

AL 136

Interviewee: Jean Chalmers

Interviewer: Stuart Landers

Date: April 22, 1991

Jean Chalmers has been active in Gainesville, working for racial and other forms of equality. She was born Jean McCormick, April 13, 1933, in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. She has five brothers and one sister. Her father died when she was around ten, and her mother sold the family farm. Chalmers went to live with her grandparents, then with her family, and then in England. She was there for the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. She returned to the U.S. around 1955 and worked various odd jobs, including as a model and in an agency, in New York City.

In 1958 she married David Chalmers, a University of Florida history professor, and moved to Gainesville. They have two children: Henry and Kim. Their sensitivity to violence and equality led her and her husband to join the Quaker congregation. She describes the racial situation in Gainesville at that time as "absolutely separate and rather ugly." She became active with the Human Relations Council and then Gainesville Women for Equal Rights [GWER]. GWER members had to find discrete meeting places for fear of trouble from the Ku Klux Klan. The membership was roughly 50/50 black and white. She discusses their social activities, work with the NAACP, and efforts to integrate boards and organizations, such as Alachua County General Hospital (Chalmers subsequently served on the board) and the Florida State Employment Office (Job Service). They also sought grants, which they used for programs such as Best Day of the Week, which featured games and projects that white and black kids could do equally well, and Head Start, for which they enlisted the aid of local physicians to administer free medical exams for qualified children.

In 1974 Chalmers was the state campaign manager for Ralph Turlington's bid for education commissioner. She was later in charge of information services for the northern district of Crisis Center. In 1982 she was successful in her bid to become a Gainesville City Commissioner. She was later elected by the commission to serve as mayor-commissioner of Gainesville. Although much has been accomplished, Chalmers still feels that there is much work to be done toward desegregation.

L: This is an interview with Mrs. Jean Chalmers being conducted for the Oral History Project of the University of Florida. This interview is being conducted in the Gainesville home of Mrs. Chalmers on April 22, 1991. My name is Stuart Landers.

The first question I would like to ask you is what is your full name?

C: Jean Marion – [my] maiden name [is] McCormick – Chalmers.

L: Where were you born?

- C: I was born in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.
- L: In Canada. Are your parents Canadian?
- C: My mother was born in Colorado. I think my father was born in Manitoba. Some of the children were born in Scotland and some in Canada.
- L: And what were your parents' names?
- C: My mother was Josephine Tina Milner, and my father was John Walter Ross McCormick.
- L: If you do not mind my asking, when were you born?
- C: April 13, 1933.
- L: Did you grow up in Canada?
- C: Oh, boy. You are going to want dates, and I have always meant to sit down and figure them out. I left Canada, I think, when I was around nineteen, so it depends what you call growing up.
- L: Well, I assume you went through high school in Canada, then.
- C: Yes. Well, I did take the Board of Regents exam in New York City, to some extent what I guess in Florida you would call the GED, because my Canadian education did not qualify me for the stringent New York Board of Regents diploma.
- L: So you moved to New York City?
- C: No, no. The first nine years of my life I lived on a farm outside of Edmonton, Alberta. My father died--it was the war years--and I was sent to live with my grandparents in Victoria, British Columbia. They were in their seventies, God bless them. I stayed with them until my mother was able to sell the farm and bring the other two children out with her. The older boys were all in the services then. Then I went to live with my mother and brother and sister until my mother had to leave and live with her parents. Then the three of children sort of "bached." Then my brother joined the air force and left, and it was just the two of us, my sister and I. Then I went to England, because in those days that is what nice little Canadian girls did.
- L: You were about how old at this point?

- C: I think around eighteen or nineteen. The queen was being coronated, and I was in love with a midshipman in the Canadian Navy, so I followed him off to Greenwich to the pomp and circumstance of the Mother Country.
- L: Did you go to school in England?
- C: Oh, I took courses, but [I] did not really go to school. I attended several sessions at London School. At that time T. S. Eliot was giving some classes. We were all frightfully intellectual then. We wore long, black stockings and wore our hair long and straight and talked about [Franz] Kafka.
- L: This was in the early 1950s?
- C: Right.
- L: How long were you in England?
- C: I think I came to the United States in 1954 or 1955. I would have to check the record, but it was probably 1955.
- L: To back up a moment, exactly how many brothers and sisters did you have, or do you have?
- C: Next to me is Ron. He is three years older than I. Then three years older than Ron is my sister Audrey. Three years older than Audrey is my brother Jessie. Three years older than Jessie is my brother Jack. Three years older than Jack is my brother Ken. Then there was a hiatus. My oldest brother, Walter, died with rheumatic fever. He was born before the war, and Kenneth was born after the war, so there is quite a time span between Walter and Kenneth.
- L: Walter was born before the First World War?
- C: Right.
- L: OK. That is a large family.
- C: Right. Well, it was a farm family.
- L: Once you came to the United States, what did you do?
- C: Various things. I sort of played around with the idea of doing show business work. That was not very successful. Between all my attempts I did temporary office work [and] receptionist work. Everyone liked my British accent. Then I went into modeling full time. I did runway work and showroom work and some

photography, although not very much. I helped a man; in fact, we formed a little company supplying models and talented, pretty women to man booths at trades fairs. This was at the time in New York City that the coliseum had just been built, and New York was starting to host trade fairs. We would get in touch with manufacturers in the Midwest and say: "Let us be your representative to New York City, and we will staff it. We will do your printing for you"--my partner owned a printing plant--"and your publicity, and all you have to do is come the day of the opening with your goods or your wares." I did that for a while. Oh, and I worked in a bar and grill, Mylady's Bar and Grill down in lower Italy that was probably Mafia owned. I took courses at NYU and took this regents exam for the state of New York.

L: What sort of courses did you take?

C: I took a sociology course and an English class. I lived next door to Hal White who was an English professor. I lived right on the plaza. But, still, [I was] not really serious about getting a degree. In Canada at that time probably 7 percent, I seem to recall, of the women my age went to college, so one really did not think much about college degrees. I just went because I was curious and it was fun. I lived next door to the professor. Besides, I was fiercely intellectual [laughter] and pretentious as could be.

L: OK. When did you leave New York?

C: In 1958 I married David and came to Gainesville, and I have been here ever since.

L: Is that when Dr. [David Markl Chalmers [professor of history] joined the University faculty?

C: No. He was here before. He used to teach at [the University of] Florida during the winter and at CCNY [City University of New York] in New York during the summer, and I met him in his summers in New York.

L: Where in Gainesville did you live?

C: We lived in Melrose in a little cabin on Swan Lake.

L: Melrose is fifty miles from here?

C: Oh, no. Twenty-five. We had a little VW [Volkswagen] bug that would bounce along the gravel roads, mainly. They did not have real bridges in yet, so we would have to ford the creek. There was always a great debate about whether you drive really slow to go through, because it would not be as bumpy, or you

just gun it [and] go through as fast as you could so your car would not go down into the ruts. So that is how we got back and forth--we bounced along.

L: What did you think of Florida and the South when you first moved down here?

C: My friends in New York wept when I left them. They all said, "You will rot with the vegetation." They took bets that the marriage would last [not] two years. The heat really bothered me, and the racial situation just absolutely astounded me. I just could not believe what I was seeing, and it politicized me. I do not think I had had a political thought before, although by instinct I had always been a do-gooder and sort of a bleeding heart. I patched little birds' broken wings and adopted cats and that kind of thing, so my personality leaned in the direction of being very sympathetic. When I saw and learned of the situation here, it rapidly politicized me.

L: How would you describe the racial situation in Gainesville in 1958?

C: It was absolutely separate and rather ugly. I remember walking down in front of Rice's Hardware Store, which I guess is on SW 1st Street. There was a heavy, heavy rain, and there was an old black couple approaching me on the sidewalk. Rice's had things out on the sidewalk, so it was very narrow, and they stepped off into the gutter to let me by. It dawned on me that they were doing that because I was white. I was a twenty-five-year-old woman, and they were probably in their sixties. It just made me feel awful.

L: When did you become involved in civil rights activities?

C: Almost immediately. David was very sensitive to the issue. In fact, our engagement announcement says, "Jean McCormick and David Chalmers announce their intention to integrate with all due deliberate speed after consultation with the judiciary," which was not sent to all of David's family's friends.

L: Why not?

C: It was sent to my family, and they did not know what in the world it all meant.

L: Why were you reluctant to send it to his family?

C: Oh, because this was a statement of integration, and it had a lot of political undertones. In 1958 integration was not what the nation wanted the most. He was deeply committed to integration, and I was ripe for it, I guess one would have to say. In New York I had socialized with a group that was quite integrated. In fact, I remember once in New York after I had decided to marry David--David

is Jewish--we were at a party. He was not there; he was down here in Florida. I was at a party with a mixed group of my friends, and one of them was a black dentist who lived down the street from us. We were friends; we did a lot of partying together and such. At the party everyone was talking about who Jean was marrying, and someone said, "Oh, she is marrying a Jew." Someone made a really ugly remark (I cannot remember what it meant), and I was just upset. It just bugged me all night long. I remember going out to the elevator with Jay and saying, "Jay, I am getting a little bit of a feeling of what your life has been like."

L: This was the dentist?

C: This was the black dentist.

L: Do you remember his last name, by chance?

C: Jay Rose.

L: You were not Jewish?

C: No.

L: What faith were you?

C: United Church of Canada, which is sort of a combination of the Presbyterians and the Methodists and the fallen-away Anglican church. It was sort of a generic liberal Protestant church.

L: Since you have been married, have you been a a member of any [congregation]?

C: Oh, yes. We are Quakers. David went to Swarthmore College, which is a Quaker college [in Swarthmore, PA]. He had never practiced his Judaism, and I never could find a religion in the United States that I felt comfortable with. I even played with converting to Roman Catholicism, because I had been raised in a Catholic school and I sort of liked their social policy. Of all the churches, they seemed to be more socially concerned, concerned with poverty and all the social issues, so I was attracted to them. When I was home on a visit, I went and met with the priests and talked to them, and I talked to some priests in New York. I just could not swallow all the dogma. It was just too big a leap for me. So although I liked their social agenda, I could not take the theological agenda. At that time, all the other denominations seemed to be very conservative.

L: This was in the late 1950s?

C: Right, the mid to late 1950s. Certainly none of the churches were leading a crusade against poverty or against racism or for women or the things that were starting to concern me. So when I got down here with David, he said, "There is a group in town, the Quakers." I knew a little bit about them just from reading history in general, but not much about their theology. So we went to some Quaker meetings. This was not right away.

For the first years we did not do anything. It was probably when I got pregnant that we decided, "Now that we are going to have a family, we had better find a spiritual core somewhere." So we went to Quaker meetings and became what they call "convinced" Quakers. [We] felt comfortable there because their social agenda was very much the same as ours. I felt very comfortable with their theological agenda, David a little less so. David has a little trouble with their pacifism. I am a pacifist, so I felt really comfortable. We have been Quakers ever since. Both our children are what are called birth-right Quakers.

L: You mentioned two children. When were they born?

C: Henry was born in 1963, and then we adopted Kim. She was born in 1966, and we adopted her in 1967.

L: You said that you are a "convinced" Quaker. Exactly what [does that mean]?

C: That is just the Quaker jargon for converted.

L: You are either converted or born.

C: Yes. And it is not even converted. Converted implies that you have to have been something. It could just be from nothing into Quakerism, and we still call it convinced.

L: When did you first actually start being active?

C: Almost immediately. I arrived here the last day of 1958, so by January--I think by January, because it was cold still--I was going to what they called Human Relations Council meetings. David took me to my first one. The Human Relations Council was an outreach program of the Southern Regional Council, which was formed in 1941 to fight racism. It was stationed in Atlanta, and communities throughout the South that were concerned about racial issues were forming these little local core groups. I went there and was just astounded with what I learned about what the black people had to go through day in and day out in our town, and I became very involved with that group, very active with it. I am now vice-president of the national, of the whole organization. So on and off the group itself dissolved, the local group, after the Civil Rights Bill was passed.

L: In 1964.

C: Right. Maybe it continued a bit beyond that. Some of the women who were concerned about civil rights did not join that group. They saw it as pretty male dominated and pretty conservative in its structure. A group of faculty wives wanted to support the University students in their civil rights protests, and they organized something called the Gainesville Women for Equal Rights. A lot of the women from the Human Relations Council got active in the Gainesville Women for Equal Rights. Gainesville Women for Equal Rights was much more active and much more involved, so bit by bit the power just left the Human Relations Council and went over to Gainesville Women for Equal Rights. I do not even know at what time I stopped participating or they stopped to exist, because by then we were sort of in the streets.

L: About what year was this group started?

C: Nineteen sixty-three. So you see, if I started with the Human Relations Council in 1959, then the next year we went to Sri Lanka, which was Ceylon then.

L: When Dr. Chalmers was on a Fulbright.

C: Right. So we were there the academic year 1959-60. Then the 1960-61 [and] 1961-62 academic years I was doing Human Relations Council. During 1962-63 I sort of left it and went to work with Gainesville Women for Equal Rights.

L: You said it was formed in support of the protests of the students?

C: Gainesville Women for Equal Rights? Yes.

L: What kinds of activities were they up to?

C: They were picketing. They were picketing the College Inn [and] protesting segregation at the University of Florida--mostly on-campus kinds of activities.

L: Some local restaurants?

C: Right.

L: What form did your group's activism take?

C: Gainesville Women for Equal Rights? (It was called GWER.) The first thing we did was to have a meeting where we had four or five black women come to tell us what it was like to live [as a] black in Gainesville. We sent out invitations to faculty wives, to everyone we could think of that might be at all sympathetic to

our cause. The black women that were going to speak to us invited all of their black friends, who were mostly from churches. Black social life all revolved around churches.

We had a big crowd at this meeting, and those women sat up there and talked about what it was like to go into a dress store and have to buy something without trying it on and never being able to return it. They had to buy hats from a hat merchant that came through town because no one would let them try on a hat. On Sunday afternoon for recreation they would drive through white neighborhoods just to see how whites lived, but they would be just a little bit afraid all the time they were doing it, and they were certainly out before dark, I can tell you that. There were no swimming pools for them. There were no parks, no recreation, no programs. They talked about what it was like to have to drive from Gainesville to New York or from Gainesville to Atlanta, for that matter. There were not bathrooms that could be used or places they could stop for food.

L: And no motels.

C: And little things like garbage would not be picked up in black neighborhoods with any sort of regularity. There was no code enforcement. A lot of black homes had no running water. There was just a faucet in the neighborhood where they could go with a pail and get their water. There was a lot of disease; there were still real problems with communicable diseases in the 1950s and early 1960s.

L: Where were the main black residential areas in Gainesville?

C: The same place they are now.

L: Fifth Avenue?

C: The ghetto and Porter's [Quarters].

L: OK. Can you distinguish for me between the ghetto and Porter's [Quarters]?

C: Yes. The ghetto [the NW 5th Avenue neighborhood] was upscale black. That is where the educated and wealthy blacks lived. A lot of them had businesses there, and there were a lot of really nice homes there. That is where old Union Academy, the black school, was. That was the center of the high culture.

Porter's [Quarter's residents] were poorer people. [There was] no commercial strip, really. There were a few jukeboxes and hangouts, and that is about all [that was] in there. Livery stables were there for the milk delivery trucks and such.

L: Where was GWER holding their meetings, and what sort of people [were

active]?

C: Mostly in each other's homes. It was not terribly safe to be holding public meetings then. The Human Relations Council used to meet in the black library, which is now the Rosa B. Williams Recreation Center on NW 1st Street. But the library was, of course, segregated. Black people did not go to the public library. I do remember once we had a meeting scheduled there, and the police asked us to please go and meet in the municipal courtroom, which is right above the police station, because they heard that the [Ku Klux] Klan was going to be in town and had targeted our meeting, to disrupt it. So we were a little bit cautious where we had our meetings.

I am trying to think of some churches. The Presbyterian Student Center was always pretty good, and the Episcopal church was good. At the beginning the Quakers did not have their own church. They met on the University campus. Oh, black churches. We met at Mount Carmel a lot. Mount Carmel was sort of a hangout. But I would say [most of our meetings were held] in each other's homes and Mount Carmel.

L: I understand the majority of the white women in the group were University faculty wives.

C: Yes.

L: Can you give me some of their names?

C: Yes. Shirley Conroy, whose husband is Stephen Conroy [professor of history]. He is still in the history department. Joan Henry, who is dead now, was a great leader. [Her husband George] Selden Henry [professor of history] is in the history department. Beverly Jones was, I think, the founding president. Beverly is living somewhere in Pennsylvania, and she is writing or has just had a book published. She became a feminist, and I think she is publishing a book about the mistreatment of women in the civil rights movement. [She has a] very strong feeling that we did all the work and they [men] got all the credit--the male/female problem. Indeed, that is, of course, why GWER was formed.

Rosa Williams, for instance, who was a strong member of the Human Relations Council, had a real speech problem. I do not know if you know Rosa. She is just an absolutely incredible woman. But she had such low self-esteem and was so oppressed that she could hardly express herself. When we would have community dinners with the Human Relations Council, we would have as many as 100 people. She would always volunteer for kitchen duty, and she would stay in the kitchen cooking. She would not come out and join us.

L: Was she a faculty wife?

C: No, this was a black woman. She was a housemaid. She was Jane Sterrett's housemaid. Jane Sterrett was a music teacher, and her husband [Delbert] was in the music department. Jane teaches voice still.

L: And she was a member of GWER?

C: I do not know if she was or not. I am not sure if she was, but she must have been, because she was always involved. Anyway, Rosa was her maid. But Rosa was just sort of low on the totem pole, the little member that stayed in the kitchen in Human Relations Council [dinners]. When we opened up GWER, we gave people like Rosa a forum, and she became a leader. She just blew us away with her organizational skills and what she could do in the black community as far as grassroot organization. We found out she had a wonderful mind. We encouraged her to go to school, and she did. She got an AA degree in human services, and she now sits on important boards. She is on the Shands Teaching [Hospital] board, on the airport board. Anyhow, she is the sort of woman that was "empowered," as they say. She was empowered by GWER. In the integrated civil rights movements--by that I mean the male/female integrated one--women were not empowered. We were not given that empowerment.

L: Were there any black faculty members?

C: There were no black faculty members. There were no black students.

L: The black women, then, that were members of your organization, about what was the ratio?

C: About 50/50.

L: Who were some of these black women?

C: It was dominated by black school teachers, and then a sprinkling of really poor black women--housemaids, people that worked in laundries, people that worked for hospitals. There was not much a black woman could do in town.

L: I know you spoke of some fear of Klan opposition. Were there any overt acts against your groups?

C: Not really. [There were] a few hate calls in the middle of the night and some people spitting at us, but that was all.

L: Were there any tensions within the group?

C: Yes, just natural ones that you would expect. The white people were all of the same class; we were all middle-class, do-gooder whites. The black membership represented the whole social spectrum; we had poor blacks, middle class, and upper class. So there was some class tension in the group.

I remember when I made a passionate speech about our main problem not being one of race but one of poverty, and I described a member's trying to take her clothes to a public washing place. She was with me, and the man did not let us in. The reason he would not let us in was her clothes were all urine-soaked, because there was no running water in the house and really no way to clean diapers before they went in [to the wash], and he said, "This is the reason I cannot let poor people use the public laundry." He said to her, "It is not because you are black, ma'am. It is just that if I let you bring that stinky laundry in here . . ." He did not call her ma'am, and he did not say black. He said: "It is not 'cause you're a nigger. Your laundry stinks so bad that it would chase all the white people away."

That was really revealing for me. Of course, the reason her laundry was so stinking was because she was too damn poor to even have the facilities to rinse out diapers. Someone came up to me after, one of the middle-class black women, and said, "You should not excuse her. We have all been that poor, and those of us who cared found the water to prerinse our diapers. Those who are looking for a free ride do not." That was the first inclination I had of a real class pull going on here.

The other thing I guess was when we elected maybe Barbara Higgins, the first black president who was not "professional." I guess she did not have a college degree, so some of the women with college degrees that were richer really felt it was probably inappropriate for us to have a black woman as president who did not come from the right neighborhood, the right strata and such.

At about this time, low-income housing was being built in Gainesville for black people. This was Phil Emmer's [local real estate developer] housing [project] on the east part of town, which is now Lincoln Estates. This was the first opportunity black people had to move out of the ghetto.

L: This is 1964?

C: Yes, around then. This whole professional class of black people were moving out of the ghetto into Lincoln Estates, and anybody who was anybody lived over in Lincoln Estates. A lot of the black people were left behind. Some of the fine, old black families, like Altamese Cook, stayed in the ghetto. Dr. [E. A.] Cosby stayed in the ghetto. Dr. [C. W.] Banks moved out to Lincoln Estates. Some of the fine, old families did stay in the ghetto. But it really broke up the community.

It is hard for me to say if it was good or bad. It was wonderful to see black people move into modern, air-conditioned, centrally heated houses with big yards and room to grow, but it was sort of sad to see the black leadership dispersed.

L: How far apart were they?

C: Oh, a long ways apart. [There were] lots of white neighborhoods between them.

L: What kinds of activities did the organization [do]?

C: We partied a lot. We had lots of socials. In those days I would not have thought of having a party in my home without inviting my black friends. Now that does not happen. No one is making a real effort, neither black nor white people, to socialize and party together and be together. We used to go to dances. Tom and Donna Coward [Tom Coward is a county commissioner] would invite us to dances. We would go over to the black part of town and sit around and drink scotch and milk and have a good time.

That does not happen now. None of the black clubs or sororities ever invite any white people to their parties, and white people do not invite black people. If they do, black people generally do not show up. So those were in many ways great days in race relations, because there was real love and real bond, real getting to know each other, and a lot of hope. I think a lot of black people are so disillusioned now that they just really do not enjoy the company of white people anymore because they are just fed up with racism. That is my guess.

L: Other than dances and parties, [what else did you do]?

C: We manned picket lines, wrote letters, tried to integrate boards. I remember the United Way one year would not give money to . . . I cannot remember the name of the daycare center. We had a little black daycare center, and United Way decided that it was not worthy of funding or something. That made us all furious, because United Way was not funding any predominantly black organization, and there just was not anything integrated. Boys' Club was heavily funded by United Way, and it was all white. We worked and worked and worked to integrate the Boys' Club, working with the national Boys' Club movement, mainly. We thought, There just has to be an easier way to do this. It will just wear us out if we integrate organization by organization. What we have to do is integrate the United Way board.

If you contribute to the United Way, you are a voting member, so all of us contributed to United Way, and a whole bunch of us got to be voting members.

We all put on our white gloves--in those days we all wore white gloves and, very often, hats--and went off to the United Way meeting. Of course, the good-old-boys--they were all white males--had it all figured out who was going to be next year's president and who all the board members were going to be. Then they called for nominations from the floor, and we nominated Rosa Williams [laughter]--and we elected her because we were in the majority at the meeting.

Thus we integrated the United Way board. Rosa articulated the needs of black people, and Rosa was very, very non-threatening. Yet still speaking with her bad stutter and her really black, black dialect, her wisdom just sort of showed through. I guess she was fairly accepted by that board. But it sure was a struggle.

L: Were you involved and to what extent in desegregating the local public schools?

C: Yes. We wrote an *amicus curiae* brief. The suit was brought by the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People]. The NAACP had the lawyers because they had the Legal [Defense] Fund, and the lawyers [came] out of New York to do the basic work. But we worked very, very closely with the school board. I remember our having a clandestine meeting with the school board at somebody's house out in Suburban Heights. I just remember being in the living room. It was [Dr.] Ben Samuels and [Dr. William] Bill Enneking and I do not know who else. Maybe it was just the two of them.

L: They were school board members?

C: They were school board members, and they were good men, too. We were just begging them to integrate. "We have to do something." We had data that we gathered from all over the world about how healthy it is in learning situations to mix races.

L: This was about what year?

C: I do not know. When did we integrate the school? It would be like the year before.

L: Nineteen sixty-four or 1965.

C: It was before it happened. I remember I guess it was Bill who said; "Do not push us too hard or we cannot get re-elected, and if we cannot get re-elected, it will be someone much worse than us. You know that. You just have to trust us. We are going to go as far as we can as fast as we can." And I think they did. I think they really handled it really skillfully. Bill Enneking was an orthopedic surgeon, and Ben Samuels was a dentist. Both of them were very respected. Ben

Samuels was Old South; I think he was a Mississippi born. Bill Enneking was one of those Roman Catholics: they are a little suspect. [laughter]

We got I think it was Jeanne Crenshaw, who is now a judge [in Alachua County]--she used to be Jeanne Schwartz--who either wrote the brief for us or helped us. And we gathered a lot of data, a lot of background information for the NAACP. We were skilled researchers.

L: What sort of data?

C: Educational studies mainly--anything that had to do with mixing races and classes in classroom, so there was quite a bit of scholarly work [that needed to be] done. Ever since the *Brown* decision people in departments of education across the nation were starting to look at how we educate. Then there were a lot of integrated schools in the nation, so they were starting to see what happened. We were making that data available. A lot of our members had higher education, some of them with considerable research skills, and our membership just spent their days in the library. The law library was in Bryan Hall then.

There were no jobs open to us because there was [a law against] nepotism, so we could not work for the state of Florida. Only one person could work for the state, and of course that was the man of the family. We could not involve ourselves in politics because there was the little Hatch Act where no state employee could run for public office or openly support candidates for election. We got that changed. So we mainly put all of our energy into doing the research necessary to make convincing cases before boards and committees and the courts on discrimination issues.

L: You mentioned you worked with the NAACP. Was it an active organization in Gainesville at the time?

C: Yes, it was active but small. I guess Tom Wright was president. It was cautious. I remember at one point there was no printed membership list because they considered it too dangerous to let the membership list out.

L: How integrated an organization was it?

C: I think it was fairly [integrated]. I think white members were just support members. Most of the activity and decision making and such was in the hands of the black community. I remember Paul Hanna [professor of history] was an early member of that, and Paul's position in the history department on the integration of the school [the University of Florida] I think cost him the chairmanship of the history department. Cornelia, his wife, was a schoolteacher in the public schools and was always very supportive of school integration.

L: What would you say was your organization's biggest accomplishment as far as integration?

C: Oh, gosh. They all seemed to be sort of equal. Alachua General Hospital was an important integration, and that was based on the Hill-Burton [Act] money that they had accepted to build the new hospital. Along with Hill-Burton [funds] was a nondiscriminatory clause which everyone across the South was just ignoring. We got in touch with [the agency administering the] Hill-Burton [program] and brought the power of the federal government to bear on Alachua General Hospital, and that alerted the federal government to examine hospitals all across America.

L: Was this employment or services?

C: Services. Everything. There could be no racial discrimination in any hospital that had Hill-Burton money. So we were the test case and, I understand, the first organization to get a hold of the folks in Washington and say, "You have to enforce your own rules." The rules came out of Congress, but the federal government, the bureaucracy, was not enforcing them. Of course, the bureaucracy in Washington was mainly made up of Southerners, and Washington was just as segregated as any town in the nation. So that was a good accomplishment.

I think equal to that was the Florida State Employment Office, which is now called Job Service. That was primarily an agency to get white people jobs. I do not recall its ever really being used for black people at all. It was starting to get money to do a little bit of job training. It was branching out. It used to be strictly a place you would go to find a job, and it was starting to get more and more power and doing some creative things. It was still white-only over there, and that was against the national laws. We got Secretary of Labor [W. Willard] Wirtz involved then, and he personally got in touch with the Job Service of Florida. So this effectively integrated Florida's state employment offices throughout the state of Florida, and I think our organization is really responsible for that.

Let me see. What else did we do? I think the hospital was the only thing with national impact, unless you call the Boys' Club a national thing. That is sort of the nonprofit sector we worked in. The Job Service was a statewide project we worked on.

The other field in which we worked--and this was not so much directed to discrimination--[was the state welfare department]. This was the activity that followed my passionate speech about poverty, so this must have been later on in my movement when I said, "Let us get away from the racial thing and start

fighting poverty, because that is where a lot of racism comes from." We then started attacking what was called the welfare department, which was the state department that accepted money both from the federal government and [state] tax funds for welfare programs. It was really archaic. The state legislature was revamping that into something called HRS, Health and Rehabilitative Services. We did an awful lot of research on that and went up to Tallahassee and testified before all the committees.

I will never forget the first committee we went to. I think [our group consisted of] three white women and three black women, with our cotton shirt-waist dresses and our rubber tong sandals and I am sure our hair was probably teased, and we had all our files. We had been working in the library for weeks. We had studied welfare systems in Holland and in England and in Canada. I mean, we knew it all, and we had all of our file folders in a Pabst Blue Ribbon beer box. [laughter] I will never [forget] walking into this committee meeting. In the first place, blacks just did not go into the state capitol, and certainly not into any legislative committees, and everyone froze. I am sure they thought there was going to be a riot or we were going to do a stand-in or something. There was deadly silence. We sat down, listened to them for a while, and then it came time to speak. One of us raised [a hand] and asked some very intelligent question, and they all looked sort of astounded. We got our black members to stand up and talk about what was happening to them.

In those days I remember one of our black members was Dorothy Lewis. She is now a nurse's aide out in Sunland [Training Center, now Tacachale, state rehabilitative center for mentally handicapped children, located in Gainesville]. Dorothy, I think, had five children of her own, and her mother had died or was sick, and Dorothy had inherited a whole bunch of siblings. She was living in the most terrible poverty, and she was getting Aid to Families with Dependent Children that was capped at \$75 a month. She was working in a laundry that I think paid 75¢ an hour, with no vacation, no sick benefits, nothing. She lived in a two-room shack--maybe it was only a one-room shack--where the water poured through the roof and you had to be careful where you put your mattress, if you had a mattress. There were no lights, no running water, nothing. And she just talked in her very broken black language [about] what it was like to live on Aid to Families with Dependent Children. That was very dramatic.

When we drove back and forth from Tallahassee, we drove through Perry, and if a black woman was driving, all the white women would get down on the floorboards. If a white woman was driving, all the black women would get down, because it was not safe to go through Perry in an integrated car. It was not safe to go most places in an integrated car. We used to laugh at that. It got so members of the committee would phone us on Sunday night and say, "We have a committee meeting coming up, and we are going to Tallahassee. What kind of

wording do you suggest for this?" I can read the HRS statutes now and tell what parts were really written by GWER.

Then locally our impact was on the school board and the county welfare office, [which] was for white people only. By then we were getting very political and understanding that we had to get our own people elected. A lot of us were out working with a group called Citizens Action Committee, CAC, which had been empowered by the demise of the little Hatch Act. By then professors could run for office, so we were all out working for that radical Ed Turlington to get him elected to the city commission. We got Byron Winn elected to the city commission, and he integrated his restaurant, the Primrose Restaurant. His wife left him, and a lot of people say she left him because he supported integration.

L: Was this in the later 1960s?

C: Yes. He formed the Human Relations Council of the city, which I guess bears the same name, but it was not connected with the Southern Regional Council. The people in power in that were Gladys M. Kammerer [professor of political science], [Omega] Ruth McQuown from the political department and Manning Dauer [professor of political science]. All three are dead now. John Degrove, who teaches down at Florida Atlantic University [in Boca Raton], was a key member in that organization. Pat Farris [wife of Charles Farris, professor of political science, now deceased], who is now a librarian for the [First] District Court of Appeal in Tallahassee, was very active in that organization. I think Doug Buck was in PR at Shands. [Professor of religion] Austin Creel [was active with the group]. There are still quite a few people around that were really active in that. We learned how to ring doorbells and deliver votes. We had walk maps. Grace and Sydney Knight were involved. Grace helped us cut out street maps and walk maps, and we would go door to door.

At one point we found out that the service description of the county social services specified that this was an organization mainly to help white families. We thought that the director of welfare was not sensitive to racial issues and was sort of old fashioned in the way she ran [the county] welfare office. We asked the county commission to have her retired. We felt it was time for some new blood, a professional MSW [Master of Social Work], to come in and revamp the old "good-old-boy" [way of running the county office]. One of the old county commissioner's mother was on welfare, and if she [the director] had had proper rules and procedures and protocol that could not have happened.

So we went to visit [County Commissioner, later State Representative] Sid Martin and [County Commissioner] G. M. Davis. G. M. is dead now. Sid, of course, is our retired legislator. And they were wonderful, really great guys when it came to helping the poor. But they were shrewd politicians. When we went and

complained about Lottie Schaeffer, that it was time for her to retire, they said: "Well, now, we need three votes to retire her, and this guy Edgar Johnson is going to run for county commissioner. It would sure be good to have Edgar on the county commission, because then we would have three votes. If we have three votes, you just know we would retire Miss Lottie. But we cannot do it unless you all help us get Edgar elected." Well, we all helped Edgar elected, and Miss Lottie was retired.

Oh, we got a hot-shot MSW in, and then someone got the bright idea to put him under the director of the health department. The director of the health department turned out to be sort of schizophrenic, so that kind of fell apart. Even with those little growing pains we got a professional director in, and indeed objective protocols were met. I have no indication that there has ever been any prejudice or favoritism or anything in the social service department since then. We really weeded that out. So locally that was [something] good [that we accomplished].

After we had changed all the laws we could change and integrated all the institutions we could integrate, we then changed the whole thrust of our activities to facilitate and improve that which we had integrated. We always had a terrible time, because we were so effective everyone wanted us to volunteer. We had a very strict rule that we would not volunteer. We were not volunteering women for do-good causes. We were not going to man the clinics or anything [like that]. We would do only our own projects. So when United Way agencies came and asked us to work as volunteers, and social service agencies, we would say, "No, that is not what we are about. We are professional women bringing about social change. If you want someone to go in a hospital and work with the poor, you pay." We sort of believed that women should not volunteer, because it was preventing women from being paid for their work. In a society that values people by how much they earn, it was demeaning to women that they were doing the labor of society and not earning a salary.

L: Would you call this a feminist organization?

C: Oh, I think so. Yes, yes. I mean, we had no feeling of feminism. There had been no consciousness raising, and we definitely were not fighting for women. We were fighting for blacks. But we knew that we had to be looked upon as powerful and resourceful and very dignified to achieve anything. As soon as we became the little ladies who worked in the pediatric clinic every Thursday morning for nothing, then we were exactly where the powerful men who ran the community thought we should be. We very purposefully never filled that role.

So when we had finished our function in integrating and had done as much as we could, then we thought our job was really to facilitate, to make what we

caused as good as possible. But we wanted to control it. We were not about to go out and volunteer at Alachua General Hospital or volunteer for the school board. So we wrote grants. A lot of the women in the organization were very good writers and very sharp women.

The first grant we got was for a program we called Best Day of the Week. That was a Saturday-morning program. We were concerned that black and white children were coming together in the schools with very different skills. All the stereotypes were there. The black kids were great at athletics, wonderful at music, good at art, [while] the white kids were all [good at] math, science, verbal kinds of things. So in the strict academic setting, it looked as if the white kids were superior, because they were superior in verbal skills. We wanted to create a setting where white children could see black children in a superior setting. The Best Day of the Week program revolved around games, art projects, those kinds of things where the two races were really equal, and sometimes the blacks much better.

L: Were these elementary-school kids?

C: Right, elementary-school kids. We thought it had to be done at that age. Then we got a second grant. We changed the model slightly because we realized that we had to involve the parents. It was very successful, what we were doing with the kids. There was some really nice bonding and change in the way a lot of children looked at each other. But then they would go back into their homes that were just as separate and just as prejudiced as before. So our next two grants were called Home and School. This is where we involved families, the black and white children, with projects at home and projects at school and brought the parents into the schools as well.

The other thing that we did--I guess this was before Best Day of the Week--was a project called Kindergarten Alert. Even after the schools were all integrated kindergarten was not mandatory in Florida. School boards charged families to send their children to kindergarten, so surprise! surprise! there were no black kids in kindergarten at all. We thought this really gave black children a disadvantage going into grade one. There was very little money for Head Start. Just a small percentage could go to Head Start. Head Start, I guess, would let you keep on through kindergarten, but it was just a drop in the bucket. So we persuaded the school board to waive the fee for kindergarten. That was absolutely basic. It was a lot of work to do that.

L: For all children?

C: For all children. That meant that they had to take a little bit from all the other grades. Budgets were really tight, so they are certainly to be complimented for

doing that. Then we had all the stipulations, like the children had to have birth certificates. Most of these kids were just born in little shacks with a midwife and were never registered. They had to have shoes. Most of these kids never had shoes. They had to have medical examinations. These parents could not afford to take children for a medical examination.

So we approached the teaching hospital [Shands]--by then it was about five years old and was still just a small, struggling medical school--and persuaded the residents there to volunteer their time to give medical examinations. They would come over to the [county] health center to give the medical examinations. Walter Murphree, who was mayor of Gainesville at one time during there, was the director of public health. Neil Butler, who was a black man and was also a mayor of Gainesville at one time, was a public health nurse, and I remember Neil's saying that Walter Murphree was the only doctor he knew who could give a black person a complete physical examination without once touching their black skin. [laughter]

But old Doctor Murphree was really pretty good at public health, and he did it. I have never heard any criticism about his letting his natural racism intrude on his profession. He opened up his clinic and really helped us make it available to these hordes of black kids that came in for medical examinations. We would go out into the back woods and up the sandy roads and haul these five- and six-year-old kids in. Many of them had never been away from their little farms or their little shacks, and we would haul them into town and buy them a pair of shoes and take them off for their medical examination. They had to get shots, too, and they did not like that very much.

- L: You are using the word "haul." How did the black parents feel about these activities?
- C: They were pleased. They were very, very positive. It was an exciting time to be black. There were some really very, very exciting things. Things were happening. I kind of feel sorry for white men, because you have not had a liberating experience. [laughter]
- L: OK.
- C: Yes. The last three or four decades I am sure have been exciting times for blacks and women. As blacks are disillusioned, I am sure women will be soon, too. But the black families were very receptive, and we simply did not encounter reverse racism as you do now. The thing that always amazed me was what black people went through and remained nonviolent. It is just amazing how peaceful, kind, loving, and really warm toward white people they were. It was just astounding.

- L: From everything you have said and from what I know, Gainesville integrated fairly peacefully and fairly calmly. I understand that there was very little violence, no bombing activities. Would you agree with this?
- C: Oh, no, that is not true. Carlene Hussy's house was burned down.
- L: When was that?
- C: Oh, I do not know. Gosh. And there were riots and fires downtown. Carol Thomas's dog was shot. She was put in jail. Gainesville was not very peaceful.
- L: What were the most turbulent years?
- C: Oh, Lord. I guess it was when I got back from Japan. When did I go to Japan? Kim was a baby--she was born in 1966--so this would have been in 1966. When was Martin Luther King shot?
- L: The spring of 1968.
- C: OK. Nineteen sixty-five to 1968.
- L: There were burnings and rioting in Gainesville?
- C: Yes. Right. I remember once we had a meeting with Chief [William "Bill"] Joiner and some of the senior police about some beatings. There were really some ugly things going on, just awful behavior in the jails, [like] beatings. We were really afraid for our people. We were talking about the general attitude of the police toward blacks and the way they were treated.

As good researchers, we had found out what qualifications were needed to be a policeman and what the fringe benefits were and what the pay was, and we were appalled at the hours they had to work and the pay they got. I mean, these were poor white trash. In many cases they were just as poor as any of the blacks we were fighting for. Chief Joiner was old Alachua County aristocracy, and I remember saying to him: "What kind of reaction do you expect from your police, given what you pay them? You keep them so poor and their lives are so meager that of course they want to keep someone under them." He said: "Do I not pay them well? Can you not live on that?" I forget [what it was exactly, but] the salary was \$5,000 or something, and he was just amazed that that was not a living wage. But I remember our meeting with him all day long because there had been a riot the night before and a bombing, I think. We were talking about how we could change this whole confrontation between the police [and the black people].

There was a group of integrationists led by Carol Thomas. Savannah Williams, who is still alive and I think probably has been interviewed--she should be if she has not--was involved in it, and they were fighting for the poor. They were very radical. I mean, they interrupted meetings and shouted and screamed and used civil disobedience all over. Carol was a [UF] faculty wife. [Billy Seay Thomas was assistant professor of physics. Ed.] Her children were taken away from her and her dog was shot and she was evicted and she was jailed for a while.

L: Do you recall the name of her organization?

C: Oh, I do not know. I do not know which group she was in. Her black counterpart was a guy named Jack Dawkins, and he disappeared and has never been seen since. People think that he was probably murdered. It was not all sweetness and light by a longshot.

L: About how many members at the peak did your organization have?

C: Well, I remember our saying two hundred, but I would really have to go back through the file and reconstruct it. Constant membership [was] maybe one hundred, year in and year out.

L: Was that hundred active?

C: Yes. It might peak to two hundred for a given cause, [like] when we rallied around some particular picketing effort or something like that.

L: The group was founded in 1963. How long did it last?

C: The last activity I remember was protesting the lack of black teachers as role models in the public school system. I did that about 1977, I think. We have not really done anything active [since then] except to have some reunions and some parties. We go to each other's funerals now. [laughter]

L: Were you very active in the early years of the 1970s?

C: Yes. That is when we were doing our Best Day of the Week and our Hands programs and such.

L: What did you do once you moved away or eased out of Gainesville Women for Equal Rights? Where did you direct your energies then? I understand you were involved in local politics.

C: Yes. As a result of integrating Alachua General Hospital, I was appointed to the

board of trustees of Alachua General Hospital. I was the first woman [to serve on their board], and really the first woman on a substantial board [in Alachua County]. No, Beth Pearson had been elected to the school board in the 1950s. Since then no woman had served anywhere important. [The board of trustees for] Alachua General Hospital, although it was not elected, was considered the most important appointed board [in the county]. I think our budget was probably as big as that of the whole Alachua County budget. So I served on that board and had some interesting problems with some of the men on that board. They sure did not like the idea.

I remember once we were going to court on some issue, and the attorney, who was Wayne Carlisle who later was a circuit judge, squirmingly asked me to make sure I did not turn up for that court case--they were suing the board of trustees--because it might prejudice the judge to see a woman there. [laughter] I was chairman of the building committee, and when they went off to New York to get bond money to build the hospital, I was disinvented because they [felt that they] may not be able to sell bonds as well if a woman trustee were present. Those were strange days. I was appointed to that in 1969.

Then in 1973 I ran for the city commission. I was really sort of interested in the county commission, but it was just unheard of for a woman to try to get on the county commission. But there was some feeling that maybe I could make the city commission because some women in other cities, particularly up North, were starting to get elected. So that year three women ran: Mary Ann Sherman, Judy Miller, and me. There were nine candidates--it was a very heated election--and I was the top vote-getter out of the whole nine. But when it came to the runoff, the good-old boys gathered together, and the number-two man got elected.

The next year Ralph Turlington [state representative from Gainesville] was going to run for commissioner of education, and he called me to see if I would run his [campaign] office for him. I agreed. I quit my job--I was doing some medical research then--and went off to run his office. We never could find a statewide campaign manager, so he made me his statewide campaign manager. Reubin Askew was governor then [1971-1979], and Floyd [Thomas] Christian was commissioner of education [1965-1974]. Floyd put his hand in the till and got himself sent off, I think, to prison. [Floyd Christian resigned April 25, 1974, after he was indicted on nineteen counts of bribery, perjury, and conspiracy and the Florida House of Representatives had begun impeachment proceedings. Ed.]

L: This was 1974.

C: Yes, 1974 or 1975. Reubin Askew appointed Ralph as commissioner of education, so Ralph's whole operation had to move up to Tallahassee. I, of course, had young children and could not go, so I stayed behind in Gainesville

and ran the treasury for the campaign. Katie Nichols, whose dad was Gardner Coles who owned the *Gainesville Sun* and several other newspapers, became his campaign manager up in Tallahassee. She handled all the PR and campaigning responsibilities, and I handled all the money and fund raising.

Then after Ralph was elected, what did I do? Oh, then I went back to the University and did some research again on health manpower. Then we went to Israel for a year. I got back from Israel and got a job at the Crisis Center, running the information referral services for northern Florida.

It is so interesting. When I was looking through the old GWER boxes the other night I came across a committee report where I made a statement saying that there had to be one central place where people could turn to find out where they could get help for their problems. Of course, we did not know then. The words *information referral* had not been invented. But last Thursday I was down in Orlando at a meeting of the Florida Association of Information Referral Services representing the governor [Lawton Chiles], because he wants to put a service in his office. I had told them in the introduction to my remarks: "It could be 1968 all over again. I am talking about the tremendous need for people to know where to turn when they have a problem." I spent five years there helping people find out where to turn when they had a problem, and it was kind of fun, because it was a sixteen-county service. We helped a lot of folks.

Our district was the size of the state of Massachusetts and had the population of Delaware. I would go to national meetings, I served as chairman of the state committee of the National Alliance for Information Referral Services, and we would have these joint meetings with the national MSWs, the social workers. People would stand up and talk about their agency. I would say, "Well, my agency is the size of the state of Massachusetts." The largest single-service delivery agency east of the Mississippi River was mine.

Then when [President Ronald] Reagan was elected, of course all the money was taken away, and it fell apart. It became a one-county thing. That was boring. I did not want to do that. By then I had formed a state association and had been president and had set up a network. It is still going, as a matter of fact. So I quit and ran for city commission, and this time I got elected.

L: In 198 . . . ?

C: Nineteen eighty-two. I spent six years with the city commission, and then I ran for the house of representatives and lost in 1988.

L: The state house?

C: The state house. Then I sort of took a year off. Then I got my real estate license, and now I am selling real estate.

L: I understand that you were mayor-commissioner of the city of Gainesville.

C: Yes.

L: Is that an elected position?

C: Well, it is elected by the other commissioners. Gainesville has a mayor-commissioner form of government where five people are elected to be on the city commission, and then the commission elects one of them to be mayor, who is really the chairman of the board.

L: Looking back, from your perspective now, how much do you think Gainesville has changed as far as race relations? Are you satisfied?

C: Oh, no. I really think we are segregated, and it really bothers me.

L: In what way?

C: In a social way. I do not know if young people are making tight bonds between the races. I do not see much of them. I think ours were forced in our generation, but they were the kind of bonds that you could only make going through an adventure together. When a group of people is put through an intense emotional experience together, there develops a lifelong trust and a lifelong friendship. I guess that is the kind of thing that comes out of a sorority or a fraternity. I know in the Crisis Center when we do crisis training we really dig down into the guts of people and have them as a group examine their very most inner feelings. They go through really tough role playing. And those people are bonded forever. If you have gone through crisis training and have worked at the Crisis Center, boy, you are friends for life, and you respect and love each other. So in my generation of black and white, there is that kind of a feeling.

The next generation did not have this mutual experience of fighting for civil rights, so there is not that strong bonding. It is in that generation I see a tremendous separation. There is no socializing at all. But among the younger kids maybe there is a bit of it. I do not know. I saw a white girl and a black boy holding hands at the [Gainesville] Chamber Orchestra [concert] Saturday night. Does that happen often? I just do not know. But it is a different kind of a relationship. The black/white relationship that is forming now is a different kind. It has not been molded by fire.

L: Do you still see evidence of things that have not changed since 1958 as far as

segregation [is concerned]?

C: No. Everything has changed to a degree, but there are still a lot of little power circles, activity circles, where blacks would not be welcome. There is definitely a segregated world out there.

L: If you had a chance to do the whole GWER thing again, would you?

C: Oh, yes. Absolutely.

L: Was it very positive?

C: Oh, yes. Still the women I admire the most are the women that were in that organization. I tell my kids that it was probably the only thing that I was willing to die for. My son will say: "You are so lucky. There has been nothing in my life that I am willing to die for. Nothing has meant that much to me." I think that is really quite interesting. For a lot of us it was our whole life. If integration had not happened, we would have been willing to lay our life down for it.

L: How much contact do you maintain today with these folks?

C: Oh, I will talk to one or the other probably once a week. They are still the people that are interested in the community. They are the members of the League of Women Voters and the American Association of University Women. They serve on city boards, they serve on county boards. They are the thinking women of the community. They are not in the Junior League and they are not in the Gainesville Woman's Club; they are not in the [Gainesville] Garden Club.

L: I take it you are not in the Garden Club.

C: No. I have nothing against the Garden Club. The Garden Club is a wonderful environmental organization.

L: Well, I think that will do it. I thank you very much for allowing me to interview you.

C: You are welcome.