

Interview

with

BETTY ANN KNUDSEN and BETH McALLISTER

July 25, 2006

By Robin Payne

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

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Interviewee: Betty Ann Knudsen and Beth McAllister

Interviewer: Robin Payne

Interview date: July 25, 2006

Location: Raleigh, Wake County, North Carolina

Length: 1 cassette; approximately 70 minutes

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

RP: This is an interview with Betty [Ann] Knudsen and Beth McAllister on July 25, 2006 in Betty [Ann] Knudsen's home in Raleigh, North Carolina.

BAK: I'm from Georgia. Savannah, Georgia was in those days during the depression almost fifty percent black. My father was in construction and he always hired a lot of black people and tried to treat them with respect, and we always had a black maid. There were four children in our family, and in those days, you had a big kettle out in the backyard and a fire pit and you boiled the water and put the white clothes in first and boiled them. Then you rinsed them in a galvanized tub and hung them out on a line and boiled the next batch of clothes. My mother always treated the help with utmost respect and regard. We couldn't have survived with four children and many dirty clothes and everything as we had if we hadn't had help. She grew up in East Tennessee in Johnson City where there were no blacks and so she had never been taught to be prejudiced and she never did teach us to be prejudiced.

Then we moved to Atlanta at the beginning of World War II and my father was gone because he was in charge of building a lot of air bases and training bases. Actually, he was in charge of building the Bell Bomber Plant that made the B-29s that dropped the bombs in Japan. And I graduated from high school in Atlanta and I wanted to go to Georgia Tech. I was going

to be an architect; that was my ambition. Georgia Tech did not allow any women on the campus, so just out of hand, I was rejected and that made me a feminist. Always after that, I was very much interested in women having their rights and would get very indignant when they wouldn't; it didn't do any good.

So I went to the University of Georgia and I majored in psychology instead. Peter and I graduated from the same high school, but he graduated the year before I did and after a year at Georgia Tech—he could go and my brothers could go, but I couldn't go to Georgia Tech.

BM: But you couldn't.

BK: Yeah—he was called up into service and went off to Guam where he served most of his time at the Airborne. When he came back, I finished college before he did and got a job and was working, and he finished college, and we got married and we went off to Missouri where he was working on his masters' degree in physics. We lived in Rolla, Missouri, which is just a little town and I don't think that there were any, there certainly were not many blacks in the community and that never did come up as a real issue. Then I got pregnant with Erik and that winter that we were in Rolla, it snowed and the weather was cold and people got snowed in. We decided we were going somewhere South so that we wouldn't have that problem (laughs). Erik was due to be born in the first of November, so we transferred to Florida State and () they had their first measurable snow in a century in Tallahassee while we were there.

Then we went back to Atlanta when he got his masters' degree where he was a professor of physics at Oglethorpe University, and we lived on the campus. From there, we went to Chapel Hill where he was working on his PhD, and he didn't get his PhD because they were supposed to hire this big high-powered physicist to come and take over the department, but the legislature in its wisdom didn't appropriate the money to buy the equipment, so the man

wouldn't come, so Peter ended up with no major professor. In the meantime, our neighbor worked for the placement office in the campus at UNC and he called Peter one day and begged him to come to an interview with Chemstrand, because they were always there and nobody would interview and they were really looking for a physicist. So as a favor to the neighbor, Peter went to the interview, and () they offered him a good job and a good salary. So we left Chapel Hill and went to Decatur, Alabama and that's where Karen was born.

By that time, we had three children and they were born in three different states. I was active in church work and ministering to, quote, "the needy," but that was the only involvement I had. We didn't have any groundswell for integration in Decatur, Alabama, and from Decatur, Alabama, we moved to the Research Triangle Park and that was when I began to really get involved through my church to begin with. I was appointed to the Urban Affairs Committee of the diocese, the Episcopal diocese, of North Carolina. We supported the Malcolm X Liberation University and (laughs) almost caused a war in the Episcopal Church. A lot of the congregation quit pledging because we helped Malcolm X Liberation University. Fortunately or unfortunately, I didn't have anything to do with it, because I got appointed right after that deed had been done, so I got the results, but I didn't have a role in it. That was the beginnings of my involvement in civil rights, was through the Episcopal Church.

RP: Okay, and this was in the 1950s?

BAK: Yes—no, 1960s. We moved here in 1960 and I worked with some people to start the Episcopal Forum, which was made up of St. Ambrose, which was a black church, St. Marks, and the Church of the Good Shepard; there were three churches that were involved in it. And we worked, we had the first integrated daily vacation Bible school in the community out at Umstead Park. Our church had a little field organ, a little pump organ that we put on the bus

and took out to Umstead Park and had Bible school. Peter and I hired a young black woman who had three children, a single parent who was on welfare, and helped her get her GED and helped her with her children and eventually, her one daughter graduated in the nursing program from Wake Tech and the other one is a secretary. So that gave me a lot of pleasure.

RP: And were you working all during this time?

BAK: I was the Christian education director at the Church of the Good Shepard.

RP: And at that point did you start to become involved in the civil rights movement outside of your church at all?

BAK: Yeah. In 1966, I joined the League of Women Voters because I had been president of EC Brooks Elementary School, and I had a PTA meeting about how your local schools are funded, and food for an army, and sent out fifty-five hundred announcements of that meeting and invited the chairman of the board of the county commissioners and other important people and only twenty-five people came, half of whom were teachers, made me so mad. So I asked the chairman of the board, if the PTA wasn't interested, who was interested in seeing the schools were properly funded and he said, "The League." So the next day, I went out and looked up the League of Women Voters and joined the School Funding Committee and before long, was president of the School Funding Committee and working not only on integration, which I'll tell you some stories about, but also on merger. We had two school systems, the Raleigh system and the Wake County system. So that was my first real involvement in politics.

RP: Okay, so then maybe before we start talking more about that, we can give Beth a chance to say a little bit about how she came to be involved in activism.

BM: I grew up in Charlotte, North Carolina. My mother and father are both from South Carolina. They always voted and they always read the newspaper and knew what the issues were and of course, I just grew up thinking that's the way things should be; you should be active in your community. They were not political necessarily in the sense of supporting candidates, getting involved in campaigns, and that kind of thing. They didn't take it to that level, but they still believed you had a responsibility as a citizen to do that.

I think probably there are a couple things that happened that I see as turning points in my life. I was seventeen years old and entering my senior year in high school. There appeared in the paper the picture of a young woman named Dorothy Counts. She is now Dr. Dorothy Counts and she lives in Chicago and the only way I know that is because the *News and Observer* ran an article about her. She was coming to my high school. Now the previous year, you had Little Rock and those kinds of places where there was a lot of violence. My mother and father didn't really seem to want to focus on that. They pointed her out to me in the paper and said, "This young woman is coming to your school." That's all they said; they just wanted me to be aware.

I came early because I was on the newspaper, the school newspaper staff, and we had a meeting and after the meeting, I came out a side door and I was stunned. It looked like the Norman Rockwell painting where the little black girl is walking down the street with four federal marshals; that's exactly what it looked like. I looked at the end of our driveway. We were just absolutely surrounded by federal marshals and out of one of those cars came that young woman and she was surrounded; there were four who walked with her up that walkway. I stood there and I was absolutely riveted to that spot because the person in that space, in that place, who had dignity was the little black girl. There were white people lining the walkway up

to the school. They were adults. And they were spitting on her and they were throwing rocks and they were picking up sticks and throwing them.

I was just astounded that people would treat other people that way. I had an aunt, the matriarch of the clan (laughs), and she had an African-American couple who were her friends, but they also, one of them kept house and one of them was the gardener. And she just loved those two people and when my grandmother died, her mother, the first person she called was Pauline, this black woman. I had not been taught that you were supposed to hate people who had black skin, brown skin.

When I saw this going on out front, I came back into the school and entered the auditorium from a side door and watched this young woman come into the auditorium and when she came down the aisle, all of the white students moved out of the way and moved away from her. Then I watched her for two weeks eat by herself every day. Now I didn't go over and say, "Let me eat with you." I was just kind of taking it in and was astounded by this and that radicalized me. That was the first, really the first step, in my becoming politically active and interested in social justice work, because nobody should treat another human being that way. Because as I said, she was the one who I admired, because she had the dignity.

Then my freshman year in college, I went to UNC-G, which was then the women's college, and I was called, as were the rest of the students in February, to a meeting in our auditorium and the chancellor was up front and he said that there was a very volatile situation downtown and under no circumstances were we to go downtown. Of course, I couldn't wait to get out of that auditorium and get downtown, because I knew that history was being made in Greensboro, North Carolina at the lunch counter at Woolworth's. So I went trotting down there and when I got there, I realized why he had said under no circumstances to go down there,

because the tension in that room you could cut with a knife. And again, there were just these four African-American men sitting at the lunch counter, they were from A&T and they had asked for a cup of coffee, but again there were people spitting on them and calling them names and trying to put their cigarettes out in the back of the raincoat that one of them was wearing. So I just decided that I would stay and stand in solidarity with these students. I mean, they weren't much older than I was.

That was the second thing that happened in my life that radicalized me and it wasn't radical in the sense of violence and destruction; it was radicalized in the sense of how I saw the world and how I saw people in the world. Much as Betty Ann has talked about, it came out of my church and my religious background, because I believed the Golden Rule: you do unto others as you want them to do unto you. And I would have to say that growing up in the South in the church was also something that radicalized me and taught me that I had a responsibility to fight for the rights of people who had no rights and who could not have a voice, did not have a voice.

I graduated from the women's college and married a young man who was getting a PhD in computer science. We went to Indiana and I met there a professor from Virginia who was teaching a course on prejudice and I thought, "Now this is interesting. Here's this Southerner and I'm a Southerner and we're up here in the Midwest teaching people about how to be fair and about prejudice." And it was a good semester and I learned a great deal from her. I also learned, I knew this, but it was affirmed for me, prejudice is everywhere. I mean, people made, in the little school where I was teaching school, people made fun of my southern accent and poked fun at that, but what I learned was that they were just as prejudiced as anyone in the South could ever be.

Uh, we – David McAllister was my husband. We wound up at Chapel Hill just like Betty Ann and Pete, that little hotbed of political activity over there (laughs). David was getting a PhD and his professor, the person he needed to study with, was at UNC. I was surprised. I thought we were going to California. I was all excited I was going to get to go to California and see another part of the world, but Dr. Ray Brooks was at Chapel Hill, so that's where we went. I had a son, Tim, who was born in Chapel Hill, has tar all over his heels. Actually, he graduated from State and he will not allow me to give him anything Carolina blue. It was about that time that we moved to Raleigh and David was going to teach at NC State and finish up his thesis; he had finished all his coursework at Chapel Hill. So we moved to Raleigh in 1973 and we moved into what was then the northernmost housing development, Northclift, and I met and was co-chair of a garden club with a friend, Bonnie Mettinger, who is still a friend. We radicalized the garden club. We had a candidates' forum for all the city council candidates and Ron Kirschbaum was elected out of that group Ron was running. That was way, way, way a long time ago.

BAK: It was early '70s.

BM: Pardon?

BAK: It was early 70s, because Randy Hester was elected in '75.

BM: Yes, yes. We had a breast cancer clinic for women. Just we did everything but grow flowers and both of us decided that we needed to affiliate with a group of women who were active in the community and so we sought out the League of Women Voters and Bonnie and I joined the League of Women Voters. It was in the League that I met another friend, Sylvia Arnold, and Sylvia got tired of hearing the anti-ERA women sort of act like they had a corner on God and motherhood and family. So she put together a spontaneous meeting over at

Meredith College in the student union of wives and mothers for ERA. Bonnie called me up, she said, "Beth, Sylvia's doing this thing over there. Grab Tim and come on," so off we went to Meredith College and it was good to be in that room. I mean, gosh, there must have been two or three hundred women. I mean, it was a huge group, huge turnout, and Sylvia's always very eloquent and articulate, but you know, it just said to me that this is a group that I want to be with and of course, many of these women were League members. That's the grapevine that it had tapped. (laughs)

RP: So is that when you first met Betty Ann, through the League of Women Voters?

BM: Yes.

BAK: From '73 to '75, I was president of the League.

BM: Right. When I joined the League of Women Voters, Betty Ann was the president. That's how I met Betty Ann.

RP: Okay, and you had already been a member for several years.

BAK: I joined in 1966 and then I became School Study chair and that was about the time the federal government was trying to force integration by saying if you don't do this, you will not get funds for your Title 1 programs or your lunch programs or this program and that program. So the school board called a public hearing in Memorial Auditorium on whether they should or should not bus and Memorial Auditorium was packed and they had sign-up sheets in the front of people who were speaking in favor of integration and those who were against it.

There must have been a hundred people who signed up against it. Three people signed up for it and I was one of the three, as School Study chair to give testimony that we supported integration because it was fair and equitable and that was the only way these children were going to get an education. But when I put my foot on the first step to go up to the stage at

Memorial Auditorium: "Boo, hiss." I was so glad we weren't outside. I knew I would have had rotten tomatoes and eggs and all kinds of stuff thrown at me. Then I got up to where the podium is and I had to stand there for about five minutes or so until the hubbub settled down so I could give my testimony. So I gave the testimony and the minute I got through and started to walk back off of the stage: "Boo, hiss," and all that all over again. But when I got to the bottom of the steps, Mary Perry () was standing there, a young African-American woman, and she said, "Where do I join the League of Women Voters?" So we got one of our first African-American members from that.

RP: Was that something that continued to happen after that? Was the League of Women Voters a fairly integrated organization in Raleigh?

BAK: Well, we were not as integrated as we wanted to be, but we were integrated.

BM: We are still, still working to recruit African-American women. We believe very strongly in integration and in justice for all people. I mean, the League has positions that are very clearly for justice for all people.

BAK: And we would meet over at the African-American Y on Hargett Street.

BM: Yes.

BAK: Once a month.

BM: We have some, but not nearly as many as we would like.

BAK: It's been a real disappointment.

RP: So, for both of you, was your involvement in civil rights movement something that led to your interest in women's issues as well?

BM: Yes.

BAK: Yeah, sure.

BM: Yes, absolutely yes for me, for sure with the experiences that I have described for you; it was standing with the African-American community. So yes, that led me to an interest in women's rights.

RP: And was that also true for you, Betty Ann?

BAK: Yes, but there was another issue, that was involvement in schools, that led up to that and that was the whole idea of merger. We had two systems, like a donut with a hole in the middle, and the money was appropriated to the school systems based on the taxable value of the property in that district, which meant the city of Raleigh got more money for its school system than the county because it had a larger tax base and it wasn't equitable. Children were not treated with any kind of equity. So this was an issue that the League took up. We were the only organization that started out supporting merger and ended up supporting merger, because what happened to begin with, the city of Raleigh was against merger and the county was for it. Then the Harris Nuclear Power Plant was built and suddenly the tax base in the county went up and so the county became against merger and the city became for merger; they just went "whoosh" like this. And the League faithfully stood by the pro-merger stance through the whole thing.

The finally, after elections failed and all kinds of problems, we worked politically through the legislature, blessed Al Adams, and we got legislation passed to merge the two school systems and that's when I decided to run for the Board of County Commissioners because I wanted to be sure the Commission appropriated the money to merge in the correct, equitable manner. So we got merged in '76 and I ran for the Board of County Commissioners in '76 and I got elected. Actually, I got more votes than Jim Hunt did that year. (laughs) And that's because I organized the way the League organized at the grassroots level. We had a lot of

people, three hundred volunteers that worked on that campaign, still is a model of community involvement.

BM: The League is well-known for being able to organize groups of people and to plan, and you or I learned many, many skills in the League, had some good mentors like Betty Ann Knudsen.

BAK: I had a good protégé.

BM: She taught me everything I know. (laughs)

BAK: Well, not really.

RP: So what were some of the things that you would do in the League to achieve this sort of grassroots activism and get the community more involved?

BAK: Well, we registered people to vote and we worked very hard to change the manner in which the elections took place for the Raleigh City Council. To begin with, all of the elections were at-large and all the members of the Council came from the Hayes Barton area, from the affluent community. The black community didn't have any representation at all. So we got enough signatures to call for a special election so that we elected directly the mayor, two members of the City Council at-large, and then we had five districts. It was easy to run from a district because you didn't represent as many people. That passed and we got our first black mayor, Clarence Lightner. Actually, he's been our only African-American.

BM: Wasn't he the first of a major city in the South?

BAK: Yes, and actually, he was the mayor when I wrote and we won the All-American City Awards in 1976 and he headed the delegation that went out to San Diego to appear before—who was the man that always had the – I'm suffering a senior moment.

BM: (laughs)

BAK: Who asked questions and judged how people felt about things? George Gallup.

BM: Oh, okay, the Gallup Poll.

BAK: I sent, wrote the award, well the application, because Mr. Carper, who was the city manager, asked me to ask the League to do it. I didn't ask my board, because I knew they'd say, "Betty Ann, we already have enough projects. We can't do this." So one night while Peter was out of town and I woke up in the middle of night and couldn't go to sleep, I padded downstairs to my office, which was known in the newspaper as "the war room," and I sat at my little typewriter and I filled out the application and I mailed it in. Sure enough, we were asked to go to the hearing before the committee out at San Diego and everybody was going: the chairman of the Board of County Commissioners, the county manager, the city manager, the mayor, who leading the delegation, the people who were head of the committee for the free way system, but not me, because I wasn't on any committee of the city and I didn't think that was right, because I had done the work. So I called a press conference at the Olivia Rainey Library in their downstairs and asked the public for support. Three days before we were to leave, I got a call from the – well, not the Better Business Bureau – but anyway, some business organization.

BM: The Chamber of Commerce?

BAK: No, it wasn't the Chamber of Commerce. Actually, they said they had a check for me, would I come get it, and I couldn't, but I said my daughter has just gotten her drivers' license and she will be happy to come pick up the check and so Karen came back and was holding the check up by one corner and she says, "Mama, what did it this mean when the woman told me to be careful, this was dripping in blood?" But we went and we won and it was done in the name of the League of Women Voters.

BM: During the ERA movement in this state, the League sent funds to fund a lobbying campaign. It was a coalition at the national level and at the state level as well, but the coalition in this state was the largest and the most cohesive. I didn't know that at first, but eventually I learned. They sent people also to help us and to work with us in lobbying for the Equal Rights Amendment's passage and the League knows how to lobby; they just have that skill. I mean, they do it on so many issues and that was one of the ways that we involved people in women's rights, was to have lobby days, to bring League members down to the General Assembly, and to prepare them for going in and for lobbying.

Betty Ann and I, now you understand the League is not political. It's political in the sense of supporting issues, but not people. Betty Ann and I knew that the best way to lobby somebody is to get them elected, so she and I packed up and we were a two-woman dog and pony show. She and I, we had certain House and Senate members who were working for and wanted to be elected because they were going to support the Equal Rights Amendment when it came to the floor. So she and I traveled all over the state. We would have breakfast in one town and speak to a group and then we'd travel on to another town nearby and we would do the same thing. We'd have lunch and we'd talk to the women's club or the local League chapter. We had to be invited, we had to have legitimacy. And then we'd have dinner in another town.

BAK: And sleep in a strange bed.

BM: Sleep in a strange bed (laughs). Then we would meet with candidates and help them any way we could, with volunteers or brochures or radio spots, whatever could help them, but again, that was political and that was really the Women's Political Caucus and the coalition, but the League was a member of this coalition and provided lots of funds and people to come with their skill and their expertise and to help us.

RP: So you were just mentioning the Women's Political Caucus and the coalition, which the league was a part of. Were there other organizations that either of you belonged to during this time?

BAK: I was a member of the Political Caucus.

BM: Yeah, we both were members of the Women's Political Caucus.

BAK: AAUW. I was at that time, I was a member of the AAUW too.

BM: I'm trying to remember the women's groups that I belonged to.

BAK: Well, it was later than that, that I joined the BPW, Democratic women.

RP: Okay. So for both of you, what was the most important issue facing women at that time, did you feel?

BAK: Well, we were underrepresented; that was the main thing.

BM: Right.

BAK: We had no voice in the decision-making in the General Assembly or boards and commissions; we had practically no women. We just didn't have any power.

BM: And there was real strong move that I think came out of the ERA ratification effort. For example, one of our ERA coordinators in Lexington, North Carolina became the chair of their County Commission. She was the first woman to serve on the County Commission and the first chair. Betty Ann Knudsen was the chair of our local County Commission here in Wake County and this happened all over. Women had come together and had developed a sisterhood. I still can walk into a room and see the people who worked with me in the ratification effort just like Betty Ann and there is an immediate bond. I mean, I'm just so happy to see them because you go through the wars. I understand now why veterans like to get together with other veterans, because they've been through the wars together and we went

through the wars together. I mean, there was a lot of – I think the women who participated in that effort learned many, many skills and they translated those into, as Betty Ann said, getting elected, getting appointed, getting some power. And we're not finished.

BAK: No (laughs).

BM: Let's make that clear: we're not finished.

RP: What kinds of things did you do? I mean, you were talking about all this traveling you did trying to help people who were campaigning on issues like the ERA. Were there other things that these organizations did?

BAK: We had phone banks, did a lot of telephoning. We did make a lot of spots, taped spots, for the radio.

BM: We taught candidates and their campaign staffs how to run a campaign and here again, I mean, the League of Women Voters teaches you how to get organized.

BAK: That's true.

BM: So we just translated that from issues. I mean, that's really the crux of it is what do these people stand for in running for office, but we translated that over into the political arena.

RP: So how did you feel when the ERA was ultimately defeated? Were you surprised?

BAK: I felt betrayed. I cried buckets.

BM: The first time, I had even bought champagne. I thought we were going to win, because we had won in the House and I thought we had the votes in the Senate. And I'll never forget, one of the ERA supporters who was working in the ERA office told me, she said, "Now Beth, we may have to postpone that party," and of course, the next day when the vote came, you could see who had been bought, so to speak. I mean, you could see what they got. One man

got a container crane for the Morehead City Harbor. And I went home, I went home and I was devastated when that vote was taken and I sat in my bedroom and I cried and I cried and then—

BAK: You got mad. (laughs)

BM: Yeah, I decided never again, never again would I be so hurt and we just started all over again in a different way; we were much political and much more organized.

BAK: I was crying in the General Assembly and Betty McCain came up to me and she said, “I am not going to give the bastards the satisfaction of seeing me cry. I’m going to go home and scrub my floor.” (laughs)

BM: (laughs) But I wasn’t going to cry in the General Assembly, but when I got out of the General Assembly—

BAK: I couldn’t help it. It just spontaneously overflowed.

RP: And, so Betty Ann, you just said after crying and being upset that way, that you got angry?

BAK: Oh, I did. I was mad as—I was mad.

RP: And channeled that into fighting even harder?

BAK: Oh sure.

BM: And I think at the end, I mean, we had a huge, we had two in fact, two huge marches and nice girls don’t march in North Carolina, but we did, and one of the marches I know had five thousand people there. And I think what struck me was the fact that out of the ERA ratification effort, even though we were not successful in getting the ERA into the constitution, there were so many good things that happened.

BAK: They were very guilty and they gave us a few bones.

BM: Well, I was thinking about programs like the Displaced Homemaker program. There were established those kinds of programs all over North Carolina, rape crisis centers, organizations like Interact.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

RP: This is side two of cassette one with Betty Ann Knudsen and Beth McAllister. Beth, you were just talking about some of the positive things that came from this work you were doing to try and pass the ERA.

BM: Yeah, I think there were some very positive gains. I think there was an organization of women who had learned tremendous skills which they've used now politically to gain power. I think the ERA movement accomplished a great deal without winning the ratification of that amendment. Alice Paul, who wrote the amendment, died in her nineties. She lived in Connecticut where her family was and I like to think and Betty Ann and I will live to see the ERA ratified or something like the ERA in the constitution to protect women and to protect their children.

RP: Do you feel the same, Betty Ann, about the positive gains?

BAK: Definitely. If somebody said we were making an effort tomorrow, I'd sign up.

BM: People ask me that. It's funny, they ask if the ERA ratification campaign started gearing up again would I participate and I thought, "Yes! You don't need to ask."

BAK: Certainly within the limits of my physical abilities.

BM: Well, I was going to say, I would not be the president of the coalition as I was in the late '70s and early '80s. I would not do that because there needs to be new blood, so to speak; there needs to be new leadership. I would certainly support that person.

RP: So both of you very much came to these women's organizations you mentioned through your work in civil rights and your churches, but Betty Ann, you mentioned that when you weren't allowed to go to Georgia Tech, that was the moment you became a feminist.

BAK: Yeah.

RP: Were there other things in your personal lives that were happening during this time that really led you to try and fight for women's rights?

BAK: Well, I was elected to the Board of County Commissioners and I was not very well received by the other members of the board, who were mostly tobacco farmers and they had a tendency to pat me on the head (laughs), which made me very angry.

BM: Foolish, foolish people. (laughs)

BAK: And they got together with the staff not to give me information, let me know when committees met and that sort of thing. So I went around and got to know all the secretaries and told everybody, "Whenever you send anything to any other commissioner, send me a copy," and I would just appear at the meetings and when there was something that nobody else wanted to do, like some national committee like Jim Hunt's North Carolina 2000 program, I would volunteer. So I found out information is power. Even though you are not totally responsible for something, but if you do have all the facts at your fingertips, you can go a long way at getting what you want to have done.

So finally after two years, I got tired of that and I decided that we were going to go out and recruit some good candidates to run. I tried my best to get some woman in Wake County to run. We had two slots coming up. I could not find a woman in the county who would agree to run, made me very mad, but there was a couple of men who had already said they wanted to run. So Bob Heater, who was my only ally on the board, and I got Stewart Adcock and Edmund

Aycock together and agreed on the issues and we told them we would help them get elected and we used the slogan, "Your children deserve straight A's. Vote Adcock and Aycock." And they got elected.

BM: They won.

BAK: And the way I got to be chair was then the members of the board voted for the chair; the chair was not elected. So I had Adcock and Aycock, Bob Heater, and me, four votes. So the first thing we did was fire the county manager and hire our first professionally-trained manager and that had been a position of the League of Women Voters since the '50s.

BM: Yep, the '50s.

RP: How about for you, Beth, were there other really eventful things in your life that led you to embrace these kinds of social justice issues?

BM: Oh gosh. First of all, professionally, I have been in positions where I worked with people who had no voice. I worked at a hospice and it was my belief that people have a right to be treated well, particularly when they're ill and dying. The hospice when we first started was not accepted. We were sort of meddling in people's personal lives, but hospice now is accepted and loved and supported and that's the way it should be. While I was at hospice, we started having just this influx of people who were living with HIV; in fact, they were dying with the effects, from the effects. And again, I recognized that one agency could not take care of this large group of people and so we formed a coalition, which turned into the AIDS Service Agency and I was the chair of their board for two years. And again, it was out of a sense of these people deserve to be treated well and to be respected.

I went back to school, got a masters degree, and now I am the director of something called Summit House. It's a residential treatment program for women who have committed

non-violent crimes and for their mother. Excuse me, for their children. And again, it's good to be back working with women and helping these women put their lives back together. They made some bad decisions. They grew up in poverty. They grew up being abused. There are reasons that they've turned to drugs for relief. There are reasons that that led to some criminal behavior and it's good, it's good for me to be back working with women and their children and watching them and seeing these just miraculous kinds of changes that they have made in their lives.

So, as I look back on my life, everything I've done, I think, has been social justice. I was asked when I was in school to do an internship at the Death Penalty Resource Center. There were no clinical social workers on the legal teams that were defending death row inmates or people charged with a capital crime. I, because of, again, my faith, I was opposed to the death penalty, but when I went to interview before taking this internship, it was like being with the people who have white hats; I was home. And so I worked there for two years, first as an intern and then just on my own, to again help there be justice for these folks. And a man who I started visiting at Central Prison, first as his clinic social worker on his legal team, thirteen years in '93, yeah, almost thirteen years ago, Michael has just won a new trial after all this time. He went in at nineteen; he's now forty-six. It's that kind of experience that keeps you going. I mean, we know that his case was never, never a capital case and it's just good to have the Supreme Court back you up.

But there have been a lot of experiences throughout my life, people, mentors like Betty Ann, W.W. Finlater. I mean he was my minister and he loves to tell the story: I invited him to come and march with me for the ERA and so he accepted my invitation and so he and I

marched together. Well, they did a documentary on the ERA ratification effort in North Carolina and they advertised it in various magazines, one of them being *Playboy*.

BAK: (laughs)

BM: So there we are, W.W. Finlater and me in *Playboy*, marching down the streets of Raleigh saying, "What do we want? ERA. When do we want it? Now." And he just loved to tell people, "Do you know that Beth and I appeared in *Playboy*?" (laughs) But it's just wonderful people at the women's college, the people who were the leaders at that school, the professors, the deans were female. I mean, those were the role models and my own family, my mother, my aunts, they were my role models. It never occurred to me that women were not equal and at times superior.

BAK: I can't say the same about my family. My family was all Republican, conservative.

BM: Oh, my mom and dad were yellow dog Democrats.

BAK: In Savannah, my mother always had to work at the polls because there weren't enough Republicans and she would be pressed into service always to be one of the observers at the polls. My mother even gave money to Phyllis Schlafly.

BM: Did she really?

BAK: Yes, she did. Broke my heart.

BM: Oh, ouch.

BAK: She was a conservative Baptist and I was a progressive Episcopalian.

BM: Well, my parents were Baptists, but they were not conservative.

RP: Were your families supportive of your activism?

BM: (laughs) My father said to me one time, "You know, I'm not sure sending you off to the women's college was the right thing to do," because you see, he did not know that I was downtown at Woolworth's. I did not tell him because I think he would have, just for my own sake, been opposed to my being down there. My parents, though, did in general support me. My brother lives in Mississippi and he told me that when I come down to visit him that I can talk about hospice and those kinds of programs, but he doesn't think I should talk about the Equal Rights Amendment.

RP: And why is that?

BM: Well, because it's so radical and politically radical and his friends will think I'm some kind of nut.

BAK: My family didn't approve of what I was doing, but they were polite to me except that when I ran for secretary of state against Thad Eure. I got a telephone call from my mother one day. She said, "Betty Ann, you're running for the wrong office." I said, "What do you mean, mother, I'm running for the wrong office?" She said, "You're just running for the wrong office." I said, "Well, what office should I run for?" "Governor. Now if you were to run for governor, I'd come over and help you campaign." I said, "Mother, why should I run for governor?" "We could have the best family reunions in the governor's mansion." (laughs)

BM: (laughs) She would like to use that dining room, that beautiful dining room. That's funny.

RP: And you were both married while you were involved in these women's organizations?

BAK: Well, I will soon be married fifty-seven years.

RP: Congratulations.

BM: That's wonderful. I was married and my husband did not approve of my being involved in the Equal Rights Amendment campaign. He did not approve of my belonging to Pullen and being a part of that family of faith. He just simply could not understand my commitment to social justice; he just couldn't. If it didn't have a money value, then it didn't have value. Needless to say, after twenty years of marriage, we separated and it was just kind of funny, because he went to his attorney and told his attorney that, "Peace of cake. I'll have everything that I want," and I went to my attorney and I told him I wanted this and this. I mean, I wanted fair and equitable distribution of property, that's right. We worked on that issue.

BAK: We surely did.

BM: And David came over to house and he looked at me and he said, "I've just been to visit my attorney and he tells me that it's not as simple as I thought it was and we need to negotiate all these issues," and he was very angry with me. And I said, "David, did I tell my attorney anything that is not true?" And he looked kind of startled and he said, "Well, no." I said, "I rest my case." He lived with me for a very long time and he should have known that I was going to ask for fairness and he was not willing to be fair. He wanted my engagement ring back.

BAK: (laughs)

BM: We had been married twenty years. He's a pistol. I think in all fairness, I don't see David, but I think probably he has changed, he has grown and he's matured. Hopefully, he's a different kind of person. But no, he felt like, he told people he was single-handedly funding the ERA movement; I heard him tell people that. He felt like he was paying for it out of pocket, because I should be working and earning money and putting it in the kitty. Now he's got a PhD and has his own consulting firm, plus he's a professor at NC State. I mean, he has money

rolling around, so he didn't need me to work. But anyway, so I am single again. I have a son who's thirty-six years old. Can you believe that? Timothy McAllister is thirty-six years old. But he and I are very close and he supports me in what I do.

RP: I was just going to ask about that, if your activism is something you talk about with your children?

BM: Yes, I do.

RP: And do you also, Betty Ann?

BAK: Oh yes. My children support everything that I do and I support them in what they do. My son is a defense attorney and he takes a lot of high-power cases.

BM: Yes, he does.

BAK: And some people have done some bad things, but, "Mother, everybody deserves a good defense."

RP: So what do you both feel is the most important thing you would want your children to remember about the work you've done and the activism you've been involved with?

BAK: That I was considerate of other people and did my best, that I worked hard, and they know that. I'll have to say that half the credit goes to my husband. I could not have done all the things that I have done without the aid and support of Peter and all the meals he cooked, the people he fed. Our house was always a hub of activity and, no joke, it – the bedroom we took over from the boys when they went to NC State, it was known as the "war room" in the news media. I can remember one headline: "Knudsen calls out troops, war room activated." And we had lots of people who came and went.

BM: One of my favorites is: "She looks like a cream puff, but she's a tough cookie," and that was in the *NC State Technician*. (laughs) I thought that was so funny, "She's a tough cookie."

BAK: Well, you were a tough cookie.

BM: I'm not; I'm a cream puff (laughs). I am a cream puff.

BAK: On the outside.

BM: You asked the question what do I want my family and particularly, Tim, to remember about my work for social justice and I think I would like for him to remember that I was working for social justice, that it was very important to me, but it was because of loving people and being a Christian and believing that we do have a responsibility to do for others what we would like them to do for us and I'd like for him to remember.

RP: Earlier we talked a little bit about what you thought were some of the positive gains of the campaign for the ERA despite the fact that it was defeated. What do you feel about women's positions today? What would you say is the biggest issue women are still facing?

BM: Power.

BAK: We still don't have equity.

BM: Yeah, that's it. We women are not in the places of power in the numbers that we should be. Do you agree with that?

BAK: I wholeheartedly agree with it. One of the things that we have done, though, that is a step in the right direction, the Women's Forum of North Carolina and Peace College got together and established the Center for Women in Public Service, social justice, and what we decided was that women needed more skills in how to be effective in public service, how to run for and get elected and serve in elected and appointed positions. The study that the League

started out doing when I was chair of the committee in 1998, we looked at the powerful boards and commissions in North Carolina and the percentage of women on them and it was pathetic. The more powerful the board, the fewer the women.

So we set up this center at Peace and we worked with Women United and they did several things. We established legislative issues. We had a series of meetings all over North Carolina. We came to the different organizations, brought their concerns, and we decided which ones were most important and then we had a meeting at the General Assembly and we passed out those issues to the members of the legislature and to women in different organizations so they would know what we would support. Then, we took a training – like Beth and I used to go to all these women's organizations and speak. We do that now, but with the legislative agenda that's been adopted.

Then we planned an institute in the summer, three long weekends where up to twenty women would come and stay at Peace College and they had people who would do all kinds of things for them and train them to do, to run campaigns and to win elections. The Sunday before last, we had seventeen women graduate from this year and several of them are already running for office and that just thrills me to death; would that we had more. The Center for Women in Public Service is one of the things that I'm hoping that we can get more people to support financially so that we can get more women to participate.

RP: Do you also think that that's towards trying to have equity for women?

BM: Yes, I think women are going to have to learn the skills, the leadership skills. I think they need to be in public office. I think they need to be on boards and commissions. I also think that they need to be in the universities teaching. I think they need to be in the corporations, in that corporate office down there, the CEO's office and the CFO's office. I just

think that women need to step up and take the leadership positions and I think other woman need to support them, those woman who want to step out and run for office or take a shot at that CEO position.

BAK: I have established what I call the Royal Order of Butterflies; I did this thirty years ago.

BM: Yes, yes.

BAK: The women who risk to achieve a goal or objective I made members of the Royal Order of Butterflies. To begin with, I would hand cross-stitched butterfly pins. My eyes and hands don't work as well, so I can't do that anymore. So I have a poem, butterfly poem, and I can't remember it all now, but it goes something like this—the words were on a poster and I can't get them out of my mind—"You can fly, but that cocoon has got to go," and I don't think it's talking about butterflies. "But the risks, all the risks of leaving this swaddling way of my cocoon, my security, for the unknown no matter how it may be." Anyway, I've got a copy of it anyhow; I'll give you a copy of it. And I still induct women into the Royal Order of Butterflies. Beth was one of the first.

BM: When my mother died, my mother died suddenly at the age of fifty-nine and that was just such a blow to me, because she was so young and in the mail comes this beautiful card with Betty Ann's handwriting and the butterfly. That was just wonderful.

BAK: The symbolism being Christ the man and the caterpillar; Christ in the tomb, the cocoon; Christ the risen, the emerging butterfly. So the only way you get to have success and achieve these goals is first to be willing risk and make an attempt.

RP: Well, on that note, that was just a beautiful conclusion. I mean, those were my questions. Was there anything else that either of you really wanted to talk about or any other anecdotes?

BM: Not really.

RP: Okay. Betty Ann, was there anything else you wanted?

BAK: No, my voice is about to give out.

RP: Okay, well, thank you so much to both of you.

BM: You're welcome. Thank you.

RP: I appreciate you taking the time.

BAK: Thank you. We're glad you're involved. We would like to be kept apprised on the progress that you've made.

END OF INTERVIEW