We voted for Vasco. We didn't jump. We didn't. We were loyal to our procedures. I guess all these things, I'm just trying to say, gave us the successes that we did have.

EG: Yeah. What accounts for the [fact that]–you know there was so little

violence in Memphis?

MS: Now that is, as I said, every day with the kids we drilled them. As I said, respect for leadership. This is, this ( ) is not on that subject I was speaking at Leadership Memphis. This was () that first city council that if a different vote wouldn't have, Martin King would have never been here. But that's getting a long way ( ). But I have to say that the quality of those rednecks, and we certainly put the best feet forward as we could of blacks. In most instances, [we were] much sharper than the whites. We had civic leaders, corporation leaders in the white community. We were philosophically worlds apart. We never agreed on anything. But I'm just saying the caliber of the leadership where they would keep us by other means but never by violence. So you had your cream of the crop, whatever that means, of the white community as well as the black community taking these positions. They probably wanted to kill us, might of had us killed. [Laughs.] But they were gentlemen and corporate leaders, business leaders in the community.

EG: Sure. How were you able to, this is going back a little bit. I read that you were a membership coordinator too. And how--

MS: Yeah, I was the first membership coordinator. They said, "What do you want to do?" I said, "Membership." I didn't know one.

EG: How were you able to increase membership?

MS: Well, I think the mood of the times. I don't know if [many people] had ever been asked. I don't know if it had been--. They were two dollars then. The adult membership, I think, was two dollars. But, on the same wave, we really used the structure–. See, our ward precinct people, our civic clubs, the neighborhoods, the

churches. I set up a number and we still use those divisions now. I guess during that first or second year, if we had 300, we went from 300 to five thousand, five or six thousand and a few years later, over 10,000. That's not a lot of people, but that was the biggest branch in the South. We probably still are. People were just in the midst of the most exciting thing that had happened in Memphis. There was a ray of hope that we would get out from under the yoke of *complete* discrimination and racism. You know, there's so many beautiful people–Lorene Thomas, Mr. McGee. Nobody will ever know their names. But they were back there writing hundreds of memberships. It was a matter of *love* and wanting to go somewhere, tired of the old status quo. When I say *love*, the first year I ran for school board--.

EG: What year was that?

MS: '71. The night I was to announce--. I had no intentions of running. We led the boycotts and everything. See, we boycotted the schools. But I never had *any* idea that I would run for school board. Finally, somebody started [saying], "Maxine, we got to put our best foot forward. ( )" Somebody leaked it to the paper that I was running. Somehow I got it. But the first day–the point I'm making–I was to have my kick off that night. I had my announcement. The news was on the radio. I had a heart attack that day, the day I was to announce to have my campaign open. I'm lying in the hospital. I had formally announced with my hand pointed out. Smitty said, "Mama, you ( )." The love I felt. I'll never forget people. I really have a love affair with humanity. People think I'm mean and evil and when I have to be, I can be. Right Vasco when you make me mad? [Laughs.]

VS: ( ).

MS: Let me just finish this. Vasco, just let me tell you this. You can ( )

VS: I'll just give you two sentences. Maxine made one appearance during her *entire* campaign, one public appearance. Volunteers opened her headquarters, got her literature, put up her signs, made the radio announcements, did everything. I mean they campaigned like you've never seen, block by block.

MS: It's the same structure.

VS: Finally, she was just about to go crazy, and we let her come to a rally one night. They brought her there--.

MS: In a truck. [Laughter.]

VS: She only stayed just a short time. And other than that one appearance, she never made another appearance during that campaign. And yet, she kicked the hell out of her opposition.

EG: Wow.

MS: I was so scared I would have to have a run off.

VS: ( ) were volunteers.

MS: That was quite an experience.

EG: When people called you--. I mean what opposition did you face or how did that make you feel in terms of--. I know you mentioned a lot of people didn't like you for what you were doing. Did that empower you more or what did you do?

MS: Well, there's a magazine article, "Maxine." Just Maxine because that is how my name is generally used. "The most loved, the most hated." I think that was on the front of the magazine, or somebody sent me, framed it. But somehow, you know, I've had a lot of [violence?] come my way and so has Vasco. We've had as many under the

beds. But that's not just to Maxine and Vasco. That's to legends ( ) who were there, like I said, whose names never will be known. Many who got out there and knocked on the doors for me to get on the school board. I'm losing my point. I feel so indebted. I feel so grateful to have been a part of this.

EG: Yes, oh, absolutely. Did the Freedom Movement, did that start with the sit-ins? When did that begin?

MS: In Memphis?

EG: Yeah.

MS: That was March of '60. That's when the sit-ins, you know, [first started at] the library. They spread all over everywhere, you know, everything in the city. Oh gosh, we filed so many lawsuits. It was amazing. Our lawyers–well, we never gave them any money. You're talking about volunteers. We just didn't have any money to give them. Everybody gave whatever talent they had full force.

EG: When you say everybody, what do you mean?

MS: I mean like the lawyers, the people, the people who went to jail, the 500 arrests during the sit-in movement. The ministers opened their doors. People gave up job opportunities, but they gave like the widow's mite. It was a crusade really. It was more than a movement. Unfortunately, as we say, the fragmentation, and we saw a little success. We sort of got complacent. The South had with that continued push could have far exceeded our brothers in the North. See, they never had laws. They were, what was it? De jure. We were, which are we by laws? De jure, that's de facto. Whatever. So they never really just looked ( ) black folks up North thought we were crazy. They were up there enjoying everything. They weren't enjoying a damn thing. [Laughter.]

VS: ( ).

MS: They didn't even know how segregated--. At least, we lived--. Our neighborhoods were *very* integrated then. ( ). Black folks and white folks lived together. That's how we *knew* each other. It might have been paternalistic or maternalistic or whatever you want to call it. But at least we *knew* each other. We played together. They didn't care. We'd fight and not racially--just like kids would fight. Nobody cared because when they went to school, we had two we could go to, and they have them everywhere. See, this is back in the '30s and all. Pete [Ariata?], who's one of our mayor's main advisors, his daddy owned the grocery store. He was on one block. There weren't but maybe five houses between us and them -- I saw him this week -- as kids you know. I saw him at something. We have this big Memphis in May barbeque here now. We were in the mayor's–everybody has a tent or booth or something, eating barbeque. He said, "Maxine, you don't remember me." I said, "No." He said, "This is Pete, Pete [Ariata?]." I said, "Oh boy, you weren't ugly, you weren't old, you weren't bald-headed." [Laughter.] Friendship from kids. Every time we see each other, I say, "I used to kick your butt." [Laughter.] What I'm saying [with] all this is we did know each other. In the North, it's relegated to the conclaves ( ).

EG: Do you think that was a big factor in what made the desegregation go fairly smoothly.

MS: I think, yeah, because they were lulled into a false sense of security. They were all right. But in a sense, they weren't *any* better, maybe not as *well* off as we were, because at least we *knew*. [Interruption].

VS: Let me give ( ). I went to Meharry Dental School ( ) that was one

of the [talking simultaneously]. You can go.

MS: She may have some more questions.

VS: ( )

EG: Okay. I'll get to you. I'll ask you about that.

MS: You want to stick a pin on what point.

VS: About these blacks in the North not knowing that they were segregated.

EG: Oh, okay. We'll get to that.

MS: He developed that. Vasco, take notes. Because she wants to have a tape of us separately.

VS: Cut it off for a minute and let me just ask you something because ( ).

EG: All right.

MS: We had two state legislators that were so dumb. They didn't know their way to Nashville, well, one in particular.

EG: They didn't?

MS: James I. Taylor.

EG: James I. Taylor.

MS: Yeah. He's dead now. But Russ and A.W., there were some family problems, mix up there. Because of stuff of interracial nature, they lost. They were ( ) A.W. was the first ( ) politician.

VS: Very brilliant.

MS: Brilliant. A different kind of brilliance than Russell. But anyway, that's when the nasty stuff started, and they got beat even [in their races for] state legislature.

EG: You mean in terms of like the divorce or--.

MS: Yeah, it was involved, you know.

EG: Okay. I heard a little about that.

MS: Well, we won't expand on that. [Laughter.] But anyway, the two folks that beat them. One was James I. Taylor. They assigned him to a committee that didn't exist, and he was just as happy. He didn't know that he--. I mean that's how *dumb* he was.

EG: He didn't know the committee didn't exist? [Laughs.]

MS: Well, I may be stretching it. Vasco will stretch it more than I.

VS: But that's true.

MS: But this was when we said, "We *got to get somebody* to replace James I. Taylor." We found—well, I can't call him "little Harold" because I still call the son "little Harold." But he [Harold Ford, Sr.] came forth, and we ran him to beat James I. Taylor through the same network that we've been talking about. And that was the beginning of the Ford family era. They are some hell of politicians. They are something *else* because that's their professions ever since.

VS: Maxine, you're getting off from what she was saying.

MS: No, but I was just saying--. Just when she says, everybody else, but, to bring that in, that's a part of the same story. You see what I'm saying?

EG: Yeah.

MS: That's all I was saying because ( ). So I just wanted you to know that's ( ).

EG: Oh, that gives me a better perspective.

MS: That's all I wanted ( ).

EG: What caused you to finally, I read you suspended demonstrations like in November. What caused you to end the Freedom Movement?

MS: Well, as we had attempted to negotiate in the beginning, they asked for negotiations. Vasco can give you more numbers on the drop in sales. It was almost--.

VS: Forty-one percent. Sales for the year were down on Main Street forty-one percent.

EG: Forty-one percent.

MS: Eventually those stores--.

VS: That's enough to bring anybody to their knees.

MS: Uh-huh. And, with the promises, we just didn't ask for enough with the bathrooms, the water fountains, the dining rooms, everything.

VS: Employment.

MS: Employment, but we just got token. It was very token. So, that's why we had to go back. I'll tell you when we went back, what was it, in '62. It was right after Medgar [Evers] died because we got fired up. We were there. I hugged Medgar. I said, "I'm so proud of you." I just hugged him. I said, "Don't let anything stop you." He never got home after that.

EG: That really served to spur you to further [activism]--.

MS: Um hmm. In '63, after that, instead of just picketing the stores, we took the picket lines all through the stores, rode the escalators.

EG: Really.

MS: They were scared to arrest us by then because the cops wouldn't get us unless they filed charges.

EG: That must have been, was that fun? I mean--

MS: It was. [Laughter.]

VS: I've forgotten ( ).

MS: You don't remember riding that escalator up and down Goldsmith's, walking through banks. See that was another one. We took care of the banks. You remember that, going into the banks. You know they wanted to arrest us. [Laughter.] ( ), after a two-year of hiatus of doing nothing, we really want jobs. We want our piece of the pie. ( ) Everybody says economic development but by no means--. [Interruption–Phone rings.] That was generally. You want to get that Vasco.

EG: I was wondering what has driven you all these years? I mean, it's just amazing to me--.

MS: I wish I knew. I'm stubborn, determined. I just won't turn loose. They thought I was crazy, not having--. ( ) After my heart attack, I had, oh, 26 years ago, quadruple bypass surgery. I didn't know you were supposed to die in ten to fifteen years. So, since I didn't know it, I didn't die, and I don't plan to die. Vasco can probably describe it because he gets so mad at me. I'm 70 years old. And when I came off the NAACP, I've been doing a lot of volunteering, ( ) nationally. But I'm a born optimist. We're going to win this thing. I won't see it. But I'm so grateful for having been a part of it. Even when I was in the hospital with open heart surgery, I never missed a month of doing a report. Vasco didn't know it, but I had folks bringing the books in. When he was coming, I'd hide them under the mattress. Once I'm involved, it's crazy. I can't turn loose.

VS: She still is.

MS: You said I'm still crazy. But it's just, I mean it's a drive. It's a drive. ( ) I say God let me ( ). I remember we used to--

VS: Everybody asks her to do things, and she won't turn them down. But everybody takes advantage of her in that they say, "I only want you to do this for me, Maxine, this little bit." If you got a lot people asking for a little bit, ain't nothing left. That's the way she is.

EG: Wow.

MS: You were about to ask something.

EG: Oh, are you religious at all?

VS: Yeah.

MS: Oh very religious. Yeah.

EG: And that played a big part in--.

MS: Oh yeah, we both came from -- not even knowing each other when we grew up -- very religious families. I couldn't go to the movies on Sunday. I was a Baptist. I had to be at Sunday School, an 11:00 service, and a 3:00 service, ( ). I used to say, "When I get grown, I ain't never going to church no more." Thank God, I haven't gotten that grown yet. I'm 70 years old. But that was just instilled. You know, I'm certainly not without sin. We cuss, we fuss, we drink, we party. We have our--but I have a profound belief in a Supreme Being.

EG: Yeah.

MS: Like Vasco watches some of this, He or She, that Being is watching us too.

EG: Is there anything else that you'd like to add?

MS: ( ) if you think of something. I think he [Vasco] can fill in the holes on the movement. But my mother passed away, what was it, two or three years ago. She was a saint. Oh God, that's another whole personal story. She'd call, "Baby, is everything all

right?" I said, "Oh, you've got nothing to worry about." When we were charged with contributing to the delinquency of a minor [with the 1969] school boycott. Had 67,000 on Black Monday [black children to stay home from school.] That was a little serious. I said, "My lawyers say everything fine." She never interfered. She didn't worry. Now Vasco--. Our parents are a little bit different. Well, the loving and everything [is the same]. But Mama didn't want her baby--. When he got arrested--. [Laughs.] Oh, I came home from Chicago–I think from somewhere–that was the bus arrest. He got arrested a lot of times, and Mama would about have a fit. ( ). I said, "Mama, I've been arrested." "Oh, that's all right, but that's my baby." [Laughs.] Mama would worry more. See when they couldn't, we had our phones, all these years, everybody got an unlisted number. They called Mama and Daddy. That would upset them. They would threaten us. They would threaten them and tell them what they were going to do. So that was--.

EG: They threatened your parents?

MS: Well, I guess they couldn't get mine through my name. It was Atkins. They couldn't. But both of us were Vasco Smiths. Vasco if you tell them one more thing. I'm going to tell them when I was trying to get in Memphis State, way back there. This was funny. We used to sit around then. We used to, I would always, I was telling her that all this stuff was plotted mostly at our house but in other houses [too.] This was back in '57. But, Laura [Sugarmon] and I applied for Memphis State. We'd have these calls. *Late at night*, they started. *Late at night.* "Maxine, if you're going to--they'd call Laura--the same thing. ", if you come to Memphis State"--excuse their French--"I'm going to fuck you everyday." I said, "Oh, good. I like that." [Laughter.] "Can I major in it?" [Laughter.] Laura was screaming, and they didn't call me anymore. [Laughter.] ( ) I'm

going to let you have it, Vasco. I'm going to try to pay some bills. I'm going to be here for a little while. Then, I got to get out.

EG: Quickly, what was your mom's name?

MS: Georgia.

EG: Georgia.

MS: Aurel Atkins. ( ).

EG: What was your dad's name?

MS: Joseph P. Atkins.

EG: Okay, great.

MS: I got the fire. He died when I was 9 years old. ( ). He was a postman. Back in the '30s, it was one of the best jobs that blacks could have. So, we were pretty good livers compared to--. His buddies would say, "You're rich compared to us." But he stayed in trouble with his bosses down at the post office. He didn't take any stuff racially. He passed in '39. So really it's his spirit I think that's inborn. [That's why, as a child, I said] I want to see *Mr.* Joseph Atkins. Clem and George just said, "Mommy, make Maxine stop!" But widowed with nine [under] 13 year-old-children; she never worked ( ). She had to get out and do both and she taught herself. There's a lot of sacrifice that you don't know. ( ).

EG: All right.

END OF INTERVIEW