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R.47. Speaking of Feminism: Today's Activists on the Past, Present, and Future of Feminism

Interview R-0892

Joanne Smith

July 8, 2015

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ABSTRACT – Joanne Smith

Interviewee: Joanne Smith
Interviewer: Rachel F. Seidman
Interview Date: July 8, 2015
Location: Girls for Gender Equity offices in Brooklyn, New York
Length: Approximately 1 hour 24 minutes

Joanne Smith is the founder and executive director of Girls for Gender Equity. In this interview, she describes her maternal family's Haitian roots and the values that she learned from them. She recounts her childhood in Maryland, her positive experiences in high school, and especially the benefits she feels she received from being an athlete. She discusses her choice to attend an HBCU for college, and the path she took to living in New York City and working in the field of social work. She won a fellowship from the Open Society Foundation to start the organization that was originally called Girls for Gender Equity in Sports, and describes in detail the goals and strategies of that organization. She talks at length about the realities of sports for girls of color, especially Black and Latina girls, and the need to address deep cultural beliefs and experiences. She discusses the role of sexual assault, and the many challenges facing her community, as well as the degree of commitment she has had to make in order to continue her work in this organization. Her interview is notable for its discussion of the role of on-the-ground services for girls vis-à-vis online feminism, and the tensions she felt between activists even in the Black feminist community. She discusses her vision of the role academics can play in social movement building and her hopes for the future.

This interview was conducted as part of Rachel F. Seidman's research for her book *Speaking of Feminism: Today's Activists on the Past, Present and Future of the U.S. Women's Movement*.

FIELD NOTES – Joanne Smith

(compiled July 8 2015)

Interviewee: Joanne Smith

Interviewer: Rachel F. Seidman

Interview Date: July 8, 2015

Location: Girls for Gender Equity offices, Brooklyn, NY

THE INTERVIEWEE. Joanne Smith is the founder and executive director of Girls for Gender Equity

THE INTERVIEWER. Rachel F. Seidman is an historian and associate director of the Southern Oral History Program.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEW. The interview took place in Smith's office. The Girls for Gender Equity offices are in the YWCA building in Brooklyn. Smith was warm and welcoming. She did, however, have an important phone call at noon, and so we were not able to address all of the issues we hoped to get to, and the interview at times felt somewhat rushed trying to make sure we didn't run out of time. There is noise from the reception area and other offices outside her office door.

NOTE ON RECORDING. Recorded on a digital zoom recorder.

TRANSCRIPT – Joanne Smith

Interviewee: JS JOANNE SMITH

Interviewer: RS Rachel Seidman

Interview date: July 8, 2015

Location: Girls for Gender Equity, Brooklyn, New York

Length: 1 audio file, 01:23:46

START OF RECORDING

RACHEL SEIDMAN: OK, this is Rachel Seidman and I'm here in Brooklyn with Joanne Smith at Girls for Gender Equity and we are undertaking an oral history for a project called *Speaking Up, Speaking Out, Talking Back: an Oral History of Feminism in the Digital Age*. Joanne, I'm going to start by asking you to help situate me with your background. Can you tell me about your grandparents? Did you know them? Did you grow up with them? Where were they from?

JOANNE SMITH: Sure, so my grandparents are—and I'm talking about my maternal grandparents—are Haitians who grew up and lived in Haiti most of their lives. My grandmother actually, Ninive Lege, is the woman, my middle name.

RS: Can you spell the name?

JS: N-I-N-I-V-E. [She] was the real matriarch of the family. In Haiti she was I guess a powerful woman, a woman who, you know—. She had five kids and took care of the family with my grandfather, who was an engineer. He was well respected in Haiti and they had property and space. Then he really, I guess, had trouble during the Papa Doc regime and had trouble getting or keeping a job. My grandmother—this is the story my mother tells us. My grandmother wrote to Kennedy at the time, and Kennedy answered

back her letter. She wrote to him asking if he could help my grandfather to really secure an engineering job and he did in Tunisia.

RS: Wow, not what she had in mind?

JS: Not what she was saying. He did in Tunisia, he secured an opportunity for him and ultimately that was their marital demise. My grandmother actually moved to New York seven years before sending for her children and really established herself, bought a house in Queens.

RS: How was she supporting herself?

JS: Working as a nurse, working doing whatever jobs that she could. Her degree didn't hold in New York what it held in Haiti, so she would have to work several jobs. Her closest friend, Tete Lamonte, Teresa Lamonte, took care of the kids at the house and helped to raise them. My mother and my aunts and uncles. She also her own business. My mother tells me without labeling themselves as feminists, these were the real feminists of the family who really did what it took to take care of the family but also were innovative and leaders and entrepreneurs and really as a community, saw it as normal. As women, [they] saw it as normal as taking lead and doing what it takes to take care of the family. And so, my grandmother sent for all of them and they all then came to New York City.

RS: All at the same time?

JS: All at the same time. So when I think of my grandparents, my maternal grandparents, I have happy thoughts of them, I have thoughts of them being real pioneers and understanding that they've also made great sacrifices for us to be here, in particular my grandmother. I think of them sometimes a little bit as martyrs in the sense of

sacrificing wealth and property to come here and have to work so hard, and then also sacrificing the children and the lives and the time away and the relationship in that way. So, for my grandmother who has passed away, the time I had with her as a child was endearing. I remember combing her hair and dying her hair, braiding it, and the candies at the bottom of the purse [Laughter] that have a little bit of crumbs on them. I remember her loving us very deeply, but I remember her as an older woman, or an old woman I would say, who really sacrificed a lot. I think by the time she reached her eighties, [she] may have been really sad about that and what she has missed. For me it has helped shape not being a martyr. And saying like, I am no martyr, because I've witnessed what that sacrifice means and it means yourself in a way that I don't even think I have. I don't think I was born with that martyrdom, in that kind of a way.

RS: How do you think it affected your mom? How old was your mom when she came?

JS: So my mom was thirteen when she came and it was during adolescence. Being thirteen it was really traumatic because she didn't speak the language. She had, of course, four siblings, so I have two uncles and two aunts, and my mother had at the time long hair. Both my grandmother and my grandfather are Haitian, and of course everybody's mixed with Indian and for them, it was a little more transparent. So her hair, all the aunts' and uncles' hair was really long and black and my mother got I guess attacked a lot within the community. They moved two places. Queens, and also on 108th and Broadway. I still remember the address: 255 108th and Broadway. That's where many of us then grew up and came through. Many times on the way to school—. It was a very Dominican community at that time. And many times on the way to school she would be attacked or

assaulted and most of it was because she didn't understand the language so she didn't answer people. Then they would pull her hair and they would fight her. So a lot of the shaping around dealing with conflict is you fight back.

Also, I think for her, assimilating into a culture where, I guess, where she's seen as Black but her history and her cultural values and practices and behaviors were reared in Haiti where very much, it's shaped by colorism and internalized racism, but at the same time, throughout every socioeconomic status and rights, Black people are the ones determining that. And so it was an assimilation into understanding how she's seen and having to deal with how she's seen, but not feeling like an African American who has grown up in the US. And this is something we still have conversations around. Because, you know, she just although now she has the experiences and can understand and connect the experiences as being seen as an African American who has grown up in the U.S, she's still very much has a connection to what it means to be Haitian and growing up in Haiti in an island where she felt very much at the time had many resources and great memories and great privilege. And great emphasis on academics and education and how that helped to shape her and her value set as well as ritual and behavior. She's very much in the Haitian community in Miami and New York. Strong accent, she won't let it go, even though now she's sixty-six. It's one of the things I very much love about her and is very connected to Haitian culture. She said it wasn't until her thirties that she realized. Oh, ok, I'm seen as an African American here and this is what racism here feels like and looks like because she was very much entrenched in Haitian culture here.

RS: So what would you say were the lessons or the values that she articulated to you that grew out of those experiences?

JS: A very strong sense of fighting. I have memories from second grade coming home and telling her how a boy kicked me when I wanted to play soccer and he kicked me in my shin and I cried and went and sat down. I told a teacher and teacher told me to sit down and I sat down. And she was like “What did you do next?” and I was like, “Then we had to go.” She was like, “You tomorrow, you go and you play soccer, and if he kicks you, you kick him back.” She was like, “Just don’t let him kick you.” So I did. I went and before he could kick me I kicked him and he cried. And the difference was both of us now had to sit down. And the third day I went and I come back and I told her what I did and she was like, “Ok good. Did you play soccer?” “Well, No.” “Play soccer if you want to play soccer,” and the next day I went and I played soccer and he picked me for his team.

So, to fight. That memory really has been at the core of a lot of things that I have done where obviously I don’t kick people any more, but definitely understand that—. Basically as Assata [Shakur] says, it’s our duty to fight and that you can’t allow yourself to be not just kicked but you can’t allow people to determine what it is you are going to do if you’re determined to do it. She showed me that through getting her [bachelor’s] degree at fifty. I’m one of three girls. I’m the youngest of three. She had my sister, her first daughter at twenty, and in raising us many times she would little by little go to school and get credits and lose credits and work so hard to raise us. I would see her falling asleep at the dining room table as she’s preparing for the next class. By fifty years old she finally got her bachelor’s degree and walked across the stage and it was one of the proudest moments to see that determination wise. Many times when people would’ve

already given in and just focused on their career. She was really focused on getting her degree and she wasn't going to allow all of the setbacks to deter that.

She taught me that but she also taught me to really hold on to my value set when it comes to family. So in our family, there are no throwaways. As much as we argue or fight or whatever obstacles there are, there's always a way back in. There's always a way. Nobody's exiled from a family regardless of what they have done. And I think right now, especially my mother being one of the matriarchs of the family, that value set is something that she still carries and is at the core of then how now intergenerationally siblings, cousins, aunts, uncles, then interact with each other. Regardless if I don't remember aunts who remember me at three months old and tell me, "Well you've got to remember me you held my finger. But my mother has me at their house regardless when I'm in Florida with her. Regardless if I haven't spoken to cousins in ten years and didn't even know they were our cousins, you know, this is family and this is where you come from and who you are and this is the memory that you all share together. So give 'em a kiss, right?"

And I think that's very much shaped how I do the work here, and we do the work here. There are no throwaways, right? You come into the work and supporting and elevating and leading the way with girls and women of color. Regardless of where you are we'll meet you there and you have something to offer. Many times you'll hear it when we talk about our Urban Leaders Academy afterschool program for middle school students. Where we say you can be a leader for a moment in a decision, you can be a leader for a day, or a lifetime. Leadership comes in many forms and it matters. Even thinking of now, within this movement or moment of Black Lives Matter and really the

racial justice fight of the twenty first century. Everybody doesn't have to be on the front lines and marching. Everybody has a role and everybody's needed.

So I feel like those values were really shaped by my upbringing, my mother's core values, as well as what we've seen from our grandparents and the path it took to get here, and the shoulders that I stand on to get here. We would've never thought, or I would've never thought that seeing my mother falling asleep at the table to get that one other credit mattered so much until then I saw the culmination and her graduating. And it for me summarized that all of the hard work paid off and that's what it took for her. It may clearly not be what it takes for everybody, but what it took for her. She was willing to do the work and it got her where she needed to be so it was worth it.

RS: You've talked a lot about your mom, what role did your dad play in shaping you?

JS: So my dad—. Very early on in my life my mom and dad divorced. My sisters were seven and five years older than me, so my father was very instrumental in being their caregiver when my mom and him were married but I think I was the surprise child, [Laughter]. The "let's give it one more go" child. Of course that brings on the third stress of the family. For my mom and dad, probably, [I] was around three or four, my mother left New York, left my sisters here. Actually I was about four or five, brought me with her to Virginia to look for new, not just new life, but career and ways in which she could raise us because she knew living in New York, in Queens, they owned a home. They were divorcing and she wasn't going to be able to afford to live here. Her brother, who's the oldest, lived in Virginia, so she moved to Virginia to relocate and to find a new career

and she'd always done accounting work. She ended up landing a job at IBM and then moving us all there to Virginia.

With my father, he was very much her friend, but he wasn't in our lives as a consistent father. It wasn't until [I was] twenty-two when my sister's daughter Alexis was going through her first communion. I was twenty-two and she was seven going through her first communion and asked—. Because her father and paternal grandparents were always around—and asked, “Where were is your father, mom?” As we're making this guest list, he needs to be here. It really sparked for my sister the fact that she wants them to really be in each other's life and as the oldest sister it was very brave. She really opened up the doors for all of us as sisters to heal and embrace my father back into the family and it was really up to us. We didn't know that, right, to be able to do that. Because I think for him, or I know for him, it was great shame that he wasn't able to be the father that he knew we needed and that he let us down, and he very much felt that way and didn't know how to reconcile that. And felt like he couldn't do anything really about that. So, after great strides of writing letters back and forth, talking back and forth, he definitely came to the first communion and has been in our lives. As a matter of fact, as we do this interview he's in Maryland now with the family and the grandkids and everyone because he is now back and has been for the last ten, twelve – for the last eighteen years, part of our lives in an instrumental way.

RS: So you grew up in Virginia then?

JS: I grew up in Maryland then.

RS: So tell me, I know about the little girl you kicking in soccer.

JS: I had to. [Laughter]

RS: So tell me about you in high school, looking back how would you describe yourself in high school?

JS: I sometimes feel guilty I had a great high school experience, because it means that then I'm sure I contributed to people not having a great high school experience. Because high school's so difficult for so many. I was very athletic in high school, very much connected with athletics. I played soccer, I played basketball, and I ran cross-country. And this was in Montgomery County, [Maryland]. I went to Seneca Valley High School. And so, for me, I always had team and I always had a leadership position. I was in varsity in ninth grade so from the time that I came into high school then I was in a space where because we played sports then we would be seen and folks would know us who we probably didn't know. I did struggle a lot in high school when it came to, I guess, being disciplined or following rules that I didn't think made sense. I thought high school was a place, in Montgomery County—. I've just gained language around my experience in high school through the work that has happened here at GGE and understanding school push out, implicit bias, and understanding how I was seen and the role, the gender role I should have been playing. And always going against that grain.

For me, high school was a place while I felt free as I reflect back on it, I realize the limitations and the expectations that were kind of put on me. What does that mean? In high school, for instance, I had shop class, cooking class. I learned to type, I learned to drive. All of the perks that came with living in one of the richest counties on the East Coast, at that time Montgomery County. After school programming, classroom size, the antithesis of New York City. Because you had an abundance of everything and you thought that's how it was supposed to be. At sixteen, you're supposed to get a car, space

house-wise you have it, space field-wise you have it, you don't even have to be part of a team and stay in an after school environment. So for me, as someone who at the time had so much energy and enjoyed sports so much, it was the ideal place to be.

I did well in school because I was creative, but when I look back at my grades and really the cornerstones of learning and development I do feel like I could have—. I got passes because I was creative. Because I was the only Black one in that AP English class, and what I was bringing or what I was offering was unique and I remember a white girl in high school saying, "Wow, you're articulate" in AP English class. I remember another white girl, Melissa Gibson, saying "She's in AP English with us. That is a racist comment to make." And it was for me, a moment of like, yeah, that's right. It was the first time somebody come to my defense in that way where that kind of, those kinds of micro-aggressions and that kind of bias was so overt that she called it out. But usually it's one of the things that people think "I don't see the problem in saying that, it's a compliment."

High school is where I was able to, you know, explore who I was. It's where I realized I was a lesbian and I wasn't yet naming myself as a lesbian. It's where I decided I had agency of my body and what I would and wouldn't do. But a lot of that freedom came from playing sports. Sports really shaped then, how I saw myself in the community, and in community with people as a team. How I saw reaching goals, how I saw handling setbacks, and it's what got me to college on a scholarship. So I saw handling debt that I essentially didn't have to have because I was able to get this kind of a scholarship and that very much, those perks very much mattered every step of the way for us in a way that I didn't realize until I looked back because of the socioeconomic status we were in. Single mom, three kids. I'm the last one off and she's working at IBM as an accountant

to really make ends meet and while her salary was good and fine, we weren't at a level where we were going to be able to—. We weren't rich, we weren't going to be able to have all of the perks that we wanted. So, thinking about where things were going to come from, college tuition was going to come from, computers were going to come from, was real. Payment plans were real and it was understanding that wow, I was really blessed and fortunate to be in that community even if it wasn't set up for me. I benefited from it and it helped to determine my economic outcome leaving then college. So then it made that high school experience, all those hours of practicing, all those hours of walking the line, really worth it, because of that.

RS: It's an interesting echo, the way you describe that of seeing your mom work so hard at the coursework

JS: Mhmm.

RS: It pays off, the hard work pays off. Ok, so which sport got you to —?

JS: Basketball.

RS: Basketball – and you went to college —

JS: I went to Bowie State University in Maryland

RS: In Maryland?

JS: Yeah, an HBCU, and that was to really try and to center myself around Black culture and really feel more of a connection. Because I grew up in Montgomery County in the suburbs and felt like that was really missing.

RS: And did it give you what you wanted?

JS: Not fully. [Laughter]

RS: Why, tell me more?

JS: Not fully. Bowie State University was a good experience. I met life long friends, but it wasn't the robust experience that I had at Louisiana State University when I went into the pre-doctoral academy, because that experience came with also seeing every socioeconomic class, but also seeing another level of academic achievement and excellence. Another level of a historic understanding and cultural competence within coursework. That really, once I completed that, shaped the reality that wow, I really can do anything that I apply myself to because I see these great examples of people who have, and a great willingness of them to mentor me and to really open doors and create pathways and it's a matter of how I show up. Then the resources and the wealth of knowledge is here. Even something as robust as their library, their facilities, the way in which they had a level of expectation on the coursework and what it was that we were going to turn in and being sure that was academically rigorous but full of integrity in line with your moral value set. And it was a program, Kofi Lomotey led the program, but it –

RS: What kind of program?

JS: It was called the Nubian Pre-Doctoral Academy and it was a program to help shape, I guess to help shape research and PhDs if you were interested in moving on, or that level of scholarship.

RS: And how long were you at Louisiana State?

JS: I was in the program for two months. It was just a post-bachelor's level program. That came, I came from Bowie, and got that and that was something I very much needed and then made me realize wow, what I missed. I didn't know what I missed at Bowie – and a lot of that, when I say that, what I missed at Bowie, you gotta remember I was a scholar athlete and so much of the time was spent in the gym and on the road and

then in homework help and we did things together as a team as opposed to having that space to explore and seek the mentorship. Our coach, at the time, for me, just wasn't the coach that I needed as a young woman who was coming to terms with her identity, a young woman that was used to a certain level of care from coaches and expectation of academic scholarship. I was the only one to graduate in four years on the team, which was kind of – very sad. So academics didn't come first on the team. And it was also a coach who was very patriarchal and it wasn't going to work for me because I didn't grow up in that setting. I grew up in a setting where I had a voice. And, if I had to fight for the voice it was going to be still heard. It had value. Value maybe was based on hierarchical, but not off of me being a woman. And he was very much a dad figure to many of the young women there, which worked for them but it didn't work for me. I needed, if you were going to be that, more support, understanding. I need a conversation, not dictatorship. And it coming down to "because I'm the coach," because that just wasn't going to ever work.

Bowie was fun though. [Laughter] It was fun. The experience there shaped some of my feminist value around sexuality and sexual orientation. In D.C., being a lesbian or being LGBT was very much based on a heteronormative model and was consistently you're either feminine or you're masculine and you look that way and you act that way and you emulate what masculinity is for men. Or you're feminine and very jazzed up and I'm neither of those things. There are some things about me that are very feminine and some things about me that are very determined as masculine as some things that just work for everybody. It was a space where I was like, wow, this isn't going to really work. And this further reinforces that I need to be in New York, because I've always felt like

I'm a New Yorker. I've always come back in forth a few times a year to New York and it just always felt like home and where I'm supposed to be compared to Maryland.

RS: So after your two months at Louisiana State, I do want to get to here. It sounds like that was a pretty eye opening—I don't want to put words in your mouth, but transformative moment,

JS: Absolutely.

RS: So can you talk about the – what you did with that realization after that?

JS: Sure, I came to New York after that and I wasn't clear on the path still I wanted to take, so I didn't go to get a Master's right away. I worked here at the Brooklyn AIDS Task Force, and before that I worked at Rheedlan Children and Families, which is now Harlem Children's Zone in Harlem. I really explored for myself what it means to do social work service, because I graduated with a Psychology degree. My path was to be a psychiatrist, and I realized I did not want to be a psychiatrist.

RS: Why not?

JS: I didn't personally believe that that would be my best path. Going on to medical school and diagnosing people, I thought that my value was counseling. My value was now social work, and realizing that at the core it was caretaking and creating an environment and situation where there are options. Psychiatry didn't fit what I thought it was supposed to fit and how it was supposed to support. So that's why I said let me take a step back and really determine where it is that I need to be. Because I explored art therapy. I explored industrial psychology, right. And there was also an entrepreneurial spirit about me. I also wanted to be rich. I thought, you know, I also have to be wealthy within this work. Family wise that was a value set you need to gain. My mother was an

accountant. You need to gain wealth, you need to have savings, you need to manage your economics.

When I came to New York then I started working and I knew I loved children, everybody knows that, and I would create in those spaces – even if it wasn't there – spaces for young people to build, to lend their voice, to share their experiences. Because many times the focus was on the parents and the young people were considered collaterals. So, it was through the experience as case manager, or case supervisor, that I realized that one, the bureaucracy of New York was something I couldn't understand. So when the families were getting entitlements in one place, another place had no connection to it. Schools and institutions were so disconnected and it felt like a hamster wheel. We're doing assessments and reassessments and I didn't want to be a part of that kind of bureaucracy. But it also opened up the opportunity because those groups that I would start would be voluntary groups and voluntary work. It wasn't work I was getting paid for and it opened up the opportunity to build my skills working with young people.

The opportunity came to apply for a fellowship through the Open Society foundation and I applied for Girls for Gender Equity in Sports. I looked at taking my experience as an athlete and creating space of girls of color to play but also to be seen differently in the community. Because I observed—and it became clear right away that had I grown up in New York, the opportunities and the path that I just went on would have been so much different. It would've been different because of the lack of opportunities and the expectation of girls to play sports now. And this year National Women's Law Center has a lawsuit against New York City high schools because of their lack of implementation around Title IX and sports. Sports were so important to me in

high school that if I didn't have them, that kind of energy and angst and anger around my father, anger around whatever was going on in school, would've been taken out somewhere else. On the streets possibly, depending on where we lived. It could've been in gangs, it could've been looking for support other places. It could've been in relationships and having early pregnancy, who knows. I'm not different from the other girls. It's a matter of what conditions are created for me to thrive.

I felt like it was very clear that what I needed to do was create better conditions because the freedom I thought I had in high school, in college, at LSU and then coming to New York wasn't real freedom until I knew others were free, and that our destiny was really tied and that I had to do something different and couldn't be part of the every day business as usual and maintaining this systemic oppression. So this opportunity for the fellowship was that without even the realization that we'd be here today. It was really in the moment and thinking of it as an eighteen-month fellowship and thinking what we can create. Let's try it, why not, and going for it. Going forward with it and it really evolving into something I would've never imagined had I not had this opportunity. So the fellowship really changed the trajectory of my life and many other lives and is what has us here today.

RS: So it's a really interesting example, I'm trying to think how to articulate this, but I'm thinking about the connection between legal change and social or cultural change.

Title IX got passed and made a huge impact—.

JS: Absolutely.

RS: On your life —

JS: And Title IX was researched in Montgomery County, that was the first place it was researched, which was why I had access to so much as a young woman.

RS: But it doesn't apply evenly.

JS: No.

RS: So can you reflect on that? You must have thought about this a lot.

JS: Absolutely, I mean that was one of the first. Title IX has been our umbrella policy starting as Girls for Gender Equity in Sports. In 2005 we changed the name to Girls for Gender Equity in understanding that just like many things, even now, philanthropy and people are often trying to catch up to organizations and revolutionary work. For Girls for Gender Equity in Sports, it was about revolutionizing again the way that girls of color see themselves, starting from a micro level and understanding their physical capacity and agency and also being healthy and enjoying sports and having opportunities but then on a macro level organizing and bringing community together.

We center – especially in New York City, it's a basketball city – so we center a lot of our activities around sports and when you have young people or children within that, that's when parents come, it's when the teachers come, it's when the community comes, and it's a way to organize and to bring about change. Especially with that being the framework, we tapped into the Women's Sports Foundation and really learning more and using what we learned around how Black girls in particular, and Latina girls don't have the access and the cultural competence around sports looks so different. So we talk about not wanting our hair to sweat out and what that means to be in gym class to be sweaty and then how to go on and how the community responds to that and how we, as

coaches, mentors, as teachers, create the conditions for that to not be the main value set and how much then work we have to do on ourselves because that's our value set.

So if you see a child even now, think about Blue Ivy and a Black woman starting a petition around Beyoncé combing her hair as a two year old baby. It just demonstrates how much we are for the pickings. Not just systemically and institutionally, but even within our own communities, right? We are vulnerable, we are accessible, we are able to be—that's actually ok. Over 5,000 people signed this petition. And it doesn't matter socioeconomic wise, I mean it's Beyoncé and Jay-Z right? It doesn't matter, they're still touchable in that way.

This is obviously very deep cultural—we're just talking about hair, but it's a very deep culturally embedded value that hair's a space where we can have a conversation about it, and have a conversation about what that means and what does it say when you're daughter's coming home and her hair is up in the air because she was sweating. Well it says I don't know how to take care of her, it says I'm poor, it says she doesn't care about what she looks like and then it reflects then on the family in that kind of a way. You would think that sitting on a floor on a basketball court with families around that kind of conversation would evoke tears and then a new understanding of why then it's so important for you to say you know what, it's ok, you're still beautiful. It also evokes that she has bad hair, , she's not beautiful and she's not going to have chances at A, B, and C. And a child is in fifth grade, right? You know, her sweating out the perm means she has to pay more money for her to go and get her hair done again. This is just one conversation.

Through understanding how Title IX misses so many of us, and I guess starting from a real grounding space of who are you walking in this space? Who are you leaving this space? Who are the people around you? The whole ecological framework of who's holding you. Who's the community? How does this policy impact you and change your life that we're here celebrating as women? Is it for all women and what advances have you seen and has it created those opportunities for you, is how then we would talk about Title IX, how we would look at Title IX, and how we would use opportunities to bring a more cultural lens to Title IX implementation within the schools. Because we all understood it wasn't just about creating opportunities in sports.

The other piece is around sexual harassment especially and that's where we really went deep because, again, for our girls what came up was on the court – them being for the picking. So something as simple as having seven to ten year olds play, but having boys in the gym at ten and eleven. They're already, many of them – look, if you didn't see their face physically - like women. They've already hit puberty and size-wise we're bigger than what you thought their age. Big for your age, right. And so running up and down the court, it took a little girl to tell me why she didn't change. I knew she loved it. I knew she loved to play. I knew she had fun. It was instructional. It wasn't so competitive. And it took her to tell me, “Well, I'm not comfortable.” So then seeing how she was holding her chest, understanding, oh, she needs a sports bra. Getting her sports bras and her being like, “Oh, this is better,” but then still being like, “I'm just not comfortable.” And finally sitting down and saying, “Oh, what's going on” and then seeing where her eyes looked. It's boys in the corner looking at her, talking about her, following me out after or they say something when I go over to get the balls. I don't even want to go and

get the ball. And then realizing - wow, in creating the conditions you also need to create the environment and education and there's accountability there and connecting that to Title IX in schools, trying to identify the Title IX coordinators in schools so that those kind of conditions can be created, that kind of education can happen. We would do workshops and trainings for the physical fitness teachers during citywide trainings where they would all come in and try to apply this cultural lens. It was really challenging work, and especially around Title IX identifying who would be accountable for creating those kind of conditions in the most basic form and then actually with some nuance to it, that would really dig deep. I know you asked about Title IX and I probably went all around the way but—.

RS: No, that's good. I'm interested in the changing context in which all these organizations are working and how that shapes the work you do. For instance - I forget what year Girls for Gender Equity in Sports was started?

JS: So the fellowship started September 11, 2001. Then we were incorporated in June of 2002.

RS: September 11, 2001.

JS: Yeah that was the first day of the fellowship.

RS: So, that must have had an impact on how you were thinking about your work.

JS: It had a deep impact because I was also in social work school. I got accepted to Master's of Social Work School at Hunter [College] at the same time I got the fellowship, so it was beautiful for me. That being said September eleventh happened. It was the first day of gathering, we were at the Bed Stuy YMCA and it was that morning. What do we—do we still go? I went, and we were working with seven to twelve year old

girls from the community and the deal with the Bed Stuy Y at that time was at twelve, girls drop out of the Y. Usually their parents have them enroll and then they come here after school but we lose them. If you can increase enrollment of girls from the community, we can be a fiscal sponsor. It was a way to increase their enrollment, but also they had two gyms at the time. This was before they had the school. And so went, set up, and girls came. It was the reality. It was stark reality that what was happening over the bridge did not effect their lives. Their parents weren't working over the bridge. The schools kept the TVs off, many TVs didn't even work. They didn't know what had happened, they didn't see it, they were here living their day-to-day and they were here in the gym.

And I've seen that consistently as movements have been happening, as international tragedies happen. Bring back our girls. It's such a disconnect from what's happening in the real world.

RS: So I wanted to ask you because that raises this other question that I'm interested in – I realize I've read stuff you've written about that moment. In North Carolina, we talk a lot about the digital divide because there's such a large rural community and that's where it's most noticeable. But it sounds like you're seeing that also here, strongly, in that community. Is that fair to say?

JS: At that time – so we're talking about 2001, 2002 - the access to smartphones and the digital access was different. The news sources, where they get their news and how it is they see their world affected is still a divide.

RS: Here?

JS: Here now. So even when I think about—. I had a meeting with Black feminist writers and scholars as well as folks who are social media gurus of Black Twitter, and so many of our girls that they are then speaking for and speaking about and creating pathways for and doing revolutionary work around, wouldn't know them if they fell on them [laughter] because they wouldn't even understand the language that's being used. Because it's not the day-to-day on the ground language that's being used. So that, intercommunity, is such as divide. And when I say girls I'm talking about under eighteen year old girls.

RS: So what did you tell the journalists? You had this meeting—.

JS: So I told them that, right? And I told them that it's in partnership because part of that meeting itself was around Black feminism work happening. Part of what I was feeling within that meeting was a devaluing of the nonprofit industrial complex and how we hold community. And maybe that might have been my own defense of being in that space and feeling like ok we have to bring it together, we have to come together with this. There needs to be robust academia and scholarship. There needs to be robust direct service and organizing that's on the ground and with the young people, and there needs to be robust social media and voices. And that we need to connect them and that work to connect them should be funded and has to happen intentionally. It's not coming together and for them to know that. No matter if you have 50,000 followers. Your 50,000 followers are likely not the ones most affected or the ones coming up from seven to eighteen years old as young people in the community. They are the ones who are well read, had a good mentor, connected them, or came upon feminism and Black feminism through school. Or had access in a way that these young people on a day to day do not

seek and wouldn't know to connect with unless they're directed that way. And would need to be reached, and that would take work coming from them, because what they're offering is not just revolutionary but necessary and innovative. That digital divide is so real but it's not about the digital divide being about coding and about how to get a job within technology.

It's also about being able to communicate and translate ideas and connect to ideas in really innovative ways and owning your voice and cultivating a skillset around scholarship and mastery that you can own and be proud of. Because what many young people are not realizing is their digital footprint being something they've been born into and something that doesn't go away. It has to be crafted and it has to be very thoughtful and that we need help with that here. Not just at GGE, but within nonprofits and community based organizations. Help with learning that and that we have a lot to offer and hold for young people. So basically that we're all valuable, and we have to be able to come together and how can we fit through coming together and doing this work together?

RS: Do you have a vision for what that partnership would look like?

JS: [Sighs] Big tent, right? When I think about GGE, I think about having those kinds of scholars here. I think of them actually being part of the work, part of the curriculum, part of the day-to-day, not just an event or a conference. That's what we end up settling for, but part of the growing edge of figuring it out together and also being informed by the girls as we do it and the young people as we do it. So for instance, the vision for that within Urban Leaders Academy, or I should say - the practice of that in Urban Leaders Academy has been young people learning to develop websites and blogs and storytelling and doing so in-house in the afterschool environment. Connecting

internationally with other youth organizers who in Mexico or Brazil who are fighting against oppression and sharing stories in that way via Skype or getting a sense of that but wanting to also have the actual practice of really exploring, examining, talking about, having classes around Twitter.

Classes around social media. Not in the just this is what you don't do, but here are the possibilities. Let's go deeper in what it is they're saying in 140 characters. What it is they're saying with this point here? How it is that your content can help shape dialogue? What feedback do you have or comments do you have? Being able to reply back and feeling confident in that reply. Being able to do the research and not the instant Wikipedia, right? The research around developing your own point and critique and developing your critical thinking skills and comparing that – and doing it a really early age with the expectation that even though you're not in college yet, your frontal lobe isn't fully developed, you can do it. You have something to say and it matters. Your viewpoint from this age in middle school really matters and can add to the conversation. And the conversation online and it not be a separate conversation. Oh, this is a space for middle school students, but on this conversation around Charleston, I have something to say about the Charleston Nine and the shooter. I understand what is happening within North Carolina because I can connect historically what has happened, but also I can connect Eric Garner and understand what has happened there and how it has impacted us here. And not having, again, to be re-traumatized or to re-traumatize but to make those connections and see themselves in the story.

I see a vision of us being able to come together and do the work in that way but there are no shortcuts. It's really about, to me anyway, it's really about creating

programming, creating opportunities that are not just one off, that are consistently embedded within the work that we do with young people and expectations that we have. As well as the teaching, that has to happen. It's reciprocal. There's a reciprocity around learning from young people because we all think many times that, "Oh we know what they're going through," but no. We were not born in an age where technology and Google or Facebook was your first email. But for them, even practices like Word or Outlook they don't know. They don't know what a dial, a busy signal sounds like. That's not what they grew up with and to them it's amazing when they can hear it. To be able to appreciate the instant information how they're getting, how they're processing it, and how they're experiencing it, to be able to learn from that and appreciate that without it being a case study, with it actually being a praxis in life, is my ultimate vision for how we tie in all those different mediums.

RS: The other thing about these very young girls that you work with, it's that for many of them they barely remember a time when the president was not a Black man.

JS: That's right.

RS: How do you see that affecting their sense of citizenship, their role in the country, or anything else?

JS: I think it's a matter of us shaping it. Because while they have seen the president and know the president as a Black man, many of us will say you can do anything. And it's the reality is that he's an outlier, he's a genius. He's worked for that, he was reared for that in ways that—. He might have overcome many obstacles to be able to get there, but it's not something everybody has. Black, white, whatever, no. [Laughter] It doesn't mean that. Actually you could be eight and you might have passed the age that

you could be president because you haven't done the work that it takes to have that capacity. Or you won't have the resources that it will take to get you to that Ivy League school and that's the reality. For me I think that's a really great question and for me I worry a little about that being the theme. Because there's a Black president, anybody could be president. You know?

And I worry about it because of how much I realized and still realize as I do the work – oh wow, I thought once I got here that will mean this happens, things open up floodgates happen or by twenty eight I was supposed to be rich. Once I got that degree it was supposed to get easier and I was supposed to be able to move mountains. The reality of the instant gratification and understanding millennials and trying to understand millennials more and trying to understand what really gets them going and makes them tick and helps them to stay committed to long term life term social change. For me, at twenty-six, after great tragedy in the program and assaults and threats within the program on my life. Realizing – OK, I have to make a decision if I'm willing to die for this. I have to make a decision if this is lifelong work for me and deciding that. And worrying if those kind of decisions would be made by these young people. If anything would drive them to that because they see the world as great possibilities of them being able to do anything. Or if they can see that they have to stick to paths. I don't think it's either or. It's a matter of me feeling like I'm not sure. I'm not sure how that will shape them and ultimately what great accomplishments will happen or disappointments will happen. It's too be seen, and I only say that because much of the optimism is around “yes, I can do anything” because this is the president and what hasn't happened yet is what will happen post-Black president and how that would then shape their thinking around what it is that they can do.

While at my age, I feel like I will never again in my lifetime see a Black president, nevertheless a Black woman president. I don't even know who's in line for a Black woman president within my lifetime because that's how far away I feel from the presidency as a Black woman. Not personally, but as a status. Yeah. I don't know. I'm sure we'll see it play out. I wish I had an answer for that but I don't know.

RS: So, I have to go back and ask you about the threats on you—to tell that story and what went through your mind or what you feel like compels your commitment after that.

JS: Well, there was an incident in the programming where there was a twelve-year-old girl and her sister was seven or eight and her job that day in the program was for the seven and eight year olds, but this twelve-year-old girl was a great basketball player and loved it. She reminded me of myself, she just was committed. She was going to keep trying and she was really a good athlete. She went on to play really well in school. But her job that day was to pick up her little sister at school. She didn't, she came straight to the program. When participants didn't come to the program it wasn't something where we would call home and find out what happened to them. Who came we would work with and who didn't, we hoped they would come back the next time. There was a game and there were a lot of young people there and schools would come in and we would play tournaments or what have you. So then what happened was as people were leaving I got the frantic – we had beepers and flip phones – actually no we just had the flip phones – we got the frantic call that she didn't pick up her sister from school. She ended up going home and her mom was like, she didn't pick up her sister. So then they went to the school and they couldn't find her sister; that her sister was missing. Actually I got it from the

front desk. These parents were up here and they were looking for me because her sister was missing. And then got the parents. As we were ushering people off the parents came back and they had been drinking and they were looking still for her and they threatened me and said, "If we don't find our daughter, we're going to come back and we're going to kill you." She better come up. And me, trying to explain that's not on me, and trying to understand what happened. I didn't know at the time her sister was supposed to pick her up for programming, so trying to understand that.

They're frantic so they go off and I stay with the students and they ended up finding her at the police station. That's what happens. The school brings them to the police station if they're left. They come back and they're like, "You're lucky. Still, we're going to kick your ass, you're lucky we found her" and what have you, just come outside. Me being at the front desk, and the front desk saying do you want to call the police, we're going to call the police if they don't leave. They've been known in the community, and they're from the community, and they've been known in the community to fight and they're drunk. And I wouldn't go out there [Nervous Laughter] if I was you basically. And me in that moment, I probably didn't make the best decision in talking back to them. I wanted to understand one, what happened and two, I wanted to say where the hell were you? Where were you? Your daughter's in school. Why was she picking her up? She was like, "Well I was home." And I was like, "If you're home why didn't you pick up your own daughter? Why do you have your twelve-year-old picking up your eight-year-old?"

So that probably wasn't the best thing. It elevated the mood and the fight and then the threats came. The front desk threatened to call the police and they end up leaving. And I end up leaving and looking over my shoulder and wondering if they were going to

jump out. And it was her and him – the mother and the father—were they going to jump out and jump me? And remembering, I lived in Kensington at the time and it was Bed Stuy. I had a little Hyundai Accent. Remembering waking up the next morning and wondering am I going to go back? Realizing, if I don't go back then I'll never be able to go back, even if I go back. And that I'm telling the girls - one, they're not worth it [phone rings] and two, [pauses] when it gets hard you stop. Even if I go back in a few days. Because the whole decision was do you let it die down. That's what the Y was trying to tell me. Let it die down, maybe cancel. You don't want to put people's lives at risk if they come back. And I'm feeling, I'm not the one putting people's lives at risk! They're putting people's lives at risk, and if you feel like there's a threat, close down the Y! You know? And feeling like there was an accountability and I wasn't going to back down. I wasn't going to provoke them, but I also wasn't going to stop what for many was such an amazing outlet. By that time we had eighty girls coming. We had teams, we had schools, we had things set up. Not going disrupted all of that. And what other kid is going to be stranded there? And I also understood I did nothing wrong. If they do jump out, if they do shoot me, if they do stab me, if they do jump me, I'm willing to go through whatever it takes to do this work. And just committing to that.

Around that same time an eight-year-old girl was raped on her way to school in the morning and it was again, just the reality that even within our own communities we have to recognize that the least valued are Black girls. Even a puppy would have been valued more than her walking from the site of the rape to school. And nobody stopping her at eight years old, in the morning, and nobody even seeing her abduction and nobody even seeing her. Like, we're invisible. You had to go deep and deeper and take those

risks. Not being a martyr, but taking those risks that really meant something or it meant nothing. It was just another program or activity. I already had vowed to not do that leaving the Brooklyn AIDS Task Force and leaving the system of assessment, reassessment every 6 months, and bill for Medicaid, and that system of really not feeling like we're having impact. That just grounded me.

If you're going to do it with purpose on purpose and that's what you signed up for and applying for this fellowship that's what it was then do it. That's why I applied for the 501c3. Was granted it in 2002, June, and realized that this was so needed, so many came, so many hands have touched this work and made it great. But that it was also life long. That I likely wouldn't see the change that I want to see within my lifetime in the way I want to see it, and if that ultimately is reflective of being able to say I don't see a Black woman president in my lifetimes, that's what I'm saying. I think a Black woman president will happen but not in my lifetime. How can I contribute to that? Making the world a little better when I'm here. I don't think you half that. I think you're all the way or you do something else. You get out of the way.

RS: So how do you differentiate in your mind? On one hand you say, "I'm not a martyr and I don't want to be a martyr." On the other hand you say, "I'm willing to risk my life on behalf of this goal or organization?" So when you talk to, if you – if they had jumped you and killed you, people might have said she martyred herself for the organization. In your head, what are the boundaries that you set for yourself that prevent you from being martyred?

JS: In my head, I am fighting for my own life. In my head, I'm still, or at least in my soul and doing this work, there's always a little girl inside of me that knows that it

takes community and it takes intentional—. I'm willing to do whatever it takes. And not just anything. I think that that's the piece of martyrdom that I think about it being. I would never burn myself alive in the name of gender equity. It's not going to go that extreme, but it's the reality that girls are dying every day. Girls are missing. We don't measure the disappeared. Girls are being sexually abused and trafficked literally. We don't even know maybe in this building next door there's a girl being held hostage. We don't know. And the reality that we don't have the luxury to wait and we don't have the luxury to do nothing. That we have to keep creating conditions for girls and creating awareness and programming as well as addressing policy. That this work needs to continue happening and that because somebody threatens me – again, I didn't go provoke them. "I'm waiting here for you and let's duel to the death." I didn't want them to jump me, I didn't want to be jumped. I did file a police report against them. I didn't go pick it up, but I got it on the records. I was told get it on the record, I got it on the record. And it was the reality that if they did come to jump me I'd try to talk my way out of it [Laughter] and try to run. I'd also try to fight back. And the decision was though I wasn't going to compromise my integrity, I wasn't going to compromise because I wouldn't want to be compromised on.

I know that eight year old would have wanted somebody to not compromise. It's more the reality that if I don't do it for myself, if I don't do it for my sisters, nobody will. More that reality. We feel it now and I say, we feel it, Black women in this world right now feel it who are connected to the Black Lives Matter movement, who are connected to what is happening internationally – Bring Back Our Girls – what is happening in Haiti. Even six of the Charleston Nine were Black women, and it was in the name of white

women that this terrorist killed them. Ain't I a woman? We're still asking that. I feel like if I can't even do that for babies –eight years old, young girls – then I'm saying I can't do it for myself and I can't do it for other women. I guess I just feel an obligation to do it and commitment to do it and a desire to do it and an ability to do it and I'm willing to do it to the best of my ability.

At the same time, it has come at a cost. While it's not martyrdom, I have made decisions that have had me work way more than I ever imagined working. I have a work life balance that's not quite balanced in the way I imagined it being balanced. So going from a girl who played sports all year round, didn't need to get a job in high school, didn't need to get a job in college, had work study, played sports, had fun, I definitely know fun. But understanding that doing this work has really come at a cost of fun and life and health and creating that balance and that I have to do better around that. Also, the community has to do better around that. When I say community, I mean nonprofit industrial complex, peers, [Phone ringing] our own community. There's still a lot of work to be done on many levels.

RS: I know it's noon, do you need to answer that?

JS: Yeah, I'm going to have to jump on this call.

RS: The one remaining thing I want to ask you about is connected to the nonprofits and the economics of it and the financial context in which you work. Maybe there'll be some way for me to come back and ask you about that or talk to you later about it.

JS: OK

RS: It's connected to that, what you were saying and how we support this work and where the money comes from and how people live life like this.

JS: I have a lot to say about that. We should pick that back up.

RS: We'll talk about that another time. Thank you so much.

JS: Rachel, thank you so much.

END OF RECORDING.

Transcriber: Emerson Rhudy

Date Transcribed: September 2, 2015