P.1. Southern Journalism: Media and the Movement

Interview P-0004
Alma Blount
10 July 2014

ABSTRACT: Alma Blount

Interviewee:	Alma Blount
Interviewer:	Seth Kotch
Interview Date:	July 10, 2014
Location:	Office of the Hart Leadership Program at the Sanford School of Public Policy, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina

Alma Blount, a direct descendant of William Blount, tells about her childhood in North Carolina, and how from an early age she was conscious of racial and social inequalities. Blount recalls how she got interested in photography, which she sees as a powerful tool for activism and political engagement. Her first job was at *The Sun*, with its editor Sy Safransky. Later, Blount functioned as a social worker for the Migrant Seasonal Farmworkers Association in eastern North Carolina. She was appalled by the conditions of the migrant farmworkers, and profoundly marked by the sufferings of Haitian workers on a tobacco field. She discusses her unsuccessful efforts to institute English classes for them, in collaboration with a community college. However, she did publish a series of interviews for *Southern Exposure* magazine that brought attention to the conditions of migrant farmworkers. In the 1980s, Blount was one of the first staff members at *The Independent*, and became the photo editor and the head photographer for three years. She describes the supportive work environment, the collaborative decision-making process, and her assignments. This interview is part of Media and the Movement, an oral history and broadcast collection project housed in the Southern Oral History Program and funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

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Length:	One file, 1:19:22

START OF INTERVIEW

Seth Kotch: Alright. This is Seth Kotch with the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I am here with Alma Blount, director of the Hart Program in Leadership at the Sanford School for Public Policy at Duke University. We're here in her office on the campus of Duke University, and the date is July tenth, 2014. Professor Blount, thank you so much for sitting down with me.

Alma Blount: Thank you! It's my pleasure.

SK: So, we often like to start our interviews just with a little bit of life history. I understand that your family has a very long history in western North Carolina. Can you tell me a little bit about your family background?

AB: Sure. Well, actually, my family has a long history in western North Carolina, but it started in eastern North Carolina. So, my family—I should be more versed in my family history than I am, but it's—I am a direct descendant of William Blount, who was the first governor of the Tennessee Territory. And then, his brother was Wiley Blount, who was one of the first governors of what became the State of Tennessee. And those folks were descendants of four Blount brothers who came over here from Sodington, England, in 1663. And so, they arrived in

the Albemarle Sound area and, ever since, they kind of gravitated across the state. And William Blount was born in Bertie County.

And so, you know, even though I grew up in Asheville and my family has been there since my great-grandmother's generation, as I was growing up, everybody always talked about eastern North Carolina and Raleigh and Blount Street in Raleigh, you know, "and you are the direct descendant of this gentleman who signed the Constitution"—that's William Blount. And, you know, so I've heard the family brag about the family my whole life. But it's kind of pathetic; even at this point, [laughs] I don't know lots of details about it because I've never really taken the time to sit down and read about it in depth. But other people in my family have, my sisters have, and my dad.

But I grew up in—my family gravitated across the state. My great-grandfather and my grandfather had a naval stores business. I don't know if—do you know what that is?

SK: Why don't you tell me?

AB: Well, it's—probably supplied lots of things, but what my family was in, their business was a turpentine business. So, back before oil became really big, things that were derived from pine trees, various products, including turpentine, that were derived from pine trees were hugely important in industry and in World War I. So, my family had a vast naval store business that ran across North Carolina, into Tennessee, down through Georgia, and down through Florida.

And somewhere along those lines, the Blounts teamed up with the Monrose family, so it was actually my great-grandmother on my—my great-grandmother who was not a Blount, who produced Alma Blount, my grandmother, who married E.B. Blount, who was the Blount, but she's the one that had the land in Asheville. So, as I grew up, I kept hearing about the Blounts,

but I also heard about the French side of my family, the Monrose side, and those are the folks who bought the property in Asheville.

So, when I was growing up—actually, now that I look back on it, I feel like I had an amazing, amazingly gifted upbringing because I grew up on this spread with a lot of land. And that just was the normal thing. I thought everybody got to do that, and then I realized that's not true. [Laughs] And my family at that point wasn't wealthy. We were actually pretty poor, dirt poor, all in a tiny little cabin, all seven of us.

But that sense of being deeply rooted in the state comes from all sides of my family. It's kind of a nice feeling. I grew up with it. I didn't think twice. I thought that's the way it was for everybody.

SK: Right.

AB: Come to find out, that's not true.

SK: Now, was that process of learning that's not true something that you sort of were exposed to at a young age, in a moment, or is it something that just over the course of reflecting you've realized that you were lucky in some way or another?

AB: I think it's—oh, that's a—what a great question! See, you ask good questions.

SK: [Laughs] Thank you.

AB: You're a good fit for what you're doing. Boy, that is a great question! I actually think it has taken me a long time to kind of figure that out. And I think it's been a combination of life experience and [0:05:00] just getting older and seeing—I don't know, you know, it's like anybody. I mean, when I was growing up, I wanted to get the heck out of Asheville. Asheville wasn't anything like what it is now. It was just a dying city.

I wanted to get away from my family. My family, you know, had gone through really hard times, having come—on both sides, my family had come from wealth, and then losing their wealth through various things. Those are whole other stories. But, by the time I was a child, my dad's family had—my dad had no money, and he had all these children and no money, and everybody was just kind of crammed into this little cabin on the side of a mountain where the roof leaked. And so, I just wanted to get away from that.

I wanted to get away. I wanted to get away from North Carolina. I wanted to get away from Asheville. And, as much as I adored my family, which I still do to this day, I really wanted to get away from my family. Part of that is just probably being a teenager.

SK: Yeah.

AB: But, for me, frankly, you know, it was even a disappointment, as much as I loved UNC and loved being able to go to school there, I wanted to get away from UNC, too. I just wanted to get away from the state.

SK: Right.

AB: But it wasn't an option. It was a big enough deal that I was able to get a partial scholarship and go to UNC.

SK: Right.

AB: You know, so it's only over time that I've realized, "Wow! Not everybody has this deep rich sense of really being anchored in not only a very wonderful and rich and convoluted and kind of tragic but certainly very interesting family history, but rooted in the history of a state," you know. And that's—I continue to kind of be astounded by that, that my family is—my family is all over the state!

SK: Yeah.

AB: And in lots of different ways. I mean, I've traveled around, and my family was very involved with slavery—that's a whole other story—parts of my family, and there are whole communities. And I'm white. I can go to certain parts of North Carolina, and there are very large extended families of African Americans that have—we share the same last name, and when you start asking people about their family history, they're connected to the Blount family. I was connected to, you know, such-and-such farmers and plantation owners. And so, you know, that's another part. I don't really know that. But it's a good feeling that, overall, I feel privileged [laughs] in a way I don't deserve to have that connection with a, you know, a family that's very grounded. It's a grounded feeling.

SK: It's a very—the demographic of Bertie County and Buncombe County, I feel like you could tell a lot about North Carolina if you sort of averaged the two of them, maybe. [Laughs]

AB: I know! Isn't that so true? Yeah. I will have to tell you this quickly. One time a person sent me a photograph. I still have this photograph in my belongings at home. This was maybe about twenty years ago. This person was an antiques furniture dealer in Winston-Salem. I didn't know her. I got this package in the mail: Alma Blount, my address in Durham, "Could you please—?" I opened it up, and there were all these pictures of this beautiful African American family with lots of different family pictures from, it looked like, the early 1920s and the 1930s.

And one picture was maybe, I don't know, about three by two, and it was a picture of a lovely young woman, who looked like maybe she was in her early twenties, leaning out over a porch, holding onto the porch rails, with a huge smile on her face, very happy. And underneath the photo, it said "Alma Blount". And so, she said, "This photo has your name on it. Is this you? Do you belong—are these your family? I found this in the drawer of an old dresser that I bought

from somebody and I can't track down. These are precious, precious photos! It looks like they came from Durham. Your address is Durham. *Please* help me find the home for these photos!"

And I called the dealer, and we talked. And I tried really hard to find—I just couldn't. I couldn't find—I drove around, I talked to people. I still am, to this day, haunted. Isn't that interesting? That's just a really little side thing, but—

SK: Yeah, yeah.

AB: Anyway. [Laughs]

SK: [Laughs] So, you pursued a degree at the University of North Carolina. Before then, did you have any experiences that you recall as a high schooler in Asheville? Where did you go to high school?

AB: I went to Reynolds High School, which is a county school.

SK: Um-hmm. [0:10:00] And what was that like?

AB: It was, um, you know what? It was—again, this is one of those things, and now that I'm older I can see how blessed I was to have, be in a high school with teachers and a principal and people who, you know, guidance counselors and people who ran the athletic program, people who really cared about us and were, I recall them, good salt-of-the-earth mountain people. A lot of Southern Baptists; my family is Catholic. That's a whole other story, too.

But when I was in high school, I—[sighs] you know, I don't know. You know, I excelled. I did well academically and I, you know, was president of my student body and all that kind of stuff. But I couldn't wait to get out of there. I thought, "This place sucks! [Laughs] These people, this place is not sophisticated." I wanted the big time! So, I didn't—I don't think I appreciated it as much as I do now.

And I just went back to my fortieth reunion. I was asked to be one of the two speakers at my fortieth reunion last year. And I just went back and got to see a lot of, a good number of people that I went to high school with, and it was really fascinating. And it made me realize again how blessed I was because, honestly, when I went to high school, people cared. People cared. You know, you weren't able to—nobody got away with a whole lot. You know, people were very attentive.

And we could—that's a whole other conversation about the differences between Catholicism and Southern Baptist tradition. And, you know, that was some constraints that, you know, were part of the culture when I was growing up I didn't really agree with. But at this point, looking back, I just see, wow, these are good people, and they helped raise me. [Laughs] So, I feel grateful.

SK: [Laughs] So, you had some push factors, at least, that were making you want to get out of Asheville, get out of North Carolina, and that might have been—have to do with the leaking roof that you mention in your house and—

AB: Yeah.

SK: And the hard times that you allude to.

AB: Um-hmm.

SK: Were there pull factors, too, that you might have gotten from doing things like reading newspapers and other signals of an outside world that you wanted to immerse yourself in?

AB: Hmm. Well, I think—that's a good question. Wow, you just ask really good questions. Of course, we didn't have the internet or any of that kind of stuff, you know, so I really didn't know so much what the outside world was. However, I would say—really, this

wasn't so much a pull factor; it's really another push factor, but it ended up taking me in good directions. My father, bless his heart, when his family lost their money—and that's a whole other story, and it's a bunch of different convoluted things that happened, a combination of depression, alcoholism, all kinds of other stuff. But when he was seventeen years old, he lied about his age, enlisted in the Army Air Corps, went on the World War II, then went to the Korean War, and then went to the Vietnam War. He was in Vietnam way before it became a full-blown war. He was there when the CIA was there. He—some bad, really bad things happened to him.

My father became a very—I think he had post-traumatic stress disorder, but we didn't have a name for it, a term for it, and he was very abusive to his family through a period of time. It just happened to coincide with my teenage years. And so, in my case, I left home when I was fifteen. I've been on my own since I was fifteen. So, when I went to high school, I wasn't living at home. I was living with other families. I just—you know.

And what ended up happening, even from a young age, because my dad was in the Air Force, is I—we had that sense of being anchored to North Carolina, but we also had to move around for certain periods of time while he was deployed. And they didn't even call it "deployed". They didn't use this terminology they use now. He's just, "Your father's in Vietnam." I remember that. I was eight years old. This was in 1963. This is when President Kennedy was shot. Nobody even knew where Vietnam was then. Seriously, I had to kind of explain to my friends. [Laughs]

And so, I've lived in various places, at that time always going to Catholic schools, because at that point my family could afford that. So, that was very, very interesting. Even though I had this anchored sense of place, "North Carolina is my home," for a period of time, until I was in high school, and my father retired from the Air Force and really became a major

alcoholic—and then, [0:15:00] he recovered from that later, but that's another story—I was exposed to really interesting people because we moved around.

So, I have this memory, for example, when we were based in the Air Force base in Tennessee, meeting these folks from India, meeting folks from Japan. I don't even know all the details about this, but even, you know, when I was a little girl, I remember it just seemed really normal to me to get out a map or to, you know, just look at the world and look at where places are and, you know, be interested in maybe eventually going to those places. I don't know. You know, so maybe that's a little bit of a pull factor.

But I can't remember anybody saying, "Oh, at some point, you're going to become very interested in politics and you're going to become an activist." I think that more—if that came from anything, it probably is more driven by the fact that from an early age, I was so conscious, without having the vocabulary to name it, of class and inequalities, social inequalities, and the sense of how unfair that was. You know, it wasn't because somebody was inherently inferior to somebody else. It's just there are conditions that can be created by human beings and by circumstances in life that can render a whole family or a whole community or a whole society's day-to-day existence, render it into something that's very difficult. And I—you know, *that* is what helped to shape who I am, I think. But I wouldn't have been able to name that at the time.

SK: Right.

AB: You know, it's just—I know that when I was a teenager and when I was at college—well, of course, also, it has to do with the timing of when I went to college.

SK: Right.

AB: Because I went to college in ’73. And that was—the war was still going on in Vietnam. And, you know, it was the early seventies, but everybody says, you know, that the sixties were extended into the seventies. [Laughs]

SK: Yeah.

AB: And I think that that’s true. And so, it was just—it was quite natural to be drawn towards political engagement and, you know, wanting to rock the boat a little bit. It just fit right in. Does that make sense?

SK: Yeah, absolutely, absolutely! Did you—were you already taking photos when you arrived at Carolina?

AB: No! But it’s interesting. My father was a gifted photographer, just a hobby, and had taken tons of pictures of his family and tons of pictures of places where he traveled. And so, we grew up being surrounded by cameras. My father just passed away a couple of years ago, but we—when he died, we assembled his vast camera collection. [Laughs] And of just of the really amazing cameras, not even the tiny little cameras, we documented 143 cameras. We have them on display. But I was surrounded by photos and by people taking pictures all the time. And I wasn’t consciously—I never at any point said, “Oh, yeah, I’m interested in photography.”

But at a certain point, I took two courses and I took them in the same semester. It’s really kind of funny. I took a photojournalism course with this guy, Rich Beckman, who started the photojournalism program at UNC, and then he left at some point, I don’t know when. I’ve lost touch with him, but he went on to, I think, Miami, or University of Miami, or something, and he’s been gone now from UNC for a while. But he was very gifted, young, ambitious, and believed only in teaching seminar-style.

And he was just such a gifted teacher that, even though I didn't realize I was interested in photography, I became deeply interested in photography. And back in the day, of course, this is pre-digital and everything, so we had to, you know, develop our own film and do all of our own printing and everything. But that was part of what made it really very captivating and fun.

And then, that same semester, I met Alex Harris, who went on to start the Center for Documentary Studies with other folks here at Duke. But he was teaching a course at UNC. And so I took both. I had courses with both these gentlemen the same semester, and that just—*boom!*

And my memory is that was also the same semester that I was taking Jackie Hall's class, and she started doing her oral history project in Bynum just as the textile mill there was closing down. And it was clear that—well, the mill village hadn't started being gentrified [0:20:00] at all yet. All the folks that had been working in the textile mill were still living there. But it was clear that their livelihood was gone and that things were going to change. You know, it took another like, I don't know, probably like fifteen or twenty years before it turned over and—that's a whole other story.

But, anyway, that was amazing! So, it was one of these things at the time I didn't—again, this is all these things you start to see in hindsight, but at the time it just felt like, "Oh, there are these cool things! They all kind of go together, don't they? It's different dimensions of the same thing, and they're all kind of reinforcing each other." But I would have—I had no idea that this was going to end up adding up to a career for me.

SK: Right, right.

AB: It was just fun, you know.

SK: And so, did you do it mainly for fun? Or did you ever take photos in a sort of formal way, say, for the *Daily Tar Heel* or another student publication?

AB: No. I wasn't even interested in that, no. I was never interested in photojournalism from a photojournalism standpoint. I was more drawn to it for the deeper kind of window into conditions that then I would want to do something about, mobilize people to do something about from a political standpoint, if that makes sense.

SK: Sure. So, I mean, it sounds like you saw and maybe still see photography work as very explicitly activist work?

AB: Yes! I did see it, at the time, that way. I actually have not been—here's another irony: I mean, I was a photographer for a number of years and I made my living as a photographer, pretty much through my twenties and early thirties, but I never called myself a photographer, really. I didn't think of that as being my profession. And I never—I'm a very organized person and I believe in following the energy, you know, the aliveness of something. So, when opportunities come my way and it really makes sense, I will take it and embrace it and let it go somewhere. And, you know, take it somewhere that's pretty strategic, so I'm not a person that just kind of like floats along, but at no point did I say, "Yes, I will be a photographer and I will be devoted to activism." At no point did I do that.

I just was interested in these conditions I was encountering, interested—more and more beginning to have a vocabulary for, you know, politics and political engagement and structural change and fighting and locating purpose and working with other folks. In a way, I mean, it makes so much sense that I'm doing now what I'm doing here at Duke, that I've been doing now for twenty years. But at no point did I say, "I am a photographer. This is who I am." I just didn't think of it that way. It was just a beautiful tool, almost really just a hobby. I thought of it as a hobby that paid my living. But the larger work was this work of changing structures and society. And I'm not even interested in photography right now. Isn't that fascinating?

SK: Um-hmm.

AB: But I wasn't a dilettante. It's just—

SK: Right.

AB: It's kind of fun. I haven't talked about all this stuff in a long, long time. I have a very visual sense, but photography always was just a tool to a way of *seeing* something, intensely, and then bringing it to other folks, hopefully helping them to see it. And then, the conversation that comes from that—it was always the conversation that then [leads/links] to action that I was interested in.

SK: Right. Well, it's a very liberating way of thinking about living, I think, generally, just to consider that you could be very deeply into something for a decade and move on.

AB: Um-hmm, yeah.

SK: Itself, to realize that, is—I think when you're young, you expect that at some point you'll choose your career.

AB: Yeah, yeah, right.

SK: And it's nice to think that you may be able to choose more than one along the way.

AB: Yeah! Right! Well, that's honestly—my students now, bless their hearts, they have so much pressure on them to have it all figured out at, you know, when they're in *junior* high school, or they don't even call it junior high school. What, middle school? [Laughs] It's crazy!

SK: Um,-hmm, yeah.

AB: And I love my students! *They're* not crazy. It's just they've got all these pressures from everybody, sometimes from their parents, certainly just from society. And that's—I wouldn't have known. Isn't that amazing? I spend a lot of my coaching, mentoring with students,

like, “Okay, you’re dealing—I mean, negotiate this pressure, because it’s real. But, wow, if you can, move in the direction of honoring that voice that says, ‘I’m doing this because I *want* to.’”

Because, for whatever reason, that was always very strong with me. And then, at a certain point, you realize, “Wow, this thing then opened up to that thing, and that opened up to that thing.” And each thing, the next step, can actually end up being way more powerful, way more beneficial, and [0:25:00] actually way more kind of integrated than if you had planned it all out. It’s amazing, you know.

SK: Right. So, you graduate from Carolina maybe in ’77 or ’78?

AB: No. Actually, I took two years off. I graduated in 1980.

SK: Okay.

AB: So, I dropped out of college after my sophomore year for a couple of years, because I just really was—couldn’t really see—I actually was an English major. And I loved it, but I couldn’t really see where it was going. During those two years, I worked for this little publication called *The Sun*, [laughs] which is still around.

SK: Yeah, yeah.

AB: But back in those days, it was—Sy Safransky, the gentleman who started that publication, was selling *The Sun* on the street in front of what used to be called the Carolina Coffee Shop. I’m sure it’s long since gone.

SK: Oh, it’s still there!

AB: It’s still there?

SK: It’s still there.

AB: Oh, my gosh! Okay, that’s funny. And it was just this really funky little, little publication. So, I got a job working at what eventually became the Pyewacket café. It had a

different name back in those days. And I worked there during the daytime, or at night, and during the day, I worked for Sy Safransky. [Laughing] I was the assistant director of *The Sun*, which is [funny]. I laugh because, I mean, God bless it, it's a wonderful little publication, but I just—it's kind of funny how then that—he took me very seriously. He was a wonderful mentor. I didn't do any photography. I just did writing and helping him edit stories. But it was a really interesting education. It helped to pave the way to my wanting to go back to school and to go into journalism.

SK: And *The Sun*, now it mingles art and literary material with sort of opinion pieces and other stuff.

AB: Right. That's right.

SK: Was it the same thing then?

AB: No, it was more, much more of a—it was trying to figure out what it was. It was much more of a spiritual kind of—I don't know what. It was like, um, I don't even know how to describe what it was. It was a little—[sighs] it was Sy's spiritual journal.

SK: Um-hmm.

AB: Or, you know—I don't know. I might want to edit that part out. [Laughs]

SK: [Laughs] Okay.

AB: Because I don't know that I want everybody to know I said that, to be honest. It wasn't quite sure what it wanted to be yet, and it took a while for it to really take shape. But it was Sy reflecting on deeper spiritual questions and issues. And it was definitely tied in with people taking LSD, okay?

SK: [Laughs]

AB: [Laughs]

SK: So, speaking of connections, was this an opportunity for you to meet people who were doing journalism or other kinds of work in the area?

AB: No, it was too, it was too—no. These were just people living their lives. These were, you know, good-hearted people who were midwives or writers or people, you know, doing some small scale farming and stuff. This was a whole subculture. It was nothing about professional journalists or any of that kind of stuff. *The Sun* has gotten a lot more sophisticated, you know, since those early days.

SK: This definitely would have been, I mean, part of the subculture that was emergent during and after the sixties of people sort of trying to find another path to fulfillment of some kind?

AB: Um-hmm. Everybody was doing that, though.

SK: Yeah.

AB: This is way before you were born, so you don't remember. This was the norm, my friend! [Laughs]

SK: [Laughs]

AB: [Laughing] This was just a given. You know, you would try—I mean, all my friends. I was just completely normal in my, you know, cohort. Everybody was just—we knew we would get jobs somehow, but what you were—everybody was on a—you know, trying to figure out, "Why are we here on the earth?" You know, so they were asking those other questions. I mean, in hindsight, I just kind of laugh, because I was just so young, and I do respect the me that was doing that. But I think I had to have that time to think and to go inside more deeply.

And actually, in a way, I think of it in hindsight now as a fallow period. I was active, but it was a fallow period, in terms of I discovered a lot of wonderful resources, you know, and

creative tools and resilience and ways of living on my own, and all kinds of stuff that have ended up being very important in my life. But on the face of it, it seemed like two years when I was hanging around with a bunch of hippies, [0:30:00] producing a little rag that had a spiritual bent to it. You know?

SK: Yeah, sure.

AB: So, but people weren't saying, "Oh, and where are you headed with your career?" That question didn't come up, you know.

SK: Right. So, after your work at *The Sun*, you return to Carolina, and you've changed your major from English to journalism?

AB: Um-hmm.

SK: And you graduate in 1980?

AB: Um-hmm.

SK: And where to from there?

AB: Oh, well, okay, so the first thing I did was I got a job with migrant farm workers. And again, it's one of those things where I asked myself—I have always given myself permission to ask, "What do I want to do?" If there is something that's drawing me, and it's really strong, I want to go investigate it, and I'm a very curious person. And I really wanted to go work with migrant farmworkers in eastern North Carolina. I couldn't even totally explain why, but it just kept coming at me from lots of different directions.

Back in those days, there were very few Latinos on the eastern stream, what they call the migrant stream. It was mainly African American men, some Haitians, because of people coming over as what they called "boat people." It was connected to U.S. policy and it was a very strange thing. But we had Cuban boat people and Haitian, but the Haitians started coming in before all

the Cubans, a whole other story, but we got folks dumped on the migrant stream who were horribly, horribly abused.

I didn't know any of this until I got involved with this federal organization that now—oh, gosh, I can't remember the name of it. They changed the name, but it's still around and it provides kind of very basic services to migrants in the field, like, will bring you to a health clinic when things are very desperate. It's not solving the situation, but it gives you—so, my job was to work with this organization. It was called the Migrant Seasonal Farmworkers Association. It was funded by federal government money.

And I basically functioned as a social worker and I did that for a year. I would bring people to health clinics. I would bring them to legal aid sometimes, when I could get access to them, if they were trying to contest not being paid, you know. Or sometimes I would go and visit and talk to the farmers. Anyway, that's a whole other story.

But it was an amazing year. And I lived in Smithfield and I lived in a, like, a little garage apartment back behind a family, very salt-of-the-earth, kind of conservative, politically conservative family, really good people, Southern Baptist people. And they thought what I was doing was very odd, but I was very safe living in downtown Smithfield. But then, going out into Johnston County, Harnett County, Sampson County in the daytime, visiting farms, sometimes getting met at the gate with a loaded shotgun by the farmer, telling me it was his private property, and I needed to leave.

And I would be very polite and say, "But, however, I work with the Migrant Seasonal Farmworkers Organization, a *federal agency*, and I do have a right to inspect your farm." No, I wouldn't say "inspect your farm"—"inspect the *conditions* of the migrant farmworkers." And so, sometimes they would let me come on, but they were not really very pleasant.

But it's interesting. They weren't—I felt, "These are my people." They looked like my grandfather. I was probably related to some of them. And so, you know, some of them I could charm and talk to, and we'd have a—a lot of people were perfectly wonderful to me, because they saw me and my group that I worked with as being somewhat helpful. We could take people to the clinic, bring them back, help them get food stamps sometimes to supplement the times when they weren't working in the field, stuff like that. But sometimes it was quite, quite difficult.

Early on, I went into a field of Haitian workers who had a Haitian boss who also couldn't speak very much English, but enough to deal with the farmer. But what astounded me about the Haitians was that they had no shoes, they had no—some of them had no, a majority of them had no shirts on, and they were out topping and suckering tobacco leaves. Do you know enough about tobacco to know—you know? That was back in the day when we grew a lot of tobacco here in North Carolina, and that is very sticky, ugly, hot, difficult, horrible work. And these men were out there in the field, and they had open sores on their backs and on their feet. [0:35:00] I was just so disgusted and astounded by that, and upset. And I even knew what I was getting into. I wasn't even naive about what I was getting into, right?

That was so upsetting, I came back—I didn't even—you're bringing out things I haven't thought about in years. I came back to—so, I had a boyfriend at UNC. So, I came back and [sighs] was very upset. And I told my boyfriend, "I'm going to go to this church that's right around the corner from where we lived. And I'm going to tell them about this and I'm going to see if they can help, because something's got to be done."

And so, the thing that upset me was that the men couldn't speak English. And I knew a little bit of French, so I communicated with them, but there was virtually nobody who could communicate with them, and that was very upsetting. So, my idea—it's naive in hindsight, but I

thought if we could just get them English classes during these times when they're not able to go out into the field, even *that*. Then let's work on the conditions, let's work on this, let's work on that.

Okay, so I went to this church. I went up in front of the church on a Sunday. It was an African American church right around the corner from where we lived. They asked me to come down. I stood in front of the whole congregation. I told my story. Tears started—I didn't plan this—tears started streaming down my face. I felt so surrounded by love! People took a collection. I didn't ask them to do this. We raised $183.00. [Laughs] I remember that amount! The minister and I together planned this idea of setting up a connection with a community college where this guy would come and teach English, and we were going to pay him to do this. And when the time came to do it, he didn't show up. That's a whole other story! That was a disaster!

But it taught me so many things all at once: the thing of you see something, you reach out. In hindsight, why did I go to a black church? Why did I do this? I don't know. It doesn't all make sense. But it—actually, everything kind of flowed, and it also taught me a lot. And we ended up channelling the $183.00 into—we weren't able to do—the migrants moved on, but we channeled it. We gave it to some organization that was working with migrant farmworkers. And then, I moved on to the next thing when that year ended. But it was very intense.

Oh, the other thing I did was I collected—now, I worked with Bob Hall. He used to be married to Jackie Hall and he was running *Southern Exposure* magazine. And I said, "Okay, Bob, I'm working with Martine Gonzales. There are only a few Latinos on the stream, but he has access to them. I have access to these other guys. We want to do a series of interviews. We want to document what's going on in eastern North Carolina in this region in these three counties. We

want to do some oral history interviews. I want to be able to take some photos. I can't do, like, front photos, you know, facial, but I can do some photos. Would you be interested in a little exposé?"

He said, "Yeah, yeah. We've done exposés on migrant farmworkers. It needs to be different. What are you going to do? What's your angle? Blah, blah, blah." So, I spent a whole year collecting all these interviews. I think I did twenty-seven or twenty-eight interviews. When somebody was getting sent back to Amocoli, Florida, because the season was over, I would—and I had built up a relationship with them. I had my little tape recorder. I would say, "I'm not going to use your name if you don't want me to, of course. I would recommend we probably not use it. We could use other—initials, or we could make something up, or whatever. But can you—?" I did basically a little mini-oral history interview with them.

SK: Yeah.

AB: And sometimes we'd have an hour, an hour and a half, while we were waiting for the Greyhound bus to come pick them up to take them back to Amocoli, Florida. And so, it was all men. And I painstakingly collected all these interviews. I transcribed them. We thought about it. Martin did his. We compared notes. We met with Bob. We came up with this article. I don't even know—I probably have it at home, buried somewhere in a chest. And we did, we published this article in *Southern Exposure* magazine.

And that was my kind of trying to pull it together at least in *some* way that tried to do some justice to that very intensive year. But where it really ended up feeding me, and this is in hindsight, is it informs what I do in my own program right now, but that's a whole other story. We can get to that in a minute. [Laughs]

SK: [Laughs] Just out of curiosity, how did you know to go to Bob Hall and *Southern Exposure*? Were you a reader?

AB: Well, no. I knew—I only knew—I knew Bob. Well, I think at that point Bob was already starting to ask me to do some freelance photography. Bit by bit—this is the part I don't remember all the chronology really well—but I found that folks started calling me up: Can you go do this story? Can you do that story? And it kind of began to [0:40:00] take shape organically.

And Bob had already asked me to do a couple of stories about some other stuff. And so, I was starting to get to know him. He and Jackie, I think, had already split up at that point, or I don't really remember. I don't remember all of the chronology. But I think, you know, they were still friends. They were very cordial. And I had met him before, because when we were doing the story on Bynum, literally I didn't have a car. Jackie got Bob to let me borrow his car, so I could drive from Chapel Hill to Bynum to interview the people in the mill village.

So, back in those days, folks that were doing this kind of work all knew each other. [Laughs] It was a small little group, small universe. And I just thought he was just such a—I just admired him, respected him. He was a man of few words, probably still is. But I just felt there was real resonance and that he—I was younger than he, but he just respected me. I was kind of unformed. He was just like, "Go do it." And I, you know, I really liked that, you know?

SK: Yeah.

AB: And so, it wasn't more complicated than that.

But when I—I do remember when I finished, when we published the article, I thought—I had enough presence of mind at that point to know, "This is just nothing. It's wonderful. I put a little [cap here] on the end of *my* experience, but nothing's changed. This is way larger than this tiny little, *tiny little* thing that I've done. And these forces are *huge* and they are deeply engrained

in a way of life, and it's a culture, and it's a way of doing business. And this is not going to change overnight, and it's so complicated."

And yet, I wasn't discouraged at all. It felt—it was a feeling—I still feel it! It was a feeling of empowerment, man. Like, you go do the thing, and things open up, really. I try to help my students see that. It's just—I call it "the organic progression of the work," and the term I use is "trust the organic progression of the work." And what I tell them is if you go deeply into a context, and you're really curious, and you're open and you listen, and you start to make connections and you start to build relationships, and you continue to be driven by curiosity, you're going to be ruined in a good way for life, because it's going to keep drawing you more and more into the direction of becoming *political* and more and more sophisticated about how you go about that.

SK: Um-hmm.

AB: And I think that was the major thing that came from that year for me. I model the Hart Fellows Program in a lot of ways after what happened during that year, because there are so many important dimensions: learning how to read a very complex context as best as you can from your limited vantage point, testing out what you're seeing with a lot of other vantage points and perspectives, learning how to work with conflict in a skillful way, seeing conflict as a resource and learning how to work with it as skillfully as you can, given who you are.

At no point did I lose my integrity about who I was with those farmers. And I identify with them. These are my people. I could feel that little voice saying, "These are your people!" And yet, at the same time, I was very clear about what I was there for, what my purpose was. If they tried to give me a hard time, I was respectful, but I didn't give up, give in, or any of that kind of stuff, you know. I learned when to be appropriately confrontational and when not to be,

when to see your larger battle is somewhere else after this story has ended and it moves on to the next thing.

SK: Um-hmm.

AB: So, it kind of helped me—it helped me—the whole critical reflection process going off after you've had the intensive experience and letting it settle so you can figure out the deeper meaning. You can figure out the deeper structural issues, the deeper political issues, what is it connected to? It helped me become much more strategic, you know, over time. Just the pure fun of the work—[whispers] it's really fun. You know? [Laughs]

SK: Yeah, yeah.

AB: I know it sounds strange to say that, because it's dealing with really difficult human conditions. They are very upsetting, very disturbing to have knowledge of, especially when you don't immediately see what you can do to change it.

SK: Right.

AB: And even just seeing that this is so much bigger than I am. How could I have the illusion that I can change it? But over time, things could change. And so, just being really intrigued by that whole question of how change does happen, and the collective nature of change, and the longterm view. All that stuff started being formed that year. Isn't that interesting?

SK: It is interesting you mention that, because one of the things [0:45:00] that I wonder a lot about—the kind of work that *The Independent* was doing in the early eighties, for instance, and the kind of work that Bob Hall and *Southern Exposure* were doing and continue to do—is sort of how to measure success.

AB: Yeah.

SK: And those bigger questions, too, apply I think to activism generally. I mean, we can think about what happened in the 1960s as, you know, the most profound revolution in the United States since The Revolution [laughs]—

AB: Yeah.

SK: Right?

AB: Yeah.

SK: And yet, we look around and we see that racial inequality persists and poverty persists.

AB: Um-hmm.

SK: And these questions, in some ways, are more pressing than ever with issues of migrant labor.

AB: Yes.

SK: And migrant families are in the news these days.

AB: Yes, yes.

SK: And so, we can and should rightly celebrate the progress we've made, if that's the—I mean, celebrate might not be the right word, but I think [you get] my meaning.

AB: Yeah.

SK: And yet, we look around and we see so much more fixing that needs to be done.

AB: Yeah.

SK: And so, from a personal perspective, I think, thinking of that organic development is a really good way to not be discouraged at the smallness of the self in that big picture.

AB: Um-hmm, um-hmm.

SK: I mean, I'm also just trying to get my head around the impact of this kind of work. And speaking with people who've done it, it's so profound to them on their lives, and the work that they've done has had an impact. But how do we measure that?

AB: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Well, are you talking about measuring it from the personal? You're talking about measuring it on a societal level? Social efficacy or political change is what you're talking about.

SK: Well, I sort of—I mean, sort of both. I mean, the short answer is I don't know. [Laughs] Right?

AB: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

SK: How do we do it? In a way, it's unfair to ask someone who's worked for social change, "Well, you know, what's your score?"

AB: Um-hmm, "What have you accomplished?"

SK: Exactly!

AB: Yeah, yeah, right.

SK: At the same time, we're talking about the real world and real impact on real people's lives.

AB: Right.

SK: One of those people is the person themselves. But the others are—there are many, many others.

AB: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

SK: And it's really an open-ended question, and I don't know that it has an answer. It's just—I'm just sort of sharing a wonderment about how you begin to think about measuring your

effectiveness as an advocate for change, the effectiveness of an organization, the effectiveness of a movement.

AB: Right.

SK: And where do you sort of draw the timeline around these things? You know, some of the—the gains of the Voting Rights Act have been sort of recently reversed. Now, does that mean that the action in the sixties that accomplished the act in the first place, should we now render that less successful than it was just five years ago?

AB: Right.

SK: When do we stop measuring? There's just a whole clump of questions I've just dumped on the table like a pile of old toys that I'm not really—

AB: No! But those questions, they're *so* important. It's interesting. It's a paradox, because, of course, the question of your effectiveness—to me, it would be your political effectiveness, your strategic savvy, you know, learning how to mobilize people, mobilize groups of really skillful, talented, focused people, passionate people. You're *mobilizing* them. You're not directing them. You're doing your part to help create a—you know, I use this term a lot in my teaching—a holding environment. It's a very creative environment where people can learn how to be present to themselves and to what's happening in their society, you know, the society that they identify as being the most connected in trying to, you know, work with, make better. [Laughs]

You know what? Another word I'm using a lot these days is locating that group or that context that you want to do your part to help it thrive. You want to do your part to help it flourish, you know, because it already is alive. But what can you do to help it flourish even more? You know? And so, asking that question about efficacy is really, really important. That's

a hugely important question. And at the same time, it's got to be tied in creating a holding environment. A holding environment is like creating sort of the parameters for "I'm working on this now. And, by gosh, I feel really committed to being as wide awake right now, working with these good people, doing the best I can right now on this, with a strategic viewpoint." You know, it's like we want to change *these* structures, and we want to change *these* systems, and *these* are the hardcore [0:50:00] politics of it.

But also, it's connected to your own self and your own growth and your own sense of purpose and your own, I don't know, [sighs] your own ability to be present. So, to me, the question about efficacy always comes back to the question of how awake am I and how awake can I be with this group of people? And I know that sounds strange. I am not a New Age person.

SK: [Laughs]

AB: But I think that's a political question. I really do. I think it's a fundamentally political question about choosing to open your eyes and to be as present—to try to minimize the distractions, cut through to the essence of something, commit yourself to be there and to be awake and to widen that circle of being with other people who are awake. And, to me, that's where the juicy stuff is, because it can take off in ways that, if you had planned and planned and planned for months and years, you never would have expected. You don't know. You're not in control of that. It's not up to you. You know? And so, I would measure the efficacy more along how awake are you?

SK: Yeah.

AB: What's your level of commitment and how awake are you? And I would also measure it, quite frankly, with how much fun are you having as you're doing this? Because this is such serious work and so important that the paradox—it's a lot of paradoxes—is you've got to

just relax and have—enjoy! It's got to be enjoyable, or why the heck would anybody want to do it, and how could it sustain itself over time, and how can you sustain yourself? Do you know what I mean?

SK: Yeah, yeah.

AB: So, that's more—maybe it's just because I'm getting older, but I think it's all about that. It's all about being present, and that the efficacy comes from that, and the joy comes from that, and I would say the power comes from that. And certainly, the human connection comes from that. It all comes from that. And it's really hard. [Laughs]

SK: Yeah. [Laughs] Well, I think the intersection of hard work and joyfulness is probably a pretty good place to be. It seems, at least from what I've learned from people who were working at *The Independent* in its early days that there was certainly a lot of hard work.

AB: Yeah.

SK: Some joy, at least. [Laughs]

AB: Oh, there was a lot of joy! It was fun. It was crazy. It was fun.

SK: Yeah. So, how did you end up there? So, *The Independent* puts out its first issue fairly early in 1983. And there's some planning and efforts that go into that, certainly, a great deal of planning and a great deal of effort.

AB: Right.

SK: But you were one of the first staff members at the publication?

AB: I was the third staff member.

SK: Third staff member?

AB: I was on the staff before Katherine Fulton was hired.

SK: Oh, wow.

AB: Yeah. It was just before, so it was Steve Schewel, David Birkhead, me, and then Katherine Fulton. And then, we kind of filled it out with everybody else.

SK: So—I'm sorry. Did Steve and David hire you? Or what was—?

AB: Steve hired me.

SK: Steve hired you, okay.

AB: See, Steve and David were friends. And I didn't know David. How did I—I don't even remember exactly how Steve and I met each other. But folks had been telling me about Steve. Other people had been telling Steve about me as a photographer. But I had been hearing about him because he had been involved with politics, you know. And I was involved with politics in other—that's a whole other story. There are so many different stories. You know, when you get to be older, you just have a million stories. [Laughs]

But anyway, we were in two different circles. I was over in Chapel Hill. I was with all the little, you know, political people connected to the history department in Chapel Hill. And Steve was over here with all the Duke people. But there was some overlap. And at one point, we just got together and we just hit it off. And we hit it off—we got together very intentionally with the purpose of just checking out would I be a good fit to do some photography with this little—it didn't even call itself a newspaper yet. We didn't know what it was going to be—a statewide publication of some kind. [Laughs]

And he drafted this prospectus. I remember we went off to Southern Pines or some place, Pinehurst, where Katherine's family had a little condo. And we just kind of holed ourselves up. At that point, I think there were seven of us, and we just had a very intensive planning weekend or retreat of some kind. And then, I think the initial idea was I was going to be a halftime photographer. But, you know, I said to Steve, "That's crazy! This is definitely a full-time job." I

shudder to think—this is so funny. We were so young. We were going to cover the whole state, be a biweekly statewide publication, and, you know, we just had that tiny little staff. [Laughs]

But it was really—it was just very fun. One thing led to another when Steve and I met each other. [0:55:00] We just clicked, great chemistry from the beginning, one of those mysterious things. Same with Katherine. Katherine and I—she's just a great lady. I assume you've talked to Katherine.

SK: I haven't. I'd like to get out to—she's out on the West Coast.

AB: Right.

SK: And so, a phone call or a trip are in order at some point soon.

AB: Oh, she's fabulous! Fabulous! But, no, we had a lot of fun. I mean, it was—oh, gosh! I mean, it was just—we were in these tiny, tiny little offices. Have you seen pictures of it or heard people talk about it? And one of my memories is that the—well, you just had to be a good sport about this, but, you know, our bathroom was our darkroom. And so, when people had to come to use the bathroom, I had to get out of the darkroom. [Laughs]

SK: [Laughs]

AB: It was just—it was crazy! It was crazy, but it was fun! It was exciting and, you know, it was one of the best things I've ever done, really.

SK: Do you remember any of your—well, I suppose before I ask that, I should ask if you remember how your assignments emerged? You would eventually become, or maybe fairly quickly become the photo editor and the head photographer.

AB: Right.

SK: So, were you making your own decisions about what to shoot? Or was that coming from the editors or the publisher? Or where did that sort of hierarchy work?

AB: You know, that's a really interesting question. My memory of it is that we did a lot of group planning. I mean, if anything, it's kind of—it's one of those funny things you look back on and you think, "How on earth did we function?" But, you know, that was just also part of the culture of the day, is that, you know, you plan everything by group.

I mean, that's one of the nice things about bringing Katherine along, because she was very respectful. And when we hired Katherine, or when Steve hired Katherine, she's deeply respectful of, you know, group input and all that kind of stuff, but she's also—she's not afraid of authority, man. She had been running a paper. It was like, [snapping fingers and clapping] "Okay, we're going to do this! We've got a deadline!" *Boom!*

SK: Um-hmm.

AB: I really liked that from the start. But we'd generate story ideas together. We were all kind of—that was the benefit of all being together in such a small space. There was a lot of cross-fertilization of ideas. So, sometimes, yeah, we'd come up with ideas. But oftentimes it was just something—we'd kick around ideas, people would tear it apart, we did a lot of fighting in a good way. You know, "No, I don't know about that." You know, "This would probably work better." That was part of the aliveness of the whole venture, too. You weren't doing this for yourself. It was larger than you! And then, but the tradeoff was, you know, ridiculous amount of time talking. [Laughs]

SK: Right, right. This is a little bit arcane, but it just popped into my head. I guess I'm thinking of the kinds of issues that *The Independent* was working on, and there's a lot of emphasis on the environment.

AB: Even in the early publications?

SK: Yeah, I mean, one of the early pieces was on the Armageddon—

AB: Oh, right. Well, that's the very first issue.

SK: Yeah.

AB: Yeah.

SK: And this is just a question for someone who's worked in photography. I'm thinking that—we're sitting here, and you have here on the table in front of us a picture of Governor Jim Martin and Catfish Hunter, and I'm thinking of how dynamic this photograph is. And I'm thinking of how challenging it must be to attempt to pair a photo with environmental reporting, because of the lack of, potentially the lack of people in it.

AB: Right, right, right. I don't remember that we did a lot of environmental reporting.

SK: Okay.

AB: That's not my memory. Or at least when I was there. I was just there for three years. That's not my memory. I certainly don't remember taking pictures of that. All my pictures were, you know, people pictures.

SK: So, what were the kinds of photos you were taking?

AB: But, I mean, even the Armageddon photo—the photo was a picture of a big question mark on top of a drum.

SK: [Laughs] Right.

AB: You know, it was like a steel drum that had, "What?" And, you know, in fact, a lot of the steel drums had question marks on them, and they were—you know, there were *chemicals* in them! And so, that was actually what caught—what caught our attention was the visuals. That was right by—those drums were stacked up, and there was a vast kind of, I don't know, field of drums, such drums, and it was right by the freeway. And so, you would drive by and you would

see these rotting, rusting drums that you knew that was a chemical storage place, and you just saw all of these big bold question marks. Do you see? You know?

SK: Yeah, yeah.

AB: I don't even remember the details of the story. [Laughs] But I do remember when I took the picture. My memory is I had to like, you know, put my camera and take the picture through a chain link fence. Obviously, I wasn't—we weren't allowed on the property.

SK: Right.

AB: But that was—most of my pictures were of people. What was your question? I'm sorry.

SK: Oh, I was just thinking of some of those assignments or some of those projects when you were taking those photos of people. What were the kinds of—do you remember anything from those moments or those stories?

AB: You know, that's the thing that I wish I had had more time [1:00:00] to kind of look at some of these—you know, we took all kinds of—I mean, we went to a debutante ball. I'm looking at this one, right? We were interested in politics and culture, okay, you know.

SK: Right, right.

AB: So, I mean, I think we called ourselves the statewide newspaper of politics and culture, or something like that. And so, you know, I'm looking right now. I'm flipping through some of these old issues. I remember going to the—you know, I've referenced Southern Baptists about three or four times already in this interview.

SK: [Laughs]

AB: And one time, Steve and I went to the Baptist convention. And it was—you know, they have it in different places. They had it up in Asheville. It was in the Civic Center in Asheville. I think they had just finished building the Civic Center. It just seemed vast to me.

It was, you know, it was really fascinating, because in a way these were my people. These *were* my people. These *are* my people. And yet, I remember thinking, "Wow. This isn't my culture, either. And there are hundreds of these good folks here, and here I am, you know, a little old hippie. And, wow, these are two different cultures here. And I'm a photographer, and how am I going to take pictures of these good folks?"

And so, that started being born in me, that whole thing of what I call "the right way of approach" so that you don't spend too much time trying to explain who you are and what you're doing, but you spend enough. You have enough of a core relationship going that you can actually enter into a dialogue of sorts with the person so that, when you take the picture, it's not some stilted thing. It's something that has a kind of a flow and an energy to it. And it's being respectful of the person, but it's also revealing something interesting about that moment. And that was really—that was challenging to me.

But I liked the fact, even flipping through these, that we would go, you know, from visiting the governor on this big farm in Hertford—in Hertford? Yeah.

SK: Um-hmm.

AB: To the debutante ball. That was like going into a whole other culture for me, too. That was really, actually, very interesting. And, you know, there was something new and different about that. Every week there was a new and different assignment.

And I was working with a network of photographers across the state. I couldn't pay them very much, but these were basically my friends. If I didn't know them, we became friends. And they were interested in the idea of *The Independent*.

And then, I loved the creativity of how ideas emerged and I loved the creativity of trying to figure out how to, working against deadline, come up with decent, good photos, compelling photos, with a budget of almost nothing. How do you do that?

And so, you know, it was—and I thought the undercurrent of everything we did was political. But you didn't overtly say that to everybody. It just felt that way. So, it was very exciting.

SK: Well, I'm curious about that idea. In the—well, I guess let me put it this way. There is a conception or a misconception that journalism is, quote-unquote, "objective" in the same way that scholarship, historical scholarship is objective. You know, it's balanced, or you tell both sides of the story, or you don't—you know, you don't have bias, whatever that is.

AB: Yeah.

SK: This was not a newspaper that labored under that misapprehension. [Laughs]

AB: Right! [Laughs] Right, right.

SK: [Laughing] And it doesn't sound like you particularly subscribe to that idea, either. Can you talk a little bit more about sort of how you saw your work fitting into a sort of—something that had a political agenda, not an insidious agenda, but had a point? The point was more than a sort of flat representation of a moment in time. There was a story to tell that had an endgame.

AB: Um-hmm. Oh, yeah. Well, I mean, I kind of—it's funny because we started *The Independent* such a long time ago. Now that I look back on it, I feel that we were—I mean, I'm

not blaming us, but I feel I was naive, and we were all naive. You know what? We were classic liberal, leftist, university, privileged, young people. What's wrong with that? Nothing. Nothing's wrong. Our hearts were in the right place. A lot of us were actually from North Carolina or had longtime North Carolina ties. We were smart; you know, we weren't idiots. We were disciplined. We were hardworking. But we were very naive about what we were—where this was all going to lead ultimately.

And at this point, you know, I try to teach my students, or at least expose them to something that's much more nuanced, because I think it's more effective. I think, if anything, we were just too—probably too much, too shrill, too much in the leftist kind of direction. [1:05:00] [Laughs] And that we probably—you know, I try to teach my students that I think where the interesting—our country right now is just so polarized that the interesting work is not tolerating some other perspective, but *really engaging* with it when it is just completely different from yours, and having full respect that it is. But yet, you share this problem together and, by gosh, you've *got* to get to the point where you're being practical about how you're going to tackle it together, you know, and without equalizing the viewpoints. That is really hard work!

SK: Yeah.

AB: And my memory of those early days, I don't honestly—we couldn't have been differently than what we were. It was good. It was a breath of fresh air. And the state needed—I think, in a way, and it sounds silly to say, but we needed something like this. But it was really very much—it wasn't about dialogue with the different perspectives. It really wasn't. It was just about shaking things up. And that's not a bad thing. I'm not minimizing it. But I think ultimately the work is more sophisticated than that. Alright?

SK: Yeah.

AB: And you must have our own perspective. You must lay claim to your own perspective and be bold about it. But if ultimately you just leave it at that, we're *never* going to get anywhere. That's—oh, [snaps fingers and claps] that's the problem. It's a much deeper, much more demanding, much more difficult skill to—I don't know. You get what I'm saying, right? Do you?

SK: I think I do. I think I do, absolutely. To what extent do you think—I'm thinking of 1983 as the year in which *The Independent* publishes its first issue and the year that CNN starts broadcasting.

AB: Oh, really? Oh, wow!

SK: Two very different styles of journalism.

AB: Yeah.

SK: To what extent do you think the media today, or since your work at *The Independent*—and I'd like to return to a couple more details about that, but just following this thread a little bit—to what extent do you think the media has contributed to this polarization that we're experiencing today?

AB: Oh. Well, hmm, that's—you're not asking any easy questions today, are you?

SK: [Laughs] Well, I just don't want to bore myself or you.

AB: [Laughs] Well, you know, of course, the media has contributed to it, but you can't blame it on the media. There are all kinds of other factors. It's so complicated.

SK: And it is—

AB: It's connected with just so many deep difficult things about our society. It's a very—that's not a simple question. I know you didn't mean it as a simple question. There's no simple answer. I don't have it all worked out. But obviously it's in the interest of certain media outlets

to try to probably intensify the polarization, I guess, because that seems more what's more dramatic. But there are other things that are working at reinforcing and polarization, too. I mean, a lot of the ways in which, you know, the internet functions, where you just line up with your, you gravitate towards your group of people who [sighs] believe what you do, rather than—.

It's this thing that I'm talking about of having to truly [claps] rub up against somebody who fundamentally is another—their politics, their culture, their way of being in the world is fundamentally and completely different from yours, and it always will be. And yet, you share this reality of whatever this hugely interdependent problem is that you share, whatever it is, however you want to define it. And the need to somehow allow the different perspectives and yet—again, I love the paradox. It's a term I use a lot these days. But it's real. It's not wishful thinking. You're owning the shared problem. It's not going to go away. And so, can you reach the point where you really do, *really do* deal with each other, talk to each other, engage in surprising practical work with each other to resolve the problem?

Media can also probably play a helpful role in reinforcing that. But I think the forces of polarization are so rampant right now, there are so many things that—even the way we use our own private little, you know, social media and stuff—that works against people learning these difficult political arts of truly engaging with perspectives that are not ours. You know?

SK: Um-hmm.

AB: And that's what I worry about, because I feel like [1:10:00] what we're doing in our own little program here is just—we're doing the best we can. And what we've seen when we work with students and we challenge them directly to begin to practice these arts, they love it. It's very empowering. And if we have more time to talk, I could tell you some of the things that we do in our classes and that sort of thing. But it's not a widespread kind of practice in the

culture. So, media is part of that, but it's lots of other things. It's just—you know, we're going to have to get together again and address that question.

SK: [Laughs]

AB: You've asked so many excellent questions today and, in a way, I feel that is the most important question you've asked, that resonates with the work I'm doing with my students, and what I see we need to do as we go forward if we're going to have any chance of getting young people really engaged in a sustained way in politics.

SK: Right. Well, it's an unfairly broad question, but it also sort of gets to the core question of what publications like *The Independent* existed.

AB: Um-hmm.

SK: And it was because, it seems to me, that people like yourself and Steve Schewel and others, you know, had an agenda. There was something, there were a set of problems that they had identified that they wanted to fix.

AB: Yeah!

SK: And that was true at *The* Independent, and that was true at some of these radio stations they we've been speaking to.

AB: Yeah.

SK: And, you know, all that connects into my curiosity about metrics of success and about agendas and politics and what journalism is supposed to do. And these—we'll never answer these questions, but perhaps, as you suggest, if we keep talking about it, [laughs] it'll be useful.

AB: Well, just asking the question is so helpful, though. You're very gifted, asking these questions.

SK: Oh, you're very kind.

AB: No, these have been fun!

SK: Well, I'm lucky to talk to interesting people.

AB: This has been fun!

SK: Well, can we just—it's getting towards the end of the day, but can we talk briefly about—?

AB: Yeah.

SK: You were there from 1983 to 1986? Is that right?

AB: Um-hmm, to 19—no, I started—I actually started with Steve in 1982. I started before the publication.

SK: Okay.

AB: Because it took us about a year to get geared up for everything. So, I don't remember exactly the timeline, but I do remember I started working with him—he hired me in 1982, and I left in 1985.

SK: Oh, okay, '82 to '85.

AB: Um-hmm, because 1985 is when I went to Mexico and Nicaragua and El Salvador and, you know, did a whole bunch of other stuff that I had been working on on the sidelines up until then.

SK: So, I'm just curious about your sort of parting of ways. What was it that—I know that you had said that from when you were an even younger than you were when you were working at *The Independent*, you had wanted to get out and see the world.

AB: Yeah.

SK: And you went and did that eventually.

AB: Yeah, yeah.

SK: Do you remember sort of how you parted ways?

AB: Oh, yeah, yeah!

SK: This wasn't a staff that stuck around necessarily for a really long time, so it wouldn't have been strange for you to leave.

AB: Oh, no, no. You know what? That's a great question. I mean, I know—we parted ways in a really nice way, I mean, because, it was just—because, you know, I'm lifelong friends with Steve. And I haven't talked to Katherine in a while, but I feel like she's a lifelong friend. And, you know, I have tremendous affection for all those folks that I worked with.

But what happened was my husband and I split up. And he was—this was my first husband. And he was slated to go do research in Mexico for a whole year. This is in 1985. And I actually took advantage of that sort of natural—it was a question: "Am I going to go with him to Latin America, or am I going to stay here?" And we were just, you know, at the same time, we were just about to split up. And we did split up, and I thought, "You know what? I'm just going to go to Latin America on my own! He's going to go do his research where he does it in Mexico. I'm going to go to the opposite side of Mexico and learn Spanish. [Laughs] And then, I'm going to head on down to Nicaragua and do this work that I've been involved with now for several years," which is exactly what I did.

So, it was just sort of a natural, for personal reasons, a natural point, turning point. But it was a professional turning point, too, because my energy—really, I'm a builder. I like to come in with a group of people and create something, do it very intensely for a while, hand it off to the next generation, and then move on to the next stage for what I'm being drawn to.

And I started getting involved with my Central America stuff, really, right around the same time. It was in 1978. So, all that stuff was very intense by 1985. That was right in the middle of the war. And that's a whole other conversation, but anyway, my work with these faith communities just got more and more, became a much bigger draw to me. [1:15:00] It was political. It was about questions of faith and purpose and sustainability and all kinds of things that were very—have always been very important to me.

And that, it was just—it all kind of came together. Again, "trust the organic progression of the work" means you read the signs, you read the opportunities, you weigh things, [claps] and if something says, "Come, join me," even though you don't know where it's going to go ultimately, you just—[snaps finger] you do it. And that—it was just a natural ending and it made perfect sense. My memory is it made perfect sense to Katherine. She was wonderful, gracious about it. We had a another young woman that I had been grooming to take my place. She was fabulous and she happily took my place. She had been my intern for a couple of years. They didn't miss a beat. It all worked out really well. And, you know, I just moved on to the next phase of my life.

SK: Yeah. Good. So, I have just one more question before we wrap up.

AB: Yeah.

SK: I was thinking about how you're a North Carolina person with this North Carolina family, ties to the Southern Baptist community, although, as you said, your family was Catholic.

AB: My family on my grandmother's side, but my grandfather was Southern Baptist.

SK: Okay.

AB: He was converted to Catholicism.

SK: Okay, okay. So, in some ways, very much embedded in the state.

AB: Yeah.

SK: And yet, you have these encounters as a—activist may not be the right word when you're working for the federal government, but with the migrant program and as a photographer when you are taking on the role of outsider, really, and are, you know, in some senses, being perceived as hostile to the interests of the state.

AB: Yeah, yeah.

SK: Did that ever get weird for you? [Laughs]

AB: You know, that's such a—wow, do you ask amazing questions, young man!

SK: [Laughs] Thank you.

AB: You really do! That is a fabulous question. It got weird in a good way. I realized, in fact, that that was a power that I had, that I always have been the outsider who is the insider. That's a huge power. It's a huge power. It's a huge personal power. It's a huge political power. You know? I didn't—I was so young I didn't—this is another insight that's really become much more clear as I've gotten older. But even when I was young, I realized, "I can do this!" You know, even to go back to the thing about the farmer, this *is* my person. I am—we are one here, you know. We're from the same folks.

And yet, I didn't agree with what was being done. I didn't agree with the circumstances. And yet, I knew I had the right, I also had the Southern charm, I had everything! I had the sense of humor, I had the persistence, I had the stubbornness. I had all kinds of things, where I could be the insider who is challenging things, coming at it from the outside. So, it's an insider from a belonging standpoint, but an outsider from a practical standpoint of how I grew up and, you know, all that kind of stuff, where I was able to have some perspective that allowed me to ask those questions, those charged questions.

And that's still true. I mean, it's pretty much been true in everything I've ever done. It's what I teach my students how to do: the power of the question that comes from an outside perspective, because going out to the outside lets you look in and see things in a fresh way. And yet, you don't have the right, in a way, to ask it unless you really understand or somehow are related to what's going on on the inside. So, if you're not naturally related to it, get related to it! Because it's just—I think, I think it's very ineffective, talking about efficacy, to just shrilly lob questions from the outside without contextualizing in a relationship what's really going on on the inside. Does that make sense?

SK: Absolutely, absolutely.

AB: And so, yeah, wow! [Claps hands] You rock!

SK: Well, thank you. You rock. Maybe we should just end there. [Laughs]

AB: [Laughs] Okay. I enjoyed it.

SK: Yeah, I enjoyed it, too. Thank you so much for your time.

AB: My pleasure. Okay. You are so good at asking questions, man.

SK: Oh, you're very kind. You're very kind. Thank you.

AB: No, I'm not trying to be kind! You really, really are. Where does the—that's a gift.

SK: Thank you. Well, I have to say, it—

[Recording ends at 1:19:22]

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Sally C. Council