

Interview

with

Virginia Volker

June 15, 2005

by Willoughby Anderson

Transcribed by L. Altizer

The Southern Oral History Program
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WILLOUGHBY ANDERSON: So today is Wednesday, June 15th. The interviewer's name is Willoughby Anderson. I'm here in Birmingham at the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute speaking with Virginia Volker today for the Southern Oral History Program, Long Civil Rights Movement Project on school desegregation in Birmingham. If you could please say your full name. We'll see how you're picking up.

VIRGINIA VOLKER: Okay, I'm Virginia Sparks Volker.

WA: I just wanted to add that this interview is for upcoming portion of the Long Civil Rights Movement Project on the women's movement and the civil rights movement. So let's start out if you could tell me where you were born and a little bit about your early years in going to school before you went to the University of Alabama.

VV: Okay, I was born in Jasper, Alabama. That's Walker County. That's approximately forty, fifty miles west of Birmingham. I lived there until I was in the ninth grade. Then my parents moved to Sylacauga, Alabama, which is Talladega County, which is more east of Birmingham about the same distance. Birmingham was the big city that I related to all of my growing up life. Do you want to know—are you going to ask me questions as we go along?

WA: Sure but anything you want to add, it's fine.

VV: Okay, growing up in Jasper as far as background. My father was a minister in the Methodist Church. He was like a circuit rider. He also was a barber because he was at the level of the ministry that you had to also work because the churches were the lower, smaller, lower income churches so he had to also have other kinds of work. So he had a barbershop, and so, my mother worked some of the time. There was one time for a brief period of time when I was young, she worked in the textile or cotton mill in

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Cordova, Alabama, which is very near Jasper. She worked as a licensed practical nurse for a period of time in a local hospital, and as I got older in my later years, she worked as a, I think they call them pastry cook, pastry cook, like baking pies and cakes and breads for a local restaurant. She also did that in when we moved to Sylacauga. I have a brother, a younger brother and a younger sister. In Jasper we lived both in town and downtown Jasper. Then we lived near the city limits of Jasper, which is like, it was, I would not call it suburbia as we know suburbia today. It was like an area that was newly developing, and we had a house there that my parents owned.

As we were growing up, we had goats and in the city we had, in Jasper you could have goats in town. You also could have them when you lived at the end of town, city limits. But so growing up with, my father had goats, and the reason he had goats is because he had ulcers, and at that time, one of the ways they treated ulcers was to ask people to drink goat's milk. So we, he had a lot of interaction with the other people in Jasper who had goats, and that was primarily in the black community. So that was my first involvement in, I guess, becoming conscious that there was black and white in terms of people in the world. So I, because I would go with him to the black area of town to do trading of goats and sometimes the people would come see him about trading goats. I think I absorbed fairly early that there were differences in social interactions in terms of going to the back door if black people came to our house. Then of course when we went in the black community, you suddenly realized a lot of people were looking at you like what are you doing here. But there was, it wasn't a problem for my, apparently people knew my father.

So and interestingly enough in Jasper the area where the black people lived was an area across the railroad tracks several blocks from where I lived. So it was truly across the tracks. Of course from their side we were across the tracks. Of course the name that was given to that part of town was not a very nice name. It was the N word with the quarters, the N Quarters, was what the way it was named. So but and after a while I think I learned that when the black people were around, that my parents used the word colored. But if they weren't around, it would vary between the N word and colored. In looking back I think that my parents were not of the really rabid Klan mentality, but like they were the, just the good white people that didn't want to make any waves. In fact in later years it was my mother's attitude toward me when I was involved in civil rights activities. It's like look, you can be that way, but for goodness sakes, don't get out and tell people how you feel. Just, in other words, don't express yourself. Don't let anybody know, and she perceived it would be dangerous for me. The truth, there was some truth in that. It could've been. I think partly I was very fortunate, but that was their concern about me as I got older in college and getting involved.

Although let me fast forward to going to when we moved to Sylacauga, which is the area on the opposite side of Birmingham. I think that was an area interestingly enough that was probably very much Klan infested at the time we were there, which would've been in the '50s, the mid '50s because I remember in that town when I guess early, probably still in the ninth grade or tenth grade, I remember Klan parading downtown on a Saturday afternoon. I remember my parents, or my mother being real upset that my girlfriend and I started yelling at the Klan rally and telling them they were wrong, and I don't know that we were throwing rocks. But we were yelling at them that

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we didn't like what they were doing. My mother yanking me back and saying, "Come inside, stop that. You're going to get us all killed." Of course I had that sense of invincibility at that age. I had no idea what she was talking about really. But my sister tells me, my sister was younger. So I guess she picked up on my mother's fears, and she said that she couldn't sleep for several nights for thinking that we were going to have our house burned down because of my yelling at the Klan rally, Klan march that day. The Klan people never really reacted. They might have, they may have thought we were, as white kids they may have thought we were saying, they might have thought we were cheering them on. And maybe they just didn't understand. But we were telling them to go away.

WA: So were you in high school?

VV: I was in high school, in high school. Yeah. Moving on from that in Sylacauga I do remember it was the Montgomery bus boycotts and being very aware of that. I would've been probably about tenth or eleventh grade high school. I graduated in '58. So tenth and eleventh grade. I remember getting in arguments with my friends and maybe the older adults that the people in Montgomery were correct that if they paid the same amount to ride the bus, why did they have to sit in the back of the bus. At that time, some of the time when I would come to Birmingham or to Jasper to visit my friends, I was in high school. Mother would let me ride the bus. I rode a Trailways or Greyhound bus from Sylacauga to Birmingham to Jasper to visit with friends. I remember one time, because I was tuned in to all of this from the media, I remember going toward the, to the back of the bus and sitting one day and all the way to the very back seat where the black people were sitting. The older black people kept telling me, "Honey, you need to not sit

here. You need to move up front." The bus was not very crowded and I said, "Oh this is fine." So I kept sitting just in the very back of the bus. Now this would've been in the time '55, '56 when a lot of this was, it was heated up in Montgomery. So I'm sure in retro—in looking back on that, that probably was very frightening to the black people because it's like here, I was white kid. I was going to get them in trouble. I was going to create a scene, and they didn't know what the bus driver would do. Somehow that day the bus driver just ignored everything. So I have no idea why that was not an issue. I have a feeling if a black person had come to the front and sat down, that would've probably been an issue. But again that just sort of reflects that white privilege that whites could go back and forth and do anything that they wanted, be where they wanted to be. But the barriers were really there for the black community.

WA: And the other white passengers that didn't—

VV: They didn't say anything.

WA: ()

VV: It was very sparsely populated on the bus. I mean, not there were a lot of empty seats. So it was very obvious for me to go to the back of the bus. It was like I was, if anybody had stopped and thought about it, I was making a statement.

WA: Right.

VV: But it was purely youthful ignorance and innocence that I did that but my way it was saying, hey, I'm with you. I don't believe in segregation. So the only way I could desegregate was go and put myself in the black community. But there were times later on in the '60s here in Birmingham that if you put yourself, if you were white and you were interacting in ways with black people, at that point Bull Connor and the police

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force felt like they did have a right to keep you separate, like that was their job to keep people separated. Because in Birmingham in the '60s if you were black and white together in a car and it was obvious you were not, they weren't working, the black people were not working for you or they were in the front seat with you or either there was a mixed group, the police felt they had a right to stop you. In fact they did. Then also other people around town like young guys would feel like they had a right to chase you and harass you, which did happen on several occasions.

WA: And I wanted to talk about that when we get to your time in Birmingham.

VV: Okay.

WA: If you want to.

VV: Where do you want me to go back to?

WA: So let's, let's start so in 1958 you—

VV: Graduated from high school.

WA: Graduated from high school and started at the University of Alabama.

There you became involved with a group from Stillman College, and there was sort of an exchange of brotherhood, brotherhood (). Can you tell me about that and how you got involved in that?

VV: Yes. In Tuscaloosa the, my dorm mates and I or friends, we, some of us talked about the world situation. We were aware of current events. In '61 I think when things, when there were the sit ins in North Carolina, in Greensboro, we were, hey we want to do something because I guess there was a core of us that felt that we, that segregation was wrong. We were already being aware of that. In doing that what happened is someone in our group had a connection to Stillman College, and so we

decided that we would take a group of University of Alabama students to go to Stillman College, which was a small church-related black school in Tuscaloosa. So we would meet, I think it was like one of their student centers, student chapel, and there was a minister in the black community there. I do not recall his name. But he would meet with us. He and we talked about what it was like to be black and white in those times. We talked about the ethos of segregation and how we wanted things to change. In a way it was like getting to know each other just a bit on a personal level. I mean, literally we would sit there and drink tea or coffee. It's like, I think for us as white students and probably I think it was the same for some of the black students, it was like, hey, we can sit beside of each other and relate as peers, and we are not struck by lightening. The world's not falling apart because that, it's hard to imagine if you weren't at that time how there was such a taboo about black and white people interacting on a level with, on equal levels. Sitting in the same room socially, that was, I can't even think of an example of in today's society where that would be true. That was really the feeling, and it was like, that was a big deal just to sit together socially like we're doing now and talking one on one in an equal fashion and respecting each other, looking each other in the eye and talking about the world around us. So we did that for, I was a senior, and some of our, the other classmates were seniors and some were juniors. We had some graduate students.

We also decided that we wanted to do something more active, not just talk. We said we would go to some of the churches because by that time some of the, nationally there had been kneel ins or pray ins at other places. So we decided we would go to some of the white churches near the University of Alabama campus. We had, we had our plan devised that first we would go in as a white group would go in. Then the black group

would come in and they'd sit beside us and then some other white people would come in so that we would have support like if we start getting beaten up. I mean, none of us were in any shape to fight period. But that was sort of in our mind I think that was our plan. We did that in a couple of churches. I remember, and interestingly enough I think Tuscaloosa at that point, certainly the churches we were going to, were enlightened enough that they probably put us down as college students on a lark. I don't know that they took us very, how seriously they took our challenge. But it was a challenge. It certainly got attention. I remember one place, I don't recall. I may have it written down; I'm not sure which church it was. But it was one near the University of Alabama campus and (). They were, but we got a lot of looks and there were hesitations in the minister's voice, but he decided to just keep going and they kept singing. Of course we came in just as the service was starting, and then another group came in just a few minutes after and another few minutes after. It was, it did cause quite a, it was quite an attention getter, which was really strange certainly for me because I was somewhat of a shy person. To have that many eyes on me, very, made me very nervous. But we were going to do that. Afterwards, interestingly enough when we got up to walk out and we all stayed together at that point because of our fear that something might still happen to us, several people came up and spoke to us. Later I realized, as we walked out, one of the church members that came over was, had been one of my professors. Of course he didn't recognize me because classes were large and you didn't know. They didn't know all their students. They came over and said hello and wanted to know who you were and where we were from. So we were so naïve. We said, oh we go to the University of

Alabama here. The other students and we go to Stillman college. It was like, okay. So that was some of, that was, I think we did that several times.

I think when we did that, after doing that, that's what attracted attention of the university administration because it was shortly after that that the men in the group got called into the dean of men. At that time they had the dean of men and dean of women that were like in charge of student life. So the women got called into the dean of women and the men to the men's dean. We were told that we should not continue our activities, and we should not go to the Stillman anymore because we had, we were being followed by the Klan and that they could not guarantee our safety if we continued to put ourselves in this kind of dangerous situation.

WA: Were you being followed by the Klan?

VV: I don't know. We may have; we may not have. We didn't know we were. The Klan certainly was in Tuscaloosa because I had visited--. One of my friends and I had visited () and I'll tell you about that later. We had, we did go so that was, that was very shocking as far as the university administration. This was the first time that I had had any kind of trouble. I was, I was the goody-two shoes in college. I was certainly not a troublemaker. I really did obey the rules. I did come home when it was curfew time and all those kinds of rules that you had to abide by in those days. They, the dean, I will always remember what Dean () the dean of women said to us. She said, "You know all of you have such a splendid record as students. It would just be such a pity to have this all go to waste at this late day in your career in college," because I was senior planning to graduate in May or actually in June, and there was my other friends, they were entering their senior year. So as she, her response was, "What you're doing is

not wrong, it's not wrong to want to interact with people. Desegregation is not wrong. But you need to wait until you're in a position like I am," meaning being a dean, "before you try to confront the system, before you flex your power so to speak." Of course we were, our response was well, you certainly aren't doing anything to help integration. But it was very frightening. So what we did is we just said, "Yes ma'am you're right. We don't want to lose our degrees here." We said, and she threatened to tell our parents. None of us wanted our parents to know what we were doing because we knew our parents would be upset too even if they supported what we did in theory. The practice would've been very, I mean it was, again it was a taboo. You just don't do things like this. So what we said yes ma'am and shuffled our feet appropriately and just continued to do what we had been doing.

We then when we, after that, we didn't do anymore church sit ins because we thought that was one of the things that might have attracted attention. But we did continue to meet with our friends. We'd have to do it on the Stillman campus because heaven knows what would've happened if they'd come on the university campus. So we'd go there, but what we would do is we would check out of the dorm. We'd not put where we were going because at that point you had to write on these little cards where you were doing. Say you were going to the drug store or something like that. Then we would take a very circuitous route. If we were being followed, we thought well, we'll shake them off of us. I don't know if they were, anybody following. I really find it hard to believe that someone was at our dorm's door waiting for us to come out and so somewhere like that. But it was a very frightening experience. But it, I think for me personally what it did was it, you can confront the powers that have a great influence

over your life. You're doing it for a very principled reason was the way we put the () that it was okay to challenge this authority if it was for this noble cause. We did. We just, we found a way to not self-destruct in the process. You wanted me to talk about—you want to ask me a question.

WA: I do. So let me just ask you a couple of quick questions about that group. About how many students, how many people were in that group?

VV: I think there were about eight or so of us from the university side. We couldn't all go at every time. Probably about equal number, six or eight on the Stillman college campus.

WA: Equal ratio, men and women.

VV: Uh huh, it really was. Some of the people I still know. Some, there's one guy that was at the Stillman College campus that we ended up staying in contact with off and on. He has lived in Birmingham. I haven't talked to him in a couple of years, but we've seen each other and talked. He's professional and if he needed something related to his work and my work, we interacted professionally. Another one of the persons there ended up being a faculty member at Tuscaloosa, at University of Alabama at Birmingham here like I did. One woman went to Harvard. I haven't heard from her since. Another woman died in a tragic car accident after she was out of school and had a child. Some of the other people I haven't kept up with as much. But it was, it was a really enlightening experience for me, and I am very pleased that I did that because my life would be so unrich if I had not gone beyond and acted on what I was feeling and believing at that time. If I had just had to bow down to because the university said don't do this. I mean, I just can't imagine what my life would be like if I had to let myself be controlled that way.

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That was just not in my nature at that time. You want me to tell you about going to the Klan office? Would that be of interest?

WA: Yes, please.

VV: I thought I, but you don't have this on tape.

WA: You?

VV: No.

WA: Oh ()

VV: No, I mean, you didn't—we had talked. I thought I had talked to you about that when we talked, but you didn't tape the last time we talked. One of my friend, I remember her name was Judy. She was my friend that went to Harvard the next year. Actually she was a junior in our class, group. She was there then when the university desegregated the very next year, which would've been '63 or next, actually the end of the summer, summer end of '62. I graduated summer of '62.

WA: And it was that—

VV: It was that summer early fall, fall then that they actually did the official integration and George Wallace did his stand in the schoolhouse door. So my friend Judy was involved in trying to be, working with the student government to try to keep things calm on the white student body there. So but she and I went downtown Tuscaloosa, main street downtown. There was a Klan office.

WA: Just with a sign.

VV: It was just a sign. You just walked off the street into this little room, building that had--. And they had all their Klan papers out there. It was like oh it was this horrible racist stuff about how black men were trying to rape white women, about

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how ignorant black people were. It was just really venomous hate material is what it was there just for you to walk in and pick up and take out. I don't know who the person was. Later we speculated it might have been Robert Shelton himself who was the grand dragon for a while during that period. But I couldn't say for sure, but he was certainly of that brand. We just remember, we just were, we called ourselves "being a spy" to get the enemy's, talk to the enemy and see what they were thinking. He was wanting to tell us I guess like, he was wanting to tell us all about the evils of the black community and black people, and here were two university students, and we were, we were just open target for him to brainwash. So he wanted to tell us everything. It was almost like he kept trying to do the fear thing. He'd keep telling us about how black men really want to sexually molest and rape white women. He'd say, "Do you know what it's like in Washington, DC? A white woman gets raped every so many minutes and by a black man. He was really doing the sex scare stuff to us.

WA: To you because you were young women.

VV: To us because we were both young women. It was and we just sort of looked at him and we thought, then he'd keep getting closer to us. We sort of thought, is he going to do something to us. He's talking about how black men want to rape and sexually molest white women, and so we talked for a little while. I think we stayed there about ten or fifteen minutes, and he talked to us and take the information and then we said, we'll think about this and then we left. But I remember it was a bit unnerving to hear this kind of really hatred. That's the first time I guess I had really seen it so concentrated. You get it from bits and pieces in your society, but here was one person and all this literature spread out on these tables around us. It was just full of venom, and

it just really made it real to us what was to some degree what was going on. Although being a white university student I know we were sheltered from so much that certainly the black students were not sheltered from. But that was my real encounter with real Klanspeople that was identified Klan person. What else were you going to ask me?

WA: I was going to ask you so then in 1963 you had come to Birmingham to start graduate work at UAB.

VV: So summer of '62.

WA: Okay. Summer of '62. You became involved with the Thurgood Methodist Church, right, and were you involved in civil rights activities through that church?

VV: Yeah, let me, yeah let me tell you how. I did not go to Thurgood as a member, but I went to the youth groups that were meeting there around the civil rights movement. I was in graduate school in Birmingham, and by early '63 there were getting to be people come through Birmingham from other places that were, that were beginning to do some organizing. I guess it was more the spring of '63 when I started getting involved, early spring of '63 because I know someone had gotten my name from a friend in Tuscaloosa, and this was, when, backtrack. When we were in Tuscaloosa, what we were doing was strictly homegrown. We had no connection with any national group. We were not being mislead by any faculty member. In fact sidetrack again one of the faculty members in the sociology department got dismissed at the end of '62 year. One of the things that, he was in the social studies department, social sciences, sociology. He was told that they thought he was misleading students. We had invited him to go with us one time to Stillman College. But that got interpreted somehow that toward the end of that school year that he had led us astray. But that was not the truth of the matter. We were

not, this was on our own--. Toward the, actually toward the very end of our time on campus like maybe even in early May, yeah, probably April May of my '62 year. I did get in touch. Somebody came through town, forgot our name or knew we were involved, and it was a man named Rob Burleson who was with I want to say ADA.

WA: What ()?

VV: Or SDA. Students for Democratic Action or ADA, the Hubert Humphrey group.

WA: Okay.

VV: That was somewhat active then. I think he was a student at Harvard, and he'd somehow was on, in the area and heard about us and looked us up. So that was our first connection with another outside group. Of course we were so excited. Here's somebody that can tell us what was really happening in the rest of the world. About that same time we also somebody got a connection with SNCC for us. One of the graduate students that was working, that was part of our group who had, I think he was a political science major, and he had a, he somehow got a connection with SNCC. Since he had a little more money. I guess he had a stipend. He financed a trip for us to go, several of us to drive to Atlanta for a SNCC conference that spring. That was I think maybe in May right before we were going to, right before we were going to leave school. So I did that which was very, very interesting. Of course I was so naïve. I didn't know what the heck was going on. SNCC conference and all those things. All that was being said, but it was certainly educational. I have a list from that, and I have met some of the people that were at that conference later on that were involved there and really, really into SNCC, the

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SNCC group. But to sidebar. What was that a sidebar from? I was just telling you an incident.

WA: Right coming—

VV: We were not, initially we were not connected and anything we did was not connected, but somehow one of those groups or maybe I think it was actually a SNCC person that connected me in the early summer, early part of the year in '63, here in Birmingham. I was a graduate student in the medical school in anatomy, was my field. He connected me with people here in Birmingham that were active. Before that I had no connection with anybody doing anything in Birmingham. So I got connected with, there was a youth group that was meeting at Thurgood Methodist Church downtown. So I started going to that. That was the beginning of my involvement with people in Birmingham. It was, it was a very good group. Again very low key, a lot of it is gee, we can be black and white together and the world doesn't fall apart. But some of it was we did want to do—need to turn the tape over?

WA: No. I'm just watching it ().

VV: We did do some sit ins at one of the big department stores for the, around the lunch counter.

WA: In '63.

VV: In '63.

WA: Was that coordinated with SCLC or any of the other demonstrations going on?

VV: I think, in retrospect, looking at it, looking back on it, I think there was some of the other people that were, the more experienced people that were directing the youth

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group probably were doing it. But as, I was truly a foot soldier. I was like, I wanted to do good. I wanted to put my body in the line for justice was sort of the way we thought about it then. So it was like, okay I'd be part of the group to do some confrontation. There was a kind of myth going around then that if you had white people with you in some of these experiences sit ins, you were less likely to have big violence. Now whether that's true or not, I don't know. But that was one of the things that was said and not, so yes, you need to come with us. So we would go as an integrated group and sit at the counter.

WA: The youth group was integrated.

VV: Uh huh. It was integrated yeah. It was, I think it was more black than white. But it was integrated. I remember the one, I don't remember whether it was Longlin's department store or Pazitt's department store but one of the department stores. In the basement they had like a fountain, lunch counter. I remember going there one time and we went in and we sat down. The woman I remember just put up a sign in front of us, "This counter is closed," walked to the back and wouldn't come out. I'm sure there were people sitting around looking at us or standing there watching what we would do. But I remember we sat there for, until our patience gave out and they were waiting us out. Of course everybody else scattered. Nobody was in that part of the store. So I guess that was part of the tactic is to move everybody out away from us. So nothing happened. They wouldn't serve us. They wouldn't, they wouldn't fight us. They wouldn't arrest us.

WA: So did it seem like they had had sit ins previous?

VV: They had had previous, by that time they had been having previous sit ins. So that was one experience that I had with youth group. From my involvement with the

youth group I met other people both black and white that were part of the movement. That just changed me forever in my social interactions. That way I started meeting other people both in the white community and the black community. Some at the university that were pro civil rights and discovered that there were a fair number of people I don't want to say--. Let's say there were maybe two handfuls of people that were at the university that would be active and speak out for what they believed in terms of integration. So I started being part of that group of people.

WA: How did that make you feel?

VV: Gosh, I was in heaven. I wasn't being, there were people who would actually agree with me. Because before I had that connection, when I would go to my church, which was a Methodist church in Sylacauga, my home church at that point. Or the few times I'd go to the Methodist church in Birmingham, I had also gotten disaffected with the Methodist youth center in Tuscaloosa because the guy there--. I keep backtracking to Tuscaloosa here. I'm sorry about that.

WA: I don't mind.

VV: This is not chronology here. But in Tuscaloosa one of the things I think that helped influence me to be more open minded is I went, probably in my junior year, I went to a national conference, a national youth conference for Methodist college students. I think it was in Illinois. At that particularly conference one of the big themes was justice and loving your neighbor, and I remember we had I think William Sloane Coffin spoke. James Lawson who was the guy in Memphis, later on in Nashville and Memphis. He did a workshop. I remember talking with him. I have his notes, and when he came to Birmingham a couple of years ago for the Foot Soldiers convention, I met him and gave

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him a copy of the notes that he had talked about about nonviolence and the philosophy of nonviolence. So and that conference was integrated of course. That was again one of the things that was very reinforcing to me. But the Methodist fellowship in Tuscaloosa, they were not as progressive in wanting to act on what was being stated nationally. When I did become known that I was doing the church sit ins with the group from Stillman College, I know the minister at the Wesley Foundation at that point pulled me aside one morning and asked me not to bring any of my friends, meaning black friends, to the Wesley Foundation because they were not going to integrate until the university integrated. I was just incensed. My response was if my friends are not welcome, I'm not welcome. I was really very disaffected from being involved with them. So when I was in school, and of course when I went home for Methodist church, it's hard to imagine. Maybe now, what's the topic when you go to church. What's the hot topic? Michael Jackson. I don't know. But it's like, whatever was in, the big news was the civil rights movement. So everybody wanted to talk about it, even in church and Sunday school, and I always was espousing my, expressing my belief and about how we should integrate and approach civil rights, and I'd get big arguments and my parents would say, "Oh Virginia. Why don't you just be quiet?" So I was not comfortable there. So then when I went to the, got involved in the youth group, from that then I met some people in the Unitarian Church here in Birmingham. I had gone to a Unitarian Church one time in Tuscaloosa.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

VV: So once I got involved with the Thurgood Methodist church group I got acquainted, became acquainted with the members of the Birmingham Unitarian Church. At that point I met other white people that felt like I did. That was really very important to me to have some people that were white and saying, you're not crazy. Because even in the black community going in and here you are a young white woman, it's like what are you really here for because you're suspect until you prove yourself. I think I did, but we all are, this is a racist society. It was then too. Everybody has to know where you're coming from. So it was to me to have people, white people who would say yes, I feel like you do, was very, it was encouraging. It gave me more courage to continue to speak out and do what I did. That was another very important thing that came out of going to the Thurgood group. I feel like our time is running out.

WA: We've got yeah, yeah, we maybe should move—

VV: To about women.

WA: In the other interviews that you've done, you've discussed the car and police harassment episode and then—

VV: Oh yeah.

WA: And also, and so we'll maybe jump over that because that's in that other interview. But really quick, in Birmingham I wanted to ask you about hearing about the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing. If you could just talk a little bit about that, and then we'll jump to Friendship in Action.

VV: Okay. What, that was, in '63 there was so much going on. By that time I was really involved at my foot soldier, white graduate student level with the movement,

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identified with it, a lot of my classmates knew I identified with it. Some of my teachers did. They would argue with me. I don't know that they, I didn't get thrown out of school, and I later learned that there were people in the hierarchy that were very supportive of the civil rights movement. But I know before the bombing of '63, church bombing in '63, when I would have discussions with my classmates and my professors, their attitude was "Well, Virginia this is just too soon. The Negro is not ready for integration." Of course my response was, "Well, what you mean is you're not ready for integration." It's like okay but if they're not ready, when will they get ready. What are you doing to help us get ready? What does it mean to be ready? I would be in big discussions like that with my colleagues. So and they, I guess some of them did know I was doing a few things, and doing the meetings. But I know that when the bombing, there had been bombings actually for a long time in Birmingham but even more in '63. I remember in the, that summer I lived in the dorm on Twentieth Street, which is where Radisson Hotel is now. These were unair-conditioned doors. You left the window open so you could breathe in this hot weather. You could really hear the bombs downtown.

WA: You could!

VV: Sure! When they'd just throw out little bombs. I know several times and one of my friends, Tommy Wrenn, he was very active, and he'd call and tell me late at night, he'd say, I'd say I'd call him or he'd call me and say, well, this is what happened and nobody was hurt or it was just minor. There were those kind of things were going on then.

WA: What was being bombed?

VV: It would, the Gaston Motel got bombed a few times.

WA: Right.

VV: There were other, if a group got together at some people's homes or a bomb would just a small one would be thrown out.

WA: From a car.

VV: From a car. The one over on Center Street. So I mean you could hear that happen. I know that actually, and Tommy Wrenn tried to get me to go to the march on Washington in '63. I was so naïve, I didn't quite get the total importance of that. I had a test that next Monday morning, and I was so dedicated to making good grades. It was like, "Tommy, I've got a test Monday. I can't go." He said, "Oh you can go. You don't have to pay. Just come ride the bus." "I've got a test." Then of course I did take time out from my studying and go watch television. I didn't have one, go watch one somewhere and saw what was going on and thought, I God I wish I was there. I didn't. So after that, I've taken advantage of going to marches. So but, that was, things became more and more apparent to me as, and it was a really, '63 was a really pivotal year for my growth and understanding too. Then in September, well, the school was integrated, beginning of school--. There were attempts to integrate the schools. They were not fully integrated by any means. So there was a lot of uproar in very, end of August, first part of September. I took great delight in that one morning when I was walking out of my dorm on Seventeenth, not my dorm, my apartment on Seventeenth Street South and going down to campus, there was some guys in their pickup truck. They were obviously, they didn't have their hoods but they were Klan type. They were looking for Ramsey High School because they were going to go and picket that because they thought they were going to be attempts to integrate it. He was wanting to know, "Ma'am do you know

where Ramsey High School is?" I took great delight in directing him in the opposite way and told him to go, go downtown and turn and turn. I don't know if he ever found it. So that was, I was well aware of so much that was going on. Then on that Sunday in '63, I had gone home that weekend. I remember I was with my family in the car, and it came over the car radio that the church had been bombed. Mayor Boutwell at that point was just saying he deplored the situation. I got real emotional. I get emotional thinking about this. It's just, it was kind of gray September day, and my folks were concerned and sort of upset but it was like, they didn't feel it the same way I did because they didn't even know all of my involvement with this. But I was just so frightened that it was anybody I knew personally, and so they didn't want me to come back to Birmingham that Sunday night.

But I did come back to Birmingham. I came back, and I rode the bus back because that was, I didn't have a car. I was a poor graduate student most of the time. So I rode the Trailway bus back into Birmingham, and a friend was picking me up at the bus station. He, so he was, he told me no that as far as he knew it was no one that we personally knew had been killed. By that time they knew it was just the four little girls that had been killed. But the streets were just, it was like, hardly anyone, very few people downtown. They were really deserted like they are now. That was not the usual in Birmingham then. There were, the military was out. I guess it was the national guard. There was a tanker here and people in uniform with guns. It was, it was like we were, we were under military occupation. It was the most awesome feeling and a very eerie feeling. Went back to, the friend took me to my dorm and we were just, we were very upset and nervous about this. The next few days in school, what just really touched me is

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that a lot of my professors, or my professors and my classmates came up to me, and they were apologizing to me for the church bombing. Now remember these are all white people. The university was not integrated in terms of student and faculty. It was like they were saying, "Virginia, this is just carrying it too far." They were saying, "Well, I don't understand all this but it's just, that is just taking this situation too far. They shouldn't bomb churches. Children shouldn't be killed." It just, my part of my response was, "Well, what are you doing about it? Just don't sit here and just apologize. Do something," because I was angry.

It just, in retrospect I realize that it was, this thing in the Christian church there's a lot of talk about sacrifice and the redemptive quality of sacrifice, which I do not profess to fully understand at all. But in some ways I realize that one way to frame that situation was that those four little girls being killed, they were like the sacrificial lambs that turned Birmingham around. Perhaps this whole U.S. for another generation. Because as I've said to some in my classes some of the time in talking about this that the civil rights movement really saved the soul of America for a generation in terms of our higher, more noble ideals. We're always a mixed bag. We aspire to some, to have a better more respectful life, and that was a way of reminding us that we really do have to, we are our brothers' and sisters' keepers. It was a very powerful time. Personally and I think it was a very powerful time for our nation and God knows what it did for those, the families of the four little girls, their lives, the four little girls and the other people that were very close. So it's not something you forget easily. I didn't mean to get so emotional. Yeah. I don't always do that.

WA: I understand. I definitely do. So—

VV: You want to talk about my role in the women's movement.

WA: Yeah, let's go to Friendship in Action.

VV: Some of the people that I met with the Unitarian Church, and as I got more involved with some of the movement people here. I met a, there were a group of women that had formed, a group called Friendship in Action. It was friendship and action. In many ways this was the women's way of doing things to try to, what can we do to contribute to building a better world, integration of society, which was the goal then and actually or breaking the backbone of segregation, the legal backbone of segregation. What, there were a group of women that had formed. Part of it was like, if we just get together and talk and get our families together and our students, our children, that there can be value in that. Also that group did some other things. Most of the women were much older than I, than myself. They were part of some of them had husbands that were involved in the negotiations that came about later.

WA: Okay. Black—

VV: Black and white. In fact Deanie Drew was in, she herself was involved in the negotiations. It wasn't just her husband. So it was Deanie Drew; Ruth (), is very, you know her role; Helen Lewis, Jessie Lewis of the Birmingham Times, his wife; several people who are dead now; Ottie Crouse I think; and Sandra Harris, several some white people, Peggy Fuller, (). It was both black and white. One of the things they did was I think they collected money, Sally Davis, Angela Davis' mother was in it too. They collected the group collected money to send some of the teenagers to camp in the north, in the east so they had integrated experiences. Some of those were people tell me that was very important for them. Then they also did, worked with having a

integrated childcare or summer child program, children's program. I think it was either at Westminster Presbyterian Church or Pilgrim, Pilgrim Baptist Church that's down on Sixth Avenue in the () area. I've forgotten specifically which church. But I was more like the young woman that they were just tutoring along and teaching me things. I was secretary I think for a little while, and that's terrible, man I am not good at being a secretary. But I was very much supportive of the group.

As things changed though and I guess about, I'm sorry I didn't get to get home and get my list of some of these dates. But a few years after, Friendship in Action sort of dissipated. But that group of women, we decided to become part of a larger national group called Panel of American Women which was started by Esther Brown who was one of the women that was involved in the *Brown versus Topeka* that was part of the '54 Supreme Court decision. You can find a lot about her if you haven't already. She somehow, we got, she contacted our group and wanted to know if we were interested in being part of the Panel of American Women, and we decided that would be certainly a good avenue for action. What Panel of American Women group did was again, it was a way of women reaching out to women, and it was family oriented. That's what women did then. They took care of family. That's what we were doing what the women's job by trying to bring the civil rights movement philosophy and that approach into what we did. We had and the Panel of American Women, we the idea was that if other people could just hear how their prejudice and bigotry affects a family and understand the pain it brings, that the good people would change and be more accepting. So we had, we developed our speeches and there was a black woman, a Jewish woman, a Catholic woman, a white woman, WASP they were called them, White Anglo Saxon Protestant,

and then we were fortunate here in Birmingham we had a woman who was Japanese American who had been () who had been in one of the concentration camps during World War Two because she was in California, had gotten moved to California, to the Arizona desert to one of the concentration camps. I think they called them detention camps or something. But they, so we had our speech. We would go into, would get asked to be invited into churches and schools and civic organizations and each share our experiences and take questions, and question and answer and dialogue. I kind of think it had some ways of certainly doing some level of educating people about what it was like to, particularly white people was more what we were about, influencing white people. I remember one of the women Elizabeth Bell, you can probably find some of her writings here too, Elizabeth Williams was her name then, Elizabeth Williams Bell. She would talk about what it was like when you were parking your car downtown and somebody would call your little child the N word, or another woman would talk about what's it like to tell your child no they can't go to Kiddieland Park. Well, Mother, all these other children are there. Why can't we go to Kiddieland Park? I think that was true for a lot of people in Birmingham. I'm aware that that's a real sensitive subject for a lot of older black people.

WA: Their children not—

VV: Their children, or them not being able to go to Kiddieland Park.

WA: And that that was an actual park in Birmingham.

VV: Yeah, it was where the fairgrounds are now, Third Avenue, and they had like rides and amusement park. I think maybe they got to the point of eventually the black people could go on one day a week or something like that but for a while they just

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couldn't go. So that, and I think the idea was that people understood those kinds of things. Catholic woman would talk about hey, we don't, that eating fish on Friday. That's not, don't make fun of us because that was when that was still part of the practice. The Jewish woman talk about no, we were not Christ killers and talking about how when their child had been called a Christ killer, how it felt. That was the purpose of that was to try to help white people understand that prejudice does hurt, and it hits the family. It's not just about something out there. But it's a very real thing. I think we were active for about five years. We actually got invited to a lot of places in Birmingham to talk and several places in different parts of the state. What would be interesting is if, I don't have the list of everywhere we went. Maybe one of our members do. We keep wanting to get together. We just haven't quite done it yet. So out of that then we, I think all of us were beginning to have more of a consciousness about women's rights. I think for me in certainly with the civil rights movement it was about your rights. The message of the civil rights movement that's not always spoken but is there it's like, if you don't stand up for your rights and organize smart to get them, you won't get them. So I think I started incorporating in my being, well, justice and equality is for everybody. Don't just start keeping me down because and putting me into slots because I'm female. So I was speaking that way. In fact I think I had already been thinking a lot of that way from some other things in my childhood, but I remember in getting Betty Friedan's book when it first came out. God, I don't remember when that was. It must have been about '65. Her first book, *The Feminine Mystique*—

WA: I'm so embarrassed that I can't remember.

VV: It was mid '60s anyhow and I remember, or maybe '64, '65. There was this beautiful bookstore called Gene Crutcher's bookstore. I hope it's written up somewhere here in the archives because it was the one place in town you could go in, and actually on the shelves there would be books by James Baldwin and other books by writers, black writers and progressive books. He fostered that. The story goes although I wasn't there, but I think my sister was that () Ginsberg came to Birmingham and had a reading in his bookstore somewhere during that time. But in the '60s, but Gene Crutcher gave my husband, I was married at that time—gave him, told him, "Here's a book about Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*. I know Virginia will like it. Buy it and take it home to her." Now whether he was just pushing that book to get some money or whether he really knew I would like it. I'll give him the benefit of the doubt. He probably knew I could relate to that. I read it and it's like, wow. She's really expressing what I'm thinking. Then when I started hearing, reading about NOW, I thought yes. Also but I think what's very interesting in Alabama though, somewhere just around that time or right before the NOW chapters.

This is moving into the '70s by the time we get to the organized, having organized activity around women's movement here in Birmingham. Probably in about 1970, a group of us on the University of Alabama campus, Birmingham campus got together, and we formed our own little group that we called Women for Equality, or WE. There were several faculty members and students, and I remember we sat and talked. Several of us had read Betty Friedan's book. We were reading what was going on and what was being discussed nationally. So we were doing consciousness raising. Do you know about consciousness raising?

WA: A little bit.

VV: Uh huh. It was like becoming aware of hey, I am woman. I am being put down when people say certain things to me that are stereotyping me and belittling me. And just becoming aware of that kind of prejudice that before you just thought that's the way people relate to women. It's like no, we're not going to excuse that. That's wrong. So we started that group and from that we also the Women for Equality. I, we that was around for about a year or maybe two, and then we formed, we got involved with the Alabama Women's Political Caucus. Somebody came through town and was organizing the Women's Political Caucus here, and that must've been in about '73, I think '72 or '73. So I got involved with that group, and we, I did not go to any of the regional meetings for the Women's Political caucus, but I think we had some meetings at my house, and we started talking in terms of organizing and speaking out for women's issues.

WA: Was that affiliated with the Democratic Party or—

VV: No, it was bipartisan, and it was, the women's political caucus is both Democrat and Republican. The I guess more of them were Democrats around here, but that was about all that was here for a while. But we were certainly the progressive arm. So I certainly was involved in helping form that. Around that time there were also what was becoming an issue were abortion rights. That we formed a national, I helped form a National Abortion Rights Action League, Birmingham chapter. That's NARAL. You know what I'm talking about?

WA: I do.

VV: So I helped form that. Very much pro choice. That would've been like '72, '73 because the Supreme Court decision was '73.

WA: So you were lobbying—

VV: I was lobbying.

WA: Raising consciousness about abortion rights.

VV: And I lobbied in Montgomery. There were a group of people statewide beginning to do that. I worked with them. We had our own local group. I started also going to Washington to lobby.

WA: Are you still involved with them?

VV: No, I pay my dues, but I can't do everything. I'm very supportive of choice because, and I learned that from being with my students. I had students that were pregnant, and it was just the most horrible time. I also had a friend in, while I was still in graduate school. She was older. She was not in graduate school. She was teaching. She was pregnant, and her boyfriend wouldn't marry her. He was a dental student. He said, here honey. Take some money and do something. Somehow, we didn't know how to help her. We were all naïve. The bottom line on that one is that she killed herself.

WA: Oh wow.

VV: She jumped from a tall building in town, and that really brought home, she said, "I can't be pregnant and teach. I'll lose my job. My mother would never accept this. How would I get by? My boyfriend doesn't want me." I'm sure he's a big professional today. But and then there were starting to be other situations. I became aware of the backdoor abortions that were being done, sometimes by doctors and sometimes by people that were not doctors. That's an interesting story in and of itself on abortion rights. Oh it's too long () here, but I was very much involved in that. I feel that that's just, your reproductive choice is just critical. I had students that wanted to

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have their children. I helped them have their children and keep them. I had people that wanted an abortion. I helped them get an abortion. I did both. But it's important. Each person needs to do what she needs to do. So there was NARAL going on. We had women's political caucus, and then in I think it was '74 that we had the first NOW chapter in Birmingham and I was part. It grew out, the first NOW chapter grew out of the Ala, American Association of University Professors, the women's committee, which was on campus. We sponsored a woman to come from the national NOW group that was, she lived in Alabama in Montgomery, Sarah Jane Stewart, and she came and presented information about NOW. We were real pleased that we had university Cudworth Hall, which is still in existence. We said well, because it was university sponsored we could meet there. We thought oh this is going to be great. We had everything ready and a slide show presentation. This was before video. We and oh it was just raining just horrible down pour right about the time that we were going to meet. I said, oh my God. There goes this. I think we had thirty people show up. We were just overjoyed. So we did get a NOW chapter formed here in Birmingham, and it was active both locally and state a number of years. We also had a group for the ERA. You know about the Equal Rights Amendment. it's still not passed. Then we from that so those were very, those groups were very active. It, I think to some degree we were different. Although we were affiliated with the national groups, I think what was different for us is that we were so isolated from all the people that were doing from what some people call radical stuff, we just so moved along. We were both black and white, more white than black but we always had a few black members with us.

WA: In the NOW chapter.

VV: In the NOW chapter, in the NARAL chapter, and I think it was because some of us who had been in the civil rights movement were very conscious of being inclusive. We worked hard to be inclusive and make sure we were both black and white. We had some influence. I think we helped, I know we did a project to have, make sure the library books were not so sexist, the particular ones for children. We polled all the hospital people and asked what they did for women's health--blew their minds I'm sure. I mean I don't know. But it certainly brought home to them that the women's movement was in Birmingham. We actually got a birthing room here eventually. After all these people fighting it, like how can nice little women like you want to have birthing rooms. You know what I'm talking about?

WA: No, what is a birthing room?

VV: Like where, when you're having, when you're giving birth, your husband can be in the room with you. Or even your family and sometimes even younger brothers and sisters. I remember God, this guy at Baptist hospital was like, () one of the nursing faculty that was for this were lobbying for birthing rooms, and he would say, "How can you really want to subject your child to something like this?" We just laughed at him. It's like, () man. It is not a crime we're committing. We're having a baby for goodness sakes. Then Baptist hospital eventually got out there, we welcome you to our women's center, our birthing center. Then Caraway got into it. Everybody started doing it eventually. That was one of the little battles that we were doing around women's health.

But in then 1980 continuing on about women's rights. We asked Richard Arrington who was running for office and who was the first black mayor of Birmingham,

we asked him if he would be supportive of establishing a women's commission. John F. Kennedy had established a women's commission much earlier in the '60s, and we had said, some places were doing women's commissions at the state and city level. So we asked him if he would do a women's commission in Birmingham if he were elected. He told us he would. Of course we were already working hard to get him elected. My group was. He followed through, and so we had a women's committee, women's commission for almost ten years. It would sort of died out for several different reasons, not because of him. But it was an opportunity in the women's commission. I think we certainly did some projects about raising people's awareness about domestic violence and also about child support payments. There were some national laws that about how you could really garnish your wages to get child support. We helped educate people about that. There were numbers of more PR types around women's issues, educating the public about women's issues. Also I think there were about a hundred women involved in that over a period of time, maybe more than a hundred. We would occasionally get together and just network, and it was a good mix of black and white. So I think as a result of that, I think what we see here in town today, I think it's changed some in about the last five years. But there was a fairly good level of interaction, networking with particularly the young professionals, both black and white in Birmingham, particularly among women. They may not know each other very well. I couldn't say they were best friends all the time, but they knew who each other were. They knew if you called an agency where they worked and say, you could talk to somebody and say hey, can you help me with this. That kind of networking, which I thought was very good for the city at that point.

There's still a women's network now that at a higher level of like the bankers and the, the very, the higher paid, higher income women. The ones that I was involved with and what we had initially it was more the middle to lower middle income groups of people that paved the way. At first some of the upper income people were just a little afraid to be, not everybody but (), they were just a little too afraid to be involved with anything that looked radical. But now radical has become just, in some ways some of those things that were considered radical then are just very normal now. It's not unusual to see a woman who is a physician or who is a lawyer. There are women policemen, policemen. Did you catch it?

WA: Yeah.

VV: Okay. Women bus drivers, those kinds of things weren't here. To me I see a direct line of my involvement with the civil rights movement and learning the value of working together smart, speaking up for justice and equality as part of the, America's about. Then to move into () women, and I think where some of these battles are today are around gay rights, gay and lesbian rights, and then the Latino community moving in. That's another big point of tension where justice is yet to be done because to black friends, Latinos are white people.

WA: Meaning, meaning what?

VV: Like, they don't need any special help and besides, they're foreigners. For some white people I know it's like, they're Latinos; they're foreigners; they're taking our jobs. Why should we do anything for them? There's a lot, it's like they're second class citizens. So I think that is a real, that may become more of an issue. I would like to think Birmingham could do better with this generation in addressing that issue. But it's a

struggle right now. There are a few groups trying to address that to diffuse the tension and build some bridges there. The () for justice goes on, and perhaps it's different and has different forms in every generation. But it still has to be, you have to fight for justice. It doesn't just come down from on high.

WA: And so tell me about why it was important to you that these were women's groups, that these were groups made up of women that you were participating in or was it?

VV: Um hmm, it's women. We didn't exclude men, but I think in being involved with women and suddenly it was a consciousness about hey, we are being treated different. We are being treated as second class citizens. As one of my friends, an older graduate student told me early on, she started saying well, the only difference between the women and the black people in the South is that the white women get to sit with the man at the table. The black people don't get to sit at the table with him. But that you just get, but just because you sit there, that doesn't mean you have any rights. In other words it's a façade. So because she was coming from a more enlightened culture in the East Coast that had I guess already progressed toward that, and she could see where we were just in a very strange situation from her point of view. I think that to me it was just a natural understanding of you have, it's also about being aware of your identity and owning your identity, and I think I learned that. I think when you grow up white, you just think, well everybody's just white, and that's the way it is, and then there are those others. Your identity is sort of like this is the norm. You don't think of it as an identity. It's just the norm like gosh, how many times have I heard white people say, well, that black person speaks like we do. He knows how to speak the king's English. Like if they

speaking white I know—gosh I like. We're going to accept him in our program because he speaks like a white person. So he'll blend in good. Meaning that his voice doesn't have any distinctive black qualities. You don't have to be white to be right, and you don't have to be white to have justice and equality and freedom.

We've had that and I think as you start breaking down this about identity you start realizing where you are as a woman too, and I think it was, it's one of those things that's time had come and when you look back. I mean look at the history of the struggle for women even just in America and how maybe even in the early days it was paralleling the struggle for abolition of slavery. I mean Elizabeth Cady Stanton is one of my heroines you know. Susan B. Anthony and that, it all got intertwined there with the abolitionist movement. So I think there was that sense of knowing your identity and starting thinking of yourself that way is real important. To me just knowing that you don't have to just take what's put on. You can shape society. I think James Baldwin's statement is something like this. You may know it. It's like history passes through us. No, and we are, we pass history. God, I can't--. What he said is to paraphrase is that we are both affected by history and what we are is because of history, and then because of what we are, we in turn perpetuate history. Then if something's bad being perpetuated, why don't you intervene and change it. So to me that's one of the things I learned from the civil rights movement is you can change. You can change society, but you have to work together smart and you have to be dedicated and it takes a heck of a long time and it's never perfect. But () you don't give up the struggle, and you don't let the bastards win by default. That's sort of been my approach, and so I just think, I see a real

correlation with learning from the civil rights movement to learn about speaking up as a woman.

WA: Was there a point, thinking about sort of changing the women's movement through the '80s, was there ever a point where you broke with the national women's movement, I mean it sounds like you're still a member of NARAL and—

VV: NARAL, um hmm.

WA: NARAL and—

VV: NOW—

WA: NOW and all that.

VV: So there's not a point where you—

WA: No, not really. As time goes on and different things in your life, part of it is you've been there, done that, and you get attracted to new challenges. But I'm not an active member of NOW, not an active member of the women's political caucus, but I'm still very supportive of that and besides what they're doing, the focus has changed because a lot of the laws have been changed. I think it was the women's movement that did it just like the civil rights movement changed the laws. That doesn't change everybody's practice though, and also I think you also have to redefine what it is you're expecting in terms of justice and being treated with dignity and not second class citizens. I think every generation has to refine that in a different way of what speaks to this generation. For younger women like you I mean you don't have to think about, you can get interviewed for jobs. The glass ceiling is there in some places or not so, sometimes it's not so glass. It's a big thick ceiling that you have to encounter. But you know you can get in the door. You know you can have some laws, but not, proving things and

getting the law to stand up for you is not simple all the time. But that's not the issue. The issue now is once you're in, how do you confront those individuals that are throwbacks and don't want you to do things because you're a woman or how do you confront those that culture that may be in your particular setting that says well, we just never had a woman in that position. Well, you want to, you would really like to be manager in that group. You mean, you really would like to be a carpenter. You mean you'd really like to work in this company where we sell tires. You really want to be the manager of the tire center. Well, we just have men doing that. You think you can get along with the boys. That kind of, I think that's where some of the battles are more now on different levels. Or the one woman that works in the fire department as a *fireman* or how does she deal with other the men's wives being upset that there's a woman there with their husband all day in this very intimate setting. If you're police, in the police department, a man and woman on a patrol unit, you get to talk a lot and know each other. How do you deal with that? If somebody's hormones are raging one day, how do you, what's the challenge of that. Those, if two people are romance on the job, when there weren't any women on the job, romance on the job was few and far between except for the gay folks, and they didn't, that was not probably very open. So I think the challenges are different now.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

START OF TAPE 2, SIDE A

VV: ()

WA: It's on.

VV: Okay, we were talking about the racism that a student might, a black student might confront going into a white institution like a university. They can get in to some degree now, but can, how do they know if they get a, say an essay question. They get a not so good grade. How do they know, well, did that teacher really, did she really read this in an objective way or did she just not like the fact that I'm black? Or when that teacher looks at me, looks at a group of students over here and says, "Okay, everybody cover your paper. No cheating." Is she looking at me because I'm a black student and she thinks we're black students cheating or is somebody sitting around me really cheating? Those kinds of subtle things. I think for a white person to be, and some of the black institutions are now beginning to say we want some white students. How does the white student deal with going in and with some black students say, "I don't know why you're here." Like we've, it comes up sometimes very passive aggressive, but it's like, "We couldn't go to your institutions. Why are you in mine? Did you get a scholarship here? You're really dumb and you're just here because you're just too dumb to go to a white institution." Those kinds of things I've heard get said to some white students that might go into predominantly black institutions. In our school system we are, here in Birmingham now I feel like that one of the things we're dealing with are the sins of the past in terms of race relations.

WA: Today.

VV: Today, and we have the situation of class is going on. I think education as institutions have been white or Eurocentric middle, upper, middle class and upper class orientation. There are sets of assumptions about students and what behavior is to be like in an educational setting that are not spoken. But when you have students that come in from a different heritage, race wise and from a very low income their, they don't have that same internalized wave of just interacting and responding that has just been assumed to be there in the white institutions. I think our white-oriented institutions are having a hard time adjusting to dealing with students that are not white middle class. I think that's part of the challenge. I think we have students, I think that we have middle class teachers, black and white, who feel like that they have gone through white-oriented institutions and they've absorbed this. So when they see a kid--and in Birmingham except for about two hundred kids, another two hundred, about four hundred kids they're all African American heritage. When they see these kids act in certain ways, a black middle class teacher can get just as upset at that kid, the black kid, as the white middle class teacher, sometimes more so because the black middle class teacher may not have been through diversity training to become sensitive to different cultures. They can just get real upset that this kid is acting in a way that's just inappropriate and low class and alley and all kinds of bad words that they might use to describe the kid. Now is that prejudice because of race or is that prejudice because of class or is that teacher just calling it like it is? But just to put down the kid doesn't solve the kid's problem. Maybe perhaps to a large degree we are still trying to make in our institutions of higher, of education, both K-twelve and higher ed, we are trying mold people to be sort of still in that old Eurocentric, middle class, upper-middle class mold. It's, everybody doesn't do

that very easily. You tell a kid to behave. Well, that kid may not know what behave means in that setting if they've not been in that same kind of setting. So I see that as a problem that we're dealing with and that we're having a hard time naming it. We like to fix it by rearranging the organization chart for job structure, and we have to put accountability on teachers. We want to do dress codes and give standardized tests and, but we want to tame kids and put up metal detectors, but we really have a human interaction problem and understanding each other that has been very difficult for people to deal with in institutional setting in my opinion.

WA: So something that's lacking today in terms of race relations and an understanding among people is this kind of personal interaction that Friendship in Action and these groups--

VV: To a large degree.

WA: Were trying to change in that way.

VV: Trying to address. Yeah. It's hard, and it's difficult to confront. If you bring it up and you're black, some of the white people, oh, they're just carrying a chip on their shoulder and getting an attitude. That's what white folks say about black people that want to confront it. If you're white, I'm not sure what black people say, but white people say, oh she's just a bleeding heart liberal. She doesn't know what she's talking about. She's wanting to coddle those kids. None of the, that's and that's not dealing with the issues, the human relations issues. Because we do bring all of our culture and our history with us, our family history and our wider cultural heritage with us all the time.

I don't know for me it took me a long time to learn that. I think I picked up some of that because I was, I read so much when I was a kid and read in such diverse books

that I studied, I had read a lot about all this. But it takes a long time to really understand it that's all that those kinds of factors are influencing your daily interactions. And you don't go around thinking about it. As you say, we don't name it. I mean I don't think I do all the time. I certainly don't know how to deal with these issues all the time. You walk in and like, as a white person, in some settings, part of my style now is I want to go in and I want to fix everything. If I don't have an answer, I like let's talk about what we can do, and I like to try to get it fixed. But if you go into a black setting and you're the odd one coming in and people don't know you real well and if you want to come in and just do your usual white thing of fixing it, whereas if it was all white people it would be oh well she's just taking the lead and sort of that's her style. But if you are white and go into a black setting do that, I'm aware now, oh God. That's just like white people trying to take over. So I've become more aware like that. So—

WA: Do you think that's particularly, that these are issues particular to Birmingham and the South or do you think ()?

VV: I don't know. I certainly see it here, but I suspect it's more than here. I think every region has its own particularly atmosphere and its history. I think that maybe in Birmingham, I like in my moments of benevolence toward all of us, I'd like to think that because of our history. We have had that history really terrific history of confrontation of the evils of race, segregation because we have done it one time here--and it took a long time to do it now--that maybe, just maybe we can confront these other more subtle barriers in a way that will be effective. We're not there yet. But maybe we could. I don't know. That would be interesting to look at because you're traveling in different places, right.

WA: Um hmm.

VV: Yeah. Could we, can we do it better here? Can we do it? I don't know.

Other questions.

WA: Well, I think—

VV: Did I cover everything and more.

WA: Pretty much. Let me see. I think I'll just ask you one last question. I know from looking at your resume and the other interviews, I know that your interests in advocacy work have moved and have moved to aging issues and poverty issues sort of after the women's movement. Is that, is that right?

VV: Um hmm. I guess I was some of that but yeah, more later.

WA: More later. And so do you see that along the same trajectory of working with the civil rights movement, working in the women's movement and then moving onto these other issues. Is that all, is that a linear progression to you in your mind?

VV: It is because it's a way of focusing in on some really bread and butter issues. Housing is something I've looked at too. Worked for that for a while, for a while at the university. To me that's, it's like the concrete parts of trying to bring the American dream more of a, make it more of a reality for more people. Because economic justice and that's hard to define. That is, that is still part of this whole justice issue. That's part of that whole class thing too. Yeah. Yeah, I see it as, it's still your fight for justice and equality and respect for the dignity of all human beings. I don't think any of us are there yet, but that's part of what I strive for and what I enjoy spending my time on this planet doing instead of doing other things. I think that for me, the fact that I did have opportunity to live in this place and this time is just count my lucky stars.

WA: In Birmingham?

VV: In Birmingham and Alabama. I just can't, it's hard to imagine how dull my life might have been if I had been born at a different time or somewhere else where these struggles were not going on. I think there are struggles everywhere, but it was so in your face here. Or for me it was that it was much easier to deal with. I just feel like my life is so much richer. I understand so much more about what it's like to be a human being. By having, doing the things I've done and taking the stands I've taken, I think that it would, life would not be the same in another place. I just, I really feel fortunate that some of the members of the black community helped educate me in my earlier years, and I'm sure that that took some patience on their part and I'm sure sometimes now it does. I like to think that I helped do some of the reverse. Then we are, we're all human beings, but we all bring our history with us. You're just going to have a wonderful time doing all of your studies.

WA: Well, thank you. I know.

VV: Just think of all the insights you're going to be able to get by pulling it together all here in a few years too in this way.

WA: I hope so.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by L. Altizer, March 6, 2006