

AL 133

Interviewee: Portia Taylor

Interviewer: Connie Lazenby Bieber

Date: April 2, 1991

B: This is Connie Lazenby Bieber. I am interviewing Portia Taylor tonight, April 2, 1991, at her home in Gainesville [2416 NW 54th Terrace]. Good evening, Portia.

T: Good evening, Connie.

B: Portia, I want to start tonight with getting some biographical information from you. Where were you born?

T: I was born in Raleigh, North Carolina.

B: When?

T: June 12, 1950.

B: What were your parents' names?

T: My father was William H. Taylor, Jr., and my mother was Gertrude Everette Taylor.

B: Everette was her maiden name?

T: Everette was her maiden name.

B: Where were they from originally?

T: My mother was originally from Hertford County, North Carolina, which is on the border between Virginia and North Carolina, and my father was a Raleigh native; he was born in Raleigh, as were his parents. Both of his parents were born in Raleigh.

B: Long-time North Carolina residents.

T: Yes.

B: Where did you grow up?

T: I started my first year of school in Raleigh, and when I was seven my family moved to Hampton, Virginia. I lived there until I was twenty-two. I graduated from the public school system there and then went to what was at that time Hampton Institute. It is now Hampton University. I graduated in 1972 and turned

twenty-two shortly thereafter. Then I moved back to North Carolina. I went to Chapel Hill, North Carolina, to earn a master's in social work at the University of North Carolina. That was a two-year program that I finished in 1974. I began working for the University of North Carolina in June of 1974 in continuing education. I worked there until the end of June of 1976. Then I moved to Gainesville, Florida.

B: So you have been here since 1976?

T: Right. It will be fifteen years this June. I came here specifically to work with Santa Fe Community College.

B: What was the first position that you took at that time?

T: Director of community education. I came in to do that, and I did that for four years, until May of 1980. Then I became the assistant to the president, [Alan] Robertson. I did that until May of 1988, when I became the associate dean of academic services. In May of 1990 I was made provost of the educational centers of Santa Fe.

B: And currently that is your position, and your office is located [at Santa Fe Community College]?

T: Right. In addition to being provost of educational centers, which includes the downtown center and the Andrews Center in Starke, Florida – that is a lot of programs – I am also director of the downtown center. So I wear two hats.

B: It sounds like an exciting career.

T: It is. It has been good. In 1980, after I became the assistant to the president, I went back to school, to the University of Florida, and earned a doctorate in higher education and administration. That is where I met John Middleton, my former husband. I went to graduate school part time and continued to work full time. I finished in May of 1986.

B: Going back to your early childhood for a minute, now, when you were still in North Carolina, what is the very earliest memory that you have of your own childhood?

T: The earliest memory I have would probably date back to 1953, when I was about three years [old], I guess. I remember my mother bringing my brother home, and he was born January 1, 1953. I do remember that. Then I have lots of memories from that point on. That was a segregated time in Raleigh, and I do remember segregated facilities. I remember spending a lot of time with my

grandparents, who were there.

B: They lived in Raleigh?

T: They lived in Raleigh. I remember attending the first grade at St. Monica's Catholic School. I started there in the fall of 1956.

B: Now, this was a segregated school?

T: It was an all-black school. The nuns (the sisters) and the fathers were all white. The student body was all black. I have memories of my mother teaching at the high school directly behind where we lived – this was prior to my beginning school – because we lived near the high school, and we would go to meet her. The baby sitter would let us go out and meet her. That was before kindergarten and nursery school, so we were home during the day with the baby sitter.

B: What did your mother teach?

T: My mother taught government, civics. Prior to that I used to go to my grandmother's school. She was a schoolteacher also, and she would take us to school on special occasions when I was small.

B: That was a real treat.

T: Yes. I have vivid memories of attending church. We were of the Baptist faith, and we started Sunday school at an early age. My father drove a Sunday school bus, and he would pick us up when he drove. My father was a schoolteacher also at that time. He taught out in the county. It was Wake County, in a little town called Zebulon. He taught business, business education, in the high school. I also have early memories about playing in the park with my brothers and sisters. I have two sisters and a brother.

B: The brother is younger is you?

T: He is the baby, William III. We are all close in age. I think right now my brother is thirty-eight, my youngest sister is thirty-nine, I am forty, and my oldest sister is forty-one, so we are very close in age and very close knit. I can remember the places that I lived as a child. I have some early, vivid memories of my childhood, I really do. I think a lot of it, too, Connie, because it was talked about a lot by my parents and my grandparents.

B: It reinforced things.

T: Yes, it reinforced the memories.

B: I bet that is a part of it. So you came to Gainesville in 1976?

T: Right.

B: What was Gainesville like when you came?

T: Well, for me, initially, it was sort of a closed town, a closed community. I did not know anyone. I knew one person when I moved here. That person was also instrumental in my coming here, Chester Leathers. Do you know Chester?

B: Yes, I do.

T: He is currently our director of community education. At that time he was associate dean for continuing education at the University of Florida. When I was working at North Carolina we became acquainted through two professional organizations that we both belonged to. I would see him at regional meetings and then at national meetings. He called me and told me about a position at Santa Fe and [asked if] I was willing to leave [UNC]. I said, "I am not going to leave the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill for a community college." He said, "Why not just look into it anyway." I did, and [I] applied and came down for an interview. I really liked Santa Fe.

But when I arrived here – that happened the early part of 1976; the entire process [took] from February to April – in June of 1976, a lot of things struck me.

The heat! I had interviewed early in the year, February or March, and I just thought it was wonderful that it was seventy-odd degrees. When I left the Raleigh-Durham airport it was thirty-two! The heat struck me.

There were not a lot of blacks at Santa Fe Community College at that time. There are a lot now, but every year there are fewer. So I did not immediately have a cadre of people to draw on. In fact, Chester pretty much introduced me to most of the people that I met. Quite naturally, they were from the majority community. I visited quite a few churches, different churches, trying to find one that I would be comfortable with. I was much younger [then] than I am [now]. I had just turned twenty-six; I moved in the day after my twenty-sixth birthday. So I was really interested in finding out what was going on.

I found that most of what was going on was geared toward the college community. I knew that the University of Florida was here. I did not realize the influence that it had on the social part of the community at the time. Not knowing a lot of other people [made] it difficult at first. In fact, it took me two or three years, actually, to get into the town. In fact, after the second year here I really felt that I had not gotten into it, [and] I began looking for another job.

But something else happened in between. My younger sister, Carole, has a law degree. She had finished law school at Chapel Hill the same time I finished my master's, and she remained in Chapel Hill working as a legal-aid attorney in Durham, North Carolina. She accepted a job doing legal aid in Wilmington, North Carolina, just the time I accepted the job here, so we left Chapel Hill about the same time. I missed her tremendously; I really did miss her. I had been here about six months or so, and it was about that fall of 1976 or the beginning of the winter of 1977 that I tried to convince her to move to Gainesville. She said, "What am I going to do in Gainesville?" I said, "Practice law." She had gone through the North Carolina bar; she had taken the North Carolina bar exam. But there was a position open at the University of Florida for an associate University attorney. I found out about it from Chester. We were always talking about Carole. I got her to send a resume. He was still working at the University, and he took it to someone there in administration. They called her for an interview. She called me and said, "They want to interview me." I said, "Well, if they are willing to pay for it, if nothing else it is a free visit to see me."

To make a long story short, she did interview, and they offered her the position. So she moved here in March of 1977, which really made a big difference about my being here and being lonely. [It was great having] one of my favorite sisters here with me. She moved down that March of 1977 after I had been here about eight or nine months. So that made it really nice for a while, because I had a buddy and a friend and a sister.

Then she grew quite bored with Gainesville. She took the Florida bar exam, but she did not like the position that much. There was no courtroom experience. It was basically a lot of paperwork. So she left in the fall of 1979 to go to Broward County to be a public defender. I became disillusioned again.

By that time I had been on the job three years. I had it down pat. I knew what I was doing, and I was a little bored with that. That is when I began seeking employment elsewhere. In fact, I was offered a position in Rockford, Illinois, as director of adult education. The reason I did not take it was we could not settle on a salary. I also informed the president and my dean that I was looking. I did not want to sneak around. I just did not find anything to be very open. I was really ready to leave.

About that time I made a good friend in Cynthia Chestnut. Carole was leaving, but Cynthia and I had become good friends. So I had a friend. Not long after that, after I turned down the job in Illinois, six months or so later, Alan Robertson, who was then the president of Santa Fe, asked me if I was interested in being his assistant. Basically what he wanted me to do for two years was to direct the self-study, the reaffirmation of our accreditation process. It sounded like something that I really wanted to do for a lot of reasons. The community ed

aspect really did not involve me with the students or staff or faculty at the college. It was a non-credit program that basically appealed to people in the community and citizens that take the leisure and avocational courses. It would give me an overall view of the college in terms of the entire workings from the bottom up or the top down, however you want to view that, and [it would give me] an opportunity to get to know the faculty and the staff. I had had some dealings with the minority students, because I had helped them with their student organizations that they had going at the time. I did not have a lot of time to do that. So I accepted the job.

It caused me to make some other decisions. I decided to go back to school to pursue the doctorate. That is how I got a house. At the time I had been living in an apartment. I thought that after two years I should buy a house and sell the [condominium]. Even if at the end of two years I am ready to go – so that led to a lot of things.

That position afforded me a lot of visibility after a while, basically because Alan gave me a lot of visibility, in addition to being the self-study director. Someone would call and say they wanted a representative from the college to serve on a board or a committee, and [Dr. Robertson] recommended me. He sent me to meetings in his stead when he could not attend. I started getting involved. I started doing a lot of volunteer work, [and] I started meeting people – people of influence. I knew all the county commissioners, all the city commissioners, all the school board members. We were all on a first-name basis. When Doug Magann first came to town as superintendent [of Alachua County public schools], Alan called and invited him to lunch, and he asked me to go with him. It really gave me an opportunity to meet people and to get involved, so it made it a lot easier. I started settling in.

Then I really got immersed in my schoolwork, too. That took some energy. So for a while there [things were really looking up]. Since that time I have been busy!

B: Gainesville is getting more like home [laughter].

T: Yes, and it is growing. I have seen a lot of growth. [Northwest] 23d Avenue was not four lanes [when I came to Gainesville]. The college has grown by leaps and bounds. The city itself has grown. It is a lot different than it was fifteen years ago, in terms of attitudes and acceptance, [of] letting people get involved.

B: Let me ask you on that. You said you found Gainesville very closed when you came. I am not from Gainesville, either. I came to Gainesville in 1972, and I did not even realize it was closed at first. I did not realize that I did not know the [native] Gainesville [population]. I knew people who lived around me or people I

was acquainted with because my children were in school with them. But it took me two or three years to realize that these people were also outsiders, and none of us had punctured the core yet.

T: There is an old guard here.

B: Right.

T: Black and white community.

B: And that was going to be my question to you. How much of the fact that you thought it was closed have to do with the fact that you were black, and how much of it was being an outsider coming into a small town?

T: I think a majority of it, Connie, had to be with being an outsider coming in, because the black community was just as closed as the white community. Where did blacks go to socialize? As it turned out, they had a lot of house parties. They would play cards or party or have dinner or whatever. I was not included in any of those. I do not belong to a sorority, so that was not an in for me. I did not belong to any other women's social organizations at that time. So it was closed to me. I would go to different churches, like I said, but once service was over –

What was different was when I grew up in Raleigh and in Hampton, if a stranger came to town – not a stranger, but a new person (you knew they were there in the community) – we would invite that person home for dinner, my grandmother in particular. It could have been the fact that I was a single female and a lot of the people were married. But even couples tend to shun single people, particularly single females. So it was closed in the black community. In fact, it was the white community that opened up to me before the black community ever did. That was the result of my getting involved in different committees and working with different agencies: Big Brothers, Big sisters, Volunteer Action Center, Junior Achievement, and things like that in which I actually got involved. But it was more open to me.

B: Now, looking at Gainesville today from the standpoint of the black community and of the white community, how do you see that they react to outsiders? Is it the same way, or do you see a change, and if so, what is it?

T: I guess I see little change in terms of the black community. Just recently a black woman that I imagine was new to this town made the same remarks as I; she sounded just like I did a few minutes ago. One of the people in the group – I do not want to identify her, but it was another black woman in the group – said, "First of all, you live in the wrong part of town." She lived out here in the

northwest. All the blacks live on the east side, in northeast and southeast. So if you do not live in the neighborhood, people do not see you and they do not know you. This particular woman who was saying this, who was asking how you get into the community, also attended the Unitarian church, which is a white congregation. So this other person's point was, "You do not belong to a black church."

So I do not think it has changed much. I think it was a closed community, and pretty much still is. A lot of my social activities are with individuals and not so much groups. But then a lot of that has been because that has been a choice of mine recently, because I do not have a lot of time for socializing.

I think why a person is here has a lot to do with how open the community is. A person that comes in in a highly visible position will be included in a lot of things because of their position, not so much because of the person. That is my opinion.

B: That makes sense.

T: "Let us invite so-and-so, the new mayor of this," or, "He is the vice-president of that." I think that has a lot to do with getting the person involved, because of their position, rather than who they are.

B: It is hard to really know who they are until you can get to know them.

T: Right. Exactly.

B: When were you invited to join the Junior League of Gainesville?

T: It is interesting, Connie. I was invited to join in 1987, but [I had served with] the husband of one of the Junior Leaguers on the SPARC [Sexual and Physical Abuse Resource Center] board; there was a gentleman on the board whose wife was a member. This was back in 1984 or 1985. For some reason the topic of Junior League came up at a SPARC meeting, either in terms of a mini-grant from them or something. This man said, "I heard a rumor that the Junior League was thinking about asking Portia Taylor to become a member." I was sitting there when he said it. Someone else at the table said, "I do not believe that. They do not have any black Junior Leaguers." That was like 1984 or 1985, maybe even earlier. But it was 1987 when I was first contacted about being a member.

B: Did you know you were going to be invited before you were asked?

T: No. No.

B: So it was a surprise to you.

T: Yes. Well, a surprise in that I was asked to lunch by the person who was proposing me, and she told me that she intended to propose me.

B: I see.

T: You know what, Connie? That could have been after I had been proposed and had gotten the required signatures and everything that you needed at that time to become a member, because when she met with me, it was a done deal. She was telling me what I had to do to be a provisional; she explained that process. Cynthia Chestnut and I were proposed at the same time, and Cynthia knew that we had been proposed. Someone apparently had told her that we had been proposed, although you are not supposed to let the person know.

B: So evidently the league was still operating under the secret system then, when you were proposed.

T: Yes.

B: As late as 1987.

T: Yes.

B: I was not aware that they were doing it that late.

T: Yes.

B: Tell me a little about your provisional year. I assume when your sponsor told you that you had been invited and started delineating responsibilities that she then asked you to choose whether you were interested in accepting.

T: Right. And Cynthia and I talked about it. We were kind of in on the buddy system, and we had decided this was an honor, and yes, we would do it. We wanted to do it. She had a different sponsor. My sponsor came to my office. [She was] Jeanne Singer, an attorney here. D. J. Hellrung was Cynthia's sponsor. I do not remember how D. J. did Cynthia's, but Jeanne came to my office one day and explained to me that I had been proposed for the provisional class of the Junior League, and [she] had all these things outlined that I would have to do, including fees and all of that. She told me how they really wanted me to be a member. I have forgotten how much time I had to think about it, but I had to let her know whether or not I wanted to do that. If I agreed, if I wanted to be a participant, she left a packet with me that I had to fill out with all kinds of information, attach a sixty-dollar check, [and] agree to do certain things. [There

was] a schedule of things that we had do to.

After she left I immediately got on the phone to Cynthia and said, "Hey!" We decided yes, we wanted to do that, for a couple of reasons. One, we felt the league should be integrated. Two, most of the women in the league at that time we knew because we had had past dealings with them, either through some board we had served on with them [or something else]. A lot of them were in Altrusa. I became an Altrusa in 1977, so a lot of members of the league that were in Altrusa I knew. There were a lot of the women that I just knew from various and sundry activities. I wanted to do it. I agreed to do it.

A problem arose during that provisional year. I think Cynthia and I were the oldest provisionals they had. I was thirty-seven, and these women for the most part were in their mid to late twenties. That is normally the age you come in as a provisional. Then you can give them fifteen years until you are forty and go sustainer. I was going to be able to go sustainer in three years. A lot of things they wanted the provisionals to do were things that I had been doing for the last ten years: go to a city commission meeting or county meeting or school board meeting. I had been attending those meetings for years.

B: So the course was really structured for somebody who had a lot less community experience than you had.

T: Exactly, because it was to train you to be a volunteer. I had been volunteering at that time ten or eleven years. So that part was not interesting to me. Also what was not interesting or appealing to me was the other provisionals. I mean, I just did not have anything in common the other provisionals. There were women, like I said, in their mid to late twenties with one or two babies, or they were pregnant with their first child.

B: So a large proportion of them were homemakers and not career people. Am I reading that?

T: In the provisional class that I was in [that was true]. There were some career women in there, but a lot of them were young mothers or about-to-be mothers. There were some [professionals], but for the most part – the women that we knew, that we interacted with, were already actives. We had to go through the provisional [course] to get there.

The other side of that was once we became active, these women went sustainer on us. [laughter] A lot of women that we knew and liked to think we would have some interaction with went sustainer.

B: So you had to stay with your group.

- T: Yes. And they were really young women. I think the problem – well, it was not a problem in kind – was when they decided to admit some black members to the Junior League, Cynthia and I were the ones that they knew best. They did not know any young black women that they could call in. We were at least ten years past the traditional age for a person to be tapped for the provisional class. So can you see my frustration in the group that we were in? How many were there in that class? Maybe thirty-five or so. And I would say there were maybe two or three over thirty, other than Cynthia and myself.
- B: That is interesting, because I think on whole the age of the provisional class has been rising in the last ten years. So maybe that was just kind of a fluke that year. I know the year that I was a provisional I was about the second oldest one in the provisional class.
- T: How old were you then?
- B: I was thirty-four, and there were three people there over thirty. The rest of them were twenty-three and up.
- T: Like I said, most of them were in their mid to late twenties. I was thirty-seven. That is a big difference between the mid twenties and thirty-seven in terms of interests. They were talking about baby sitters [laughter]. Now, there were some professional women in there; I can remember some.
- B: Well, I can see where you would not have as much in common with that group.
- T: But I enjoyed it. They were wonderful women. That was not the problem. The problem was doing all those things that Cynthia and I had been doing for years. I think Cynthia was on the city commission at the time. I was her campaign manager. I knew how to run a campaign, and she knew how to get elected. That was when the Morningside Nature Park [was required]. We had been taking Christopher [Cynthia's son, my godson] there since he was tiny. And we had to go down to the Alachua County court and hear [Eugene] Gene Whitworth [state attorney for the 8th Judicial Circuit] talk about the court system. These are the kinds of things that we knew already. So that was not interesting.
- B: Did you find that your invitation to membership and your provisional year was handled differently from other people's because you were the first of two blacks who were brought into the group?
- T: If there was, I was not aware of it. If something was handled differently, they kept it secret. I was not aware of it.
- B: You did not feel that you were treated differently?

T: No.

B: But they made you go on to the commission meetings after you had been doing that for all those years. I would say they kept the same rules. They did not treat you any differently.

T: They did, and I went. I showed up at a school board meeting, and they thought I was going to run for the school board. That is what the people on the school board and people in the audience that worked with the school system [thought]. A bunch of them came down and said, "Are you going to run for the school board?" I said: "No. Why?" They said, "We have people sort of sitting in when they are about to run for something." I said: "No. I am here for a provisional class of the Junior League." [laughter] So it was funny, Connie, in a way.

B: Tell me, how did you feel about being one of the first two black members of this all-white group?

T: Well, it was not my first time being a first [black member of an all-white group], so it did not faze me. I had had some firsts in my life in different things, so that did not faze me. I did not feel uncomfortable about it. Like I said, I knew a lot of the actives. I was not agitated or upset. I did not feel like I was being used at all. I felt that the women genuinely wanted me in the league. I genuinely felt that Cynthia and I were asked to be in it because we were the caliber of women that the members wanted in the league. I really did not have any bad feelings about it at all.

Now, I do have to admit I went to that provisional meeting in the fall, before you start doing all these things you had to do, and there were some sustainers there that I felt did not like the idea of our being there. Not the actives or the ones that brought us in. But I really felt some animosity on the part of some of the older women in the league. You can feel when somebody does not necessarily want you. You know. You have been around. They did not smile or say welcome; they just ignored me. Ignoring a person, to me, is a big sign that they are not glad you are there. I mean, do anything but ignore me. I thought there was some animosity.

And then I was told by someone later (I cannot remember who) that there were some sustainers that did not want to let blacks come to the meetings. I believed them and I understood it. I mean, Alachua County is not the most liberal county in Florida by a long shot. You know, we were breaking this tradition. The only thing worse could have been if we were going to the DAR [Daughters of the American Revolution] or something. I thought it was their problem. We had been asked.

B: So you did not feel at all resentful that you might be treated as a token?

T: No, I really did not. If I had felt that way, I would not have accepted membership. I felt that way recently when I was approached about becoming the first black member of Gainesville Golf and Country Club. I really felt that that was a token thing. If they really wanted black members, why did they not get someone that plays golf and tennis and would use the facility? I do not golf, I do not swim, I do not play tennis. Why ask me? So I thanked them and said, "No, thank you." I really felt that was a token membership. If I felt that way about the league, I would not have done it. I really felt that folks like Carolyn Kitchens and Judy Brashear and D. J. Hellrung and Jeanne Singer and some others truly wanted us to be members of the league.

B: And that was in 1987.

T: Yes.

B: Has the league invited other black women into membership?

T: Yes. In fact, I proposed one woman when I was first admitted, but she did not take advantage of it because she could not at the time. She was a reporter here for the *Gainesville Sun*, and she was having some difficulties and did not accept membership. But Rosalyn Hall came in in that year. This fall when I was at a meeting we met a young woman who is in the provisional class. There have not been hordes of black women, but I know at least two. I know Rosalyn Hall is a member. I cannot remember the other woman's name because I had just met her for the first time at the September meeting when they introduced the provisionals. There have been at least two more [that have] come in.

B: I want to talk a little more a little later about the diversity of the membership, or lack thereof, but now let me go back and ask you this: When you were in Gainesville at the time you were invited to join, what did you know about the league before your invitation?

T: I have to be really honest with you, Connie. Not much.

B: What was your perception of the league in the community?

T: My perception was very limited until I found out that some of these women that I knew were members of the league. My perception at that point was very limited. Basically I thought they were a bunch of middle-class white women whose husbands were doctors and lawyers and things like that. They did not work, so they spent a lot of time on these do-good projects. I did not consider them to be professional in the sense that they worked full time or held responsible positions.

It was a very narrow view of them. And I knew of some projects that they had been involved in that I thought were worthwhile projects. I also thought, well, they have time to do this. They do not have to get up and go to work in the morning.

When Jeanne approached me about being a member and told me some of the people who were in the league, that is when I gained a lot of respect for the league and was willing to be a member. Then when I got in the league I saw people like Melissa Murphy really work hard and do things. There still was an element of women who do not work and rely solely on their husbands, but that is fine. That is fine. I am just glad that they are committed to doing something. I really am. My perception was very narrow.

What was interesting was the reaction I got from certain people when I told them that I was in the provisional class in the league.

B: What people are you referring to?

T: People in the community, both black and white. [They thought] that I did not fit the league image. I said, "Because I am black?" That is fine, to be honest. But the other problem is that they had that same image that I had, that these were non-working, upper-middle-class women – "do-gooders," as a lot of people term them. They did not see someone that worked and was involved in a lot of things as a being a member of the league.

B: How do you think that affected the way the black community dealt with you or perceived you?

T: I am not even sure that many people in the black community are aware that I am a member of the league. I do not know if it was a problem or not, but I belonged to a group called the LINKS, Inc. Are you familiar with the LINKS?

B: No, I am not. Tell me about it.

T: LINKS, Inc. is a group of professional black women. [It is a] national organization that has the same image in the black community as the Junior League does in some corners of the white community. [It is thought to be] a very high-brow black women's organization. Husbands [of the members might be] a lawyer, a doctor, a judge. It was a parallel of the Junior League for black women. I was in the founding chapter here. We established a chapter here in 1984 or 1985. I was founding vice-president. Well, I resigned. I took a leave of absence for a year from the LINKS and then subsequently resigned. I understand that some of the LINKS members thought that I was more interested in being a league member than a LINKS, but that had nothing to do with my

resigning. Apparently they had some ill feelings about my resigning from LINKS and not resigning from the league, because of the reasons I gave them for resigning.

Other than that, I am not too sure that very many people even know.

I think more people in the white community are aware of my membership in the league, because I have had a lot of husbands of league members say, "I understand you are in the league." C. B. Daniel said something to me when I encountered him in a meeting. I was on the Alachua County Plan Board, and Dick Tarbox said something to me. I got divorced during this period of time, which is why I resigned from LINKS. It had a lot do to with what was going on in my marriage. I instructed the staff of the plan board – they had all the names up – that I was going back to my maiden name of Taylor and [asked them] please to change nameplate. Dick Tarbox said, "Yes, they have already changed it in the league." [laughter] I just thought that was very interesting.

One time I was sitting around having lunch at the club, and, Connie, no less than three or four men, husbands of league members, said something to us about being in the league. I mean, they congratulated us. So I guess it was an eventful thing. Apparently they all went home and told their husbands that they were taking Portia and Cynthia into the league. I like to think of it as encouraging: "We are taking Portia and Cynthia into the league," not that they were taking blacks into the league.

It was interesting that two women from a community college in Alabama were here visiting our college for something, and one of the vice-presidents and I took them to lunch. Calhoun Community College is in Decatur, Alabama. I do not even know how the question of the league came up, but I said the league here does so-and-so. This woman was incredulous. She said, "You are a member of the Junior League?" I said, "Why, yes." And she almost dropped her teeth in her soup. Then Tal, the vice-president, said, "Yes, Portia and her best friend were the first black members of the Junior League." I mean, he just really [went on about it]. But I thought this woman would actually drop her teeth in her soup. Decatur, Alabama. But there was a real shock that I was a member of the league.

B: The reason I asked you the question about how the black community perceived your joining the league [was because] I think that I was wondering if they might have perceived that you were selling out in some way.

T: I think the LINKS may have thought that way, because I resigned from the organization and remained in the league. They may have. But you know, Connie, to be quite honest, I have never had anyone in the black community say

anything to me about the league other than when they found out I was the co-chair of the committee that gave the mini-grants. There were some organizations that were submitting [applications] for mini-grants, and I guess they asked someone who was on the community research committee. They found I was on it, and they were glad [laughter].

B: Right. Tell me a little about this mini-grant program that the league has taken on. Actually in the last five or six years it has gotten a lot stronger.

T: When I was co-chairing the committee, we had \$10,000 to give out in mini-grants. There was a date to submit proposals. In fact, it is one of the best ways, I think, that the league gained a more positive image among grassroots organizations in the community, as far as funding goes. Some of the requests were very minor amounts, and we could get a lot of good will and get a lot of mileage out of the \$1,500 or \$2,500 grant. The problem was there was not that much money to give out. Then two years ago a decision was made not to do mini-grants and to give all the money to the Sid Martin Bridge House for three years to establish a women's wing of that.

Since that time, they are building back up the mini-grant moneys. There is a deadline. They usually publish an announcement in the *Gainesville Sun* or write a letter to organizations that have applied previously [notifying them] of the granting period and the deadline for the projects. Then the community research committee gets together, and we divide the different requests among the members of the committee. I guess it must not be that well known, because we never got a lot of requests, maybe fifteen or twenty. As one committee member, I would take two or three requests and call the person submitting the grant and get more detail on what they would do with the money, how they planned to evaluate the project, what would they do if they did not get the funding, what would they do if they got half of the funding.

Then we as a committee, the community research committee, would meet often, and we would each report on the requests that we had investigated. Then we would vote – it was a very democratic process – to decide which ones we wanted to fund and at what level. Say SPARC wanted \$1,500 for a new refrigerator and stove. Now, my question to them was: "What if we gave you \$750? Would the refrigerator help? Could you get along without the other?" Even a lot of times it was time. An organization wanted to have plastic mattresses in order to pass HRS certification by a certain date, and our funding date was not until two months from that because we had to present the entire thing to membership. "Could you use it for something else?"

Once we decided and listed in priority the requests, we took it to membership. We did not just go in there blind and use [our] gut instincts. We used the

priorities for the league from the AMP [Association Management Process] meetings, whether it was for teenagers or children's welfare or the aging population or drug rehabilitation or literacy. The members are great at that. We looked at what the membership had said was important in terms of the needs they wanted to address, and we funded projects based on those things that best met those needs. Then we presented [them to the] membership, and they put the ballots in the *League Lines*. Then we looked at what they wanted us to fund with their priorities. We did it like that.

I wanted to see us do the women's wing of the Bridge House, but I also thought not doing the mini-grants, or cutting the money down so low that we really could not do much, for two or three years was not a good idea in terms of letting the community know about the good things that the league did.

B: So is that the philosophy behind doing the mini-grants? At one time the league had this policy that they did not put their money where they did not put their women, because they wanted to have some control over what happened.

T: They wanted a placement opportunity for league members. No, they stopped doing that. These mini-grants that we did were not [necessarily to place league members there to work]. In fact, on the application there was a question that asked, "Is there a place for a placement for a league volunteer?"

Connie, what happened was [this]. You are right, that the membership has increased to more and more professional women, and they did not want placement opportunities. They would rather give their money than their time, because they did not have the time. So there did not have to be a placement opportunity in order to fund it. I think the question was still asked, but if a group said no, it did not deny them an opportunity to receive funding, because there are more and more league members that cannot do placements or that kind of thing. I wanted to be a cuddler in the pediatrics, but the hours that they said you had to do it just did not fit in my schedule.

This year I am on public affairs. I had to plan a bus trip today to Tallahassee; they had a bus trip to Tallahassee, and Cynthia Chestnut said she was going to speak to the group and tour the capitol and see the legislature in session. I had to go to this meeting downtown, so I had to miss it. So I did have plans. That is the kind of committee that you can have two or three meetings in the evening and be done with it.

B: It sounds to me like you are saying the league has become very much aware that membership has smaller chunks of discretionary time.

T: Exactly.

B: So they are going to need to redesign, I guess, their projects to accommodate that.

T: I think they are. Also, they are looking at not having these monthly meetings.

B: Oh, really?

T: At one time there was some talk of going to quarterly meetings. I do not know if we will do it. We have not done it yet. We did not have a January meeting. It keeps coming out in the surveys and things like that that people want less meetings, that they have less time.

B: The meetings function in a lot of ways, but one of the things they do is serve as a social aspect for the group. How do you see the league in terms of [its general character]? Is it a social group? Is it a do-good group, as you said? Is it a civic organization? Is it a network for women? What do you see?

T: I think it is kind of all the above. Not necessarily for myself, but for some of the other women there I really do. I think it is a social outlet for a lot of women, because I know a lot of them see each other outside of the league and have become friends through the league. As far as networking, a lot of networking goes on there, particularly as the number of professional women has increased. There is a lot more networking. I know if I need a service such as a realtor or insurance, I would look to someone in the league for that first. I really would. I still think they do a large share of the projects that need to be done.

Then there are some things that I do not necessarily agree with. I got a call from the chairman of the public affairs that wanted the public affairs committee to go on record and present to the league a petition at the meeting last month about Cafe Risque, saying that we were opposed to it and all. I said, "I am not signing that. No, I do not want to sign it." Before I said that she just went on and on. I guess she was not still sure I would sign it, because we had to have all the members of the public affairs committee to agree to it before they would take it to the membership and vote. I said: "First of all, the league is not supposed to get involved in political things. We do not get involved in campaigns." (We have a candidates' forum.) "My understanding is we were not political. That is what I have always heard. This is a political issue. Second, I do not have a problem with Cafe Risque. I think it is a freedom; it is a right. I am not so sure that that is something that we should get into. Personally, I do not have a problem with it. People are going to elect to go over there or not. Women are going to elect to work there or not." She got this thing about "it is a great exploitation of women," but I said, "That may be the case, but it is that woman's choice to go down there and work."

I think she did not believe what I was saying or understand what I was saying, because then she started repeating kind of a pat speech that I guess she was giving all [the others]. I said: "I understand exactly what you are saying. What I am saying to you is no, I do not wish to sign any such thing. You cannot go to membership and say that the public affairs committee wants to take a stand on this and send a letter to the county commission. If you as individuals want to do it, fine. But I do not." So I guess it is trying to get political now.

I could be totally wrong, but I think it was probably some selfish motives on the part of some of the leaguers who live in the Gainesville Golf and Country Club who did not want it [Cafe Risque] that close to their neighborhood. Had it been located in downtown Gainesville, northeast Gainesville, or southeast Gainesville, they would not care about it. I did not want to participate in anything like that. I refuse to.

I think the league is a variety of things. I speak of diversity not in terms of culture but more in terms of mentality, because it is not that diverse in terms of culture. I mean, there are a few blacks, and the rest are white. Ilene Silverman's mother told me that Ilene was the first Jewish woman they admitted to the league. I think Ilene came in a year or two before Cynthia and I did; she had not been in that long. But in terms of the diversity I am talking about, the women who I think are strong willed will voice their opinions. We have two elected officials, Carolyn Kitchens, who is a sustainer [and a member of the Alachua County school board], and Cynthia [Chestnut, who is] in the [Florida] legislature. I think it is becoming a more diverse group in terms of its getting involved.

B: When you say you do not think it is very diverse culturally, I know you are talking about race. Are you also talking about educational background and geographic demographics, working versus homemaker?

T: I think [in terms of] the working versus the non-working, the professional versus the [non-professional], the educated in terms of degree of education. I do not think they are so dependent on their husband's occupation as my [first] impression was.

B: As it used to be?

T: As it used to be.

B: That is an interesting comment.

T: And this is totally me, Connie, based on membership as I have seen in the past. The interesting thing is I knew more of these women's husbands than I knew them. My knowledge of their husbands is from my participating and getting

involved in community things. I did not know their wives, which made me think that it [membership in the Junior Welfare League] was based more on their husband's occupation or the fact that their mother or grandmother had been a leaguer. It is kind of a rite of passage.

B: I talked to a woman a couple of weeks ago that I was interviewing who was very active in the league in the 1950s, and she detailed for me how the league membership became so much more diverse. When she first came to Gainesville she was married to a Gainesville man, and two-thirds of the members of the league either were Gainesville women or were married to Gainesville people. Outsiders had very little chance to gain membership. It was particularly with the coming of the medical center that a lot of that changed. So diversity is very proportional; it is all relative.

T: It really is. But based on some of the sustainers and looking at the membership, my impression is that a lot of people were there either because their mothers or grandmothers were leaguers or because of their husband's occupation. If some of these women worked, they worked long before I ever came to Gainesville. I never knew them as working or anything. So I think it is becoming more diverse in terms of people, of the profession of some of the women in the league. There are really some bright women in the league. Emilie Bodette is a real hard worker.

B: How would you characterize the role of the Junior League of Gainesville today?

T: Well, that is an interesting question, Connie. I think it still, in my opinion, is an organization that does a lot of good in the community in terms of projects to help the community at large. I think for the most part it is still seen as an elitist-type organization by those who do not know some of the members and some of the things that league members do. I think a lot of people do not know that the membership of the league is becoming increasingly professional. I am sure that a lot of people still view the league as "that do-gooder, non-working, upper-middle-class group of women." I see it differently. I think they do a lot of good. I think they are a lot of hard-working, sincere, dedicated women. I am glad to be a part of the league. But you must know that by February 1 I will have to have my letter in to go sustaining [laughter].

B: This is your last year as an active?

T: Yes. I hope they will accept me for sustainer status.

B: I am quite sure that will not be a problem.

T: I hope not. But I am proud to be affiliated with the group, I really am. I have to

admit that the three and a half to almost four years I have been I was not as active as I had originally intended to be. During the provisional year I was looking forward to being an active; I was looking to really getting involved. Because of other commitments I missed the monthly meeting every Thursday night. Like I said, I was on the planning board for three years. We met that same Thursday night. I was constantly sending in an excuse for not making the meetings. But I was active in my placement, in my community placement.

Then I felt I should not feel guilty for not doing all that because I was doing exactly what the league is preaching and teaching. I was on the planning board, the Salvation Army board, the United Way board, the Friends of Five board. That is what they want you to do: volunteer. Though I am not a volunteer in the league, as a league person to be on that board, I am doing what the league wants its members to do: to be active in the community. So I stopped having those feelings of guilt, and I just sent my excuse in.

B: Good for you.

T: I said [to myself], Rather than do that, why not, since I am eligible to do so discuss those things in a meeting and some of these other things that I do which I think still represents the league. I am very proud to say I joined the league. I really am. But it does still continue to raise some eyebrows in certain places.

B: I guess that is the mirror of the world that we are living in as a whole. It is not just changing, but it has not stopped changing yet.

T: Connie, I went into Rotary [International] earlier this year; I am a member of the Rotary. The person that took me in, that proposed me, asked for a resume so he could introduce me. I said I had a list of organizations and clubs and things I belonged to, not the least of which was the [Junior] League. [But there were many others that I thought were notable,] certainly from the boards I have volunteered [to serve on]. It was interesting when he introduced me to the group he said I was a member of the Junior League.

B: He chose that one! [laughter] Tell me what Altrusa is.

T: Altrusa is a professional women's organization that does – I hesitate to say altruistic things, but – pretty much the kinds of project that the league likes to fund. We have a [membership] classification, either in business or education or law.

B: Just like the Rotary?

T: Right. And there has to be an opening in that classification for you to become a

member. We meet the second and fourth Thursday of every month. It is just like Rotary; it is almost like a female equivalent to Rotary. They have different committees. They have a luncheon speaker at the meetings, and we work on certain projects.

B: I have something else I would like you to comment on, and that is this thing of providing a support group for the members. Do you feel that the league provides a support group for women? Would you comment?

T: Yes, I think it is designed to. I am glad you mentioned it, Connie, because although I thought that I had vocalized that, I definitely think that it provides a support group among themselves, for each other, among members.

B: Which is different from networking.

T: Right. Not necessarily for women outside the organization, but for the members within. When Connie Quincey's husband had a heart attack and had heart surgery, a friend of mine that works at the hospital said there were so many leaguers around there, around the emergency room, and it spread like wildfire. She was president of the league at the time, and these people just all rushed to her. That is just one example. There have been many times when I saw women with different problems and things, and the league really rallied by them. They had not been a support group for me because I would not have needed them to be there; I have my own little support system.

B: It sounds like you have not really been able to take advantage of the opportunity of getting to know and work closely with [the league members] because of your other time commitments.

T: Right. And because, like I said, a lot of women that I really wanted an opportunity to do all that with went sustaining shortly after I became an active. The age difference really made a difference as far as my involvement. I used to listen to the other women at committee meetings and at the general membership meetings, and they had done things together and had been together. I think they really have some commonality, a support group [for each other].

B: The way you said that tells me that those commonalities are not across the board among the membership. Would you comment on that?

T: I do not think so. I do not think necessarily the support would be there for certain members, either because of race or age or interest or whatever. I think there are little cliques within the league that really support each other. I know one member of my provisional class who is getting divorced and is taking it very hard. Some other members of the league around her age and her interest were really

supportive of her and helped her through that. Other times when someone needed help [because she] and was pregnant and could not do things [or when] a child or a spouse was sick or [there was] a business crisis, they really pitched in and helped. Maybe they would have been there for me if I had asked them or had wanted them, if I had encouraged that kind of a relationship. But I had not; I had not done that. I have not done that because I have my own little support system outside of the league. I think if I had reached out they would have responded; I really do.

B: It sounds like you have created a niche for yourself in Gainesville, which is encouraging after what you said about when you first came to town.

T: It is so different. I am glad that it is. I really feel a part of this community. I really feel that I have made an investment of myself in this community, through the college and in the community both. By the way, that is why I have remained here for fifteen years. I have no plans to leave any time soon. I really feel a close tie to this community. I am really included in this community.

B: Do you have that sense about the black community of Gainesville, also?

T: Yes, and basically, I think, because of the television show [I host] that is on channel five [WUFT], a minority affairs show.

B: Is that weekly now?

T: It is weekly. It is twice a week. The original [show] airs on Sunday mornings at 9:00 and [it then] repeated on Wednesday afternoons at 2:00. It is the only media event for blacks in this community, and I have met a lot of the black community, from grassroots organizations on up, on that television show. I have been doing it since 1983. When you have something that people want or need, where you can help them or get their message out, [you do everything you can to help]. I do not have a problem with that. That was the whole purpose of the show: to get the message out about what was going on in the community, not necessarily just the black community, but things going on period. I think it helped members of the community at large. I think it is largely a result of that. I have gained more acceptance in the black community.

I am asked to speak in a lot of places or even [serve as] mistress of ceremony here and there. I am kind of a minor celebrity among certain people in the black community. So I think because of that, more so than my role at Santa Fe or different organizations and boards I work with, [I am well known in the black community]. Quite often I am the only black on the board or in a meeting. So yes, I think I am accepted, I really do. I like Gainesville. It is home. I have lived here longer than I have lived anywhere else [laughter].

- B: I know what you mean. We have touched on a lot of different things tonight about Gainesville and you and the Junior League. Think a minute, though, and tell me: Is there anything else you would like to tell me about the Junior League or about the community that we have not already touched on tonight?
- T: I wish the community could get a better feel for the league.
- B: What do you mean?
- T: I wish the community had a truer picture of what the league really does and what it stands for. It is not just a group of non-working, upper-middle-class women with nothing else to do, so they take on these projects.
- B: So you think that is still is the major perception of the community?
- T: I do. I think it is going to be up to the members of the league to change that perception, by doing more things like the mini-grants and the things that actually affect grassroots organizations.
- B: Do you think that the composition of the membership of the league has changed to the point where they actually are not any longer largely a group of non-working, white, middle-class women?
- T: I think there are more professional women in that group. I think they need to take in more minority members – more blacks, more Hispanics, more Orientals, whatever. I think they need to be a more culturally diverse group. I would like to see the league do that. I would also like to see them focus more of their energies and moneys [on projects] that actually touch the heart of this community and that need to be done.
- B: Are you saying there are segments of the community that the league is not addressing in its programs?
- T: I am not sure we are doing anything for the homeless. I would like us to take on St. Francis House as a project. I am not so sure we are addressing some of the needs of teenage pregnancy or some of the problems that we have with the drugs in this community. I think we maybe still tend to take on "community-safe" projects, if you will, things that are acceptable, that we will not get our hands dirty on or that sort of thing. I would like to see us touch more of some of the real problems in this community. I think having a more culturally diverse membership will allow some of those things to happen, Connie.
- B: Well, thank you very much for your time tonight.

T: Thank you. I have enjoyed it.

B: I have enjoyed it also.