

BARNARD COLLEGE CLASS OF 1971 ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

The Reminiscences of

Andrea Polk-Stephenson

2015

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Andrea Polk-Stephenson conducted by Katherine J. Brewster on Sunday, September 13, 2015. This interview is part of the Barnard Class of 1971 Oral History Project.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that s/he is reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

Interviewee: Andrea Polk-Stephenson

Location: Atlanta, Georgia via Skype

Interviewer: Katherine J. Brewster

Date: September 13, 2015

[00:00:00.00] Q: Tell me more about your parents' involvement in political issues??

[00:00:32.04] Polk Stephenson: Well, they've always been politically knowledgeable, and Dad would come home and talk about it or we'd watch the news. It was just part of my culture. And, oh wait! It came from his culture, actually, because believe it or not, his aunt was—what was she? She was Republican Chairman of the District, the one up in Washington Heights where they lived. And my grandfather—I guess he was a Republican, I don't know what he was—[pause] interested in politics but not so much the kind of politics as my father was interested in. And his grandfather worked at the IRS [Internal Revenue Service] in the early nineteen hundreds. We still have his business cards.

[00:01:39.01] Q: _____ ?? mother's political involvement.

[00:02:15.00] Polk-Stephenson: Although Mom eventually became a union person and she loved the union that had to do with the Teacher's Union. No, I don't think they were involved in anything like that. When you look up "Progressive Party" it was just Henry Wallace and that whole thing. It was like a thing of four years and it was different then than it is now. I don't know what to tell you, it was their life. It wasn't mine.

[00:02:46.23] Q: _____ (??)your parents' political leanings??

[00:02:49.22] Polk-Stephenson: Well, telling me about it years later, yeah. And having a very, very—what would be considered a liberal perspective, or a left-wing perspective about politics today. But yeah, you're right, you could make that call, left-wing, because that was in the days of the anti-communists and everything else.

[00:03:20.23] Q: [inaudible; asks about junior high to high school to Barnard College].

[00:03:33.21] Polk-Stephenson: When I was in junior high, I got into Hunter [Hunter College High School] and I got into Bronx-Sci [Bronx High School of Science]. I went in the SP—Special Progress [program]—so that was seventh grade. Eighth grade, I skipped eighth grade, I was in ninth grade. So some time during ninth grade my parents moved to Woodside, Queens. I had to make a decision whether I wanted to go to another junior high or keep going to the one in Manhattan. So I'd go with my dad every day. We'd walk, or take the car to the subway, and we'd take the subway in, back and forth, back and forth. I finished junior high by commuting. So when I, just out of the blue, got into Hunter High and Bronx-Science I had to make a decision. We decided it was really—even though I was interested in science and I probably would have rather gone to the more scientifically-oriented school—we decided it was just too long a commute from Queens to the Bronx. So I commuted, then, for another three years to Hunter. Which is why, when I got to Barnard, it was assumed that I would probably commute. So I was considered a commuter when I got there, and a few weeks later I couldn't stand it. My Grandma lived on 168th Street and Fort Washington Avenue, offered to let me come in—

[00:05:12.16] Polk-Stephenson: [technical difficulties with Skype]

[00:05:28.11] And I lived there. It was pretty awful so my father got on the phone with somebody in the college and they got me a place in Plimpton Hall, which had just been finished and was accepting people at that point. I was lucky I got a very nice corner room, I had nice roommates. In the previous interview I had mentioned some things that had gone on with that. But I don't know that we're up to that at this point. So I did commute, yes. Yeah, it was just a few weeks into the term.

[00:06:11.20] Q: [Tell me about your experience with Barnard roommates(??)]

[00:06:27.08] Polk-Stephenson: Well, I covered that part of it a lot. I did my second year there. I lived with some people from the Midwest and our cultures were different and they sort of treated me pretty rotten. I didn't like them and they didn't like me, let's put it that way. So that was not a good experience.

[00:06:57.15] Q: [Tell me more about your accident and recovery from the brain injury(??)]

[00:07:11.00] Polk-Stephenson: _____(??) middle. Christmas Eve, 1969, on my way to an anti-war rally in Central Park.

[00:07:18.02] Q: [Inaudible]

[00:07:36.00] Polk-Stephenson: Well, I didn't go back to Barnard. It happened in December and then I left the hospital three months later on March 13, 1969—Friday the 13th, believe it or not, okay? (Laughs) So Friday the 13th was always my lucky day. Today's the 13th, I thought that was interesting. I don't believe in any of that crap, but I like it. It was pretty cool to get back home and on a walker and on crutches. I had people coming to me and so then I was able to go—I wanted to graduate with my class, as I've expressed before. I had this boyfriend—I had met him the summer before when I was running a waterfront. In the Catskills. And on my day off I had gone to one of these hotels by the pool and I met this guy who was very nice named—I think his name was Howard Agren. We kept in touch. At the time we used to write letters—or calls.

And when I got run over it was during that Christmas break and he happened to have been at Carnegie Hall with his quartet from Philadelphia, singing with the Philadelphia Orchestra, "Carmina Burana." So when he found out what happened to me, somehow he must have called because I guess he wanted to see me and my mother told him. He came to the hospital and they sang to all the nurses and everything at my bedside (laughs). So I'm told. So he was so sweet and nice, and I decided to go to Philadelphia

(laughs). Instead of around the corner from my house. I guess I'd had enough living at home, also, probably by that point. To try to take a few classes to catch up. So I ran around Philadelphia on my crutches and I had a boyfriend, so that was good. And it helped knowing somebody there, obviously.

[00:10:05.15] [Technical difficulties with skype].

[00:10:23.26] Q: [Tell me about your recovery(??)]

[00:10:30.28] Polk-Stephenson: So, yeah. But coming back I probably was still on my crutches, yeah. And I mentioned about the kitty-cat that I got, and I lived with. [Referring to previous interview session] By that point I'm quite sure I had post-traumatic stress syndrome. Because my personality had changed and I just did stuff that was stupid and not me.

[00:11:07.22] Q: [How would you describe your personality change??]

[00:11:21.00] Polk-Stephenson: Maybe I didn't care as much about some of the—I guess I just wanted to live for the moment and I had faced death. I've always been pretty open, and free, and flamboyant but I would say that I became more open and free and flamboyant—and friendly. And more, I guess, interested in the biology of our bodies and everything. In terms of the intellectual. Because biology was my major.

[00:12:10.01] Q: [Say more about your personality change as a result of the accident(??)]

[00:12:13.00] Polk-Stephenson: I got headaches, I had a short fuse.

[00:12:20.03] Q: [Tell me more about this(??)]

[00:12:22.26] Polk-Stephenson: I even took an art class. I used to love art, but I took an art class. Do you remember the—you probably don't remember—the art school, or whatever it was called, the

School of the Arts was further downtown. It was, like, 110th Street, or Washington, or somewhere. No, Amsterdam. And so I'd walk all the way over there from Plimpton Hall for an eight or nine o'clock class. It was dark, that's all I remember, and we'd have to paint naked bodies (laughs). Pretty weird (laughs). But it was just a class. I could take an elective so I took the easiest things that I could my senior year.

[00:13:08.11] Q: Tell me more about your memories at Barnard(??)

[00:13:10.25] Polk-Stephenson: It's the funniest thing. I had one—I can't remember very many—but I had one conversation with Ellen Futter. Now, you know Ellen Futter, right? Okay. I had one conversation with her and I remember all these years later.

[00:13:25.17] Q: Say more about this conversation(??)

[00:13:26.25] Polk-Stephenson: It was just, "How are you? It's so amazing," blah, blah, blah. "You're back at school, we're so happy to have you." It was a conversation but I just remember. It's the weirdest thing.

[00:13:37.18] Q: Is there anything else you remember about your recovery while simultaneously taking classes at Barnard(??)

[00:14:09.22] Polk-Stephenson: Well, I was back at Plimpton Hall—and so that was partly home. It was okay. I just wasn't able to concentrate. That was part of the head injury and everything. So I don't think that I was as serious a student in terms of my abilities as I was back, before then, necessarily. And it's like I never really had a choice, in terms of biology. I was sort of stuck there. Not that I necessarily would have changed, but I might have.

I just feel like I missed a whole lot that I could have learned that I never was really given a chance to find out about. I wrote about the fact that—you remember that we didn't take the same classes as the Columbia men, right? The classics, and the humanities, and whatever else they would take. We needed to take that! I mean I'm reading now about Caesar because I don't know much about him. I just came back from the Basque country with a girlfriend of mine and I knew I'd be seeing Roman ruins. I was sitting there having breakfast next to a Roman ruin, I'm like, "Ooh! An arch!" And so I started reading about Caesar and stuff like that. We were liberal arts but we had no—I don't remember, do you remember any good counseling?

[00:15:39.08] Q: No. And I was only at Barnard for 1½ years so I wouldn't know what was available after 1969(??)

[00:15:43.00] Polk-Stephenson: No, there was nothing. It was like, you take your four classes and then you take the next four classes and eventually you decide on a major. So I suppose I decided on the major simply because I had taken a few biology classes. And because at that point it would be good to be a doctor—which I never became because of the—whatever.

[00:16:06.00] Q: Thank you so much for so openly sharing your experience recovering from your traumatic accident. Changing topics for a moment, I'd like to hear about your experiences with dating and sexual explorations??

[00:16:10.14] Polk-Stephenson: It was cozy. I knew what was going on.

[00:16:16.03] Q: [(??)]

[00:16:36.23] Polk-Stephenson: I mean, I had two boyfriends in high school and there was no sex, okay? I mean not the real thing. And Barnard made all of us women aware of our bodies and that sex wasn't just for men, and everything else. So I have no other point of reference to talk about that (laughs). This is for eternity and I'm not talking (laughs). I can tell you the funniest thing is I remember the first—you know those girls that I met, even though I wasn't friends with them really, at Barnard when I was there, they just stuck in my mind. I mean they all got their own good friends and went off and did whatever but for some reason they stuck in my mind.

[00:17:30.09] Q: Say more about your experiences with men and dating while at Barnard(??)

[00:17:34.04] Polk-Stephenson: _____(??)that I met that summer. In that first week that we were there, there were dances and all kinds of stuff going on, and I met some guy. I don't know who he was, he had a friendly face, he was from Idaho, he was in the Law School. Was it him? No, it wasn't even him, it was somebody else. And we were sitting in the little social area in one of those residence halls and we had been drinking and doing all kinds of stuff and then I turned around and I was sitting there talking or making out or something and I barfed right there (laughs). I mean I had never done that kind of thing before (laughs). Into a waste paper basket and he helped me get cleaned up, and I never talked to him again the whole four years I was there (laughs). Whoever this guy was, I mean he'd pass me in the hall and not look at me (laughs). Horrible. It was disgusting (laughs).

[00:18:40.27] Q: Oh no! I'm so sorry. And, what a nice person, though to help you get cleaned up(??)

[00:18:52.10] Polk-Stephenson: Yeah, he was a nice guy. Somewhere.

00:18:56.23] Q: [_____(??)]

[00:18:58.00] Polk-Stephenson: Yeah, that was very nice.

[00:19:00.21] Q: [Tell me about your sense of race, discrimination, class differences while you were growing up(??)]

[00:19:32.00] Polk-Stephenson: People were people, that's all. I mean one of the questions I noticed on there [list of interview questions] was, "Did you have any friends of different ethnicity or race, or something." Well, one of my good friends was Irish, from Staten Island. And that was different. My really good friend my senior year was from one of the African countries, I can't remember it—Liberia. Her father was the UN ambassador to Liberia and everybody in her family was black and she happened to have white skin—because, I don't have to tell you the history—and with freckles. She wound up becoming a lawyer. No, no, no, a doctor. I think, somebody told me she married a Brazilian Jew but I don't know whether that's true or not, okay? Just the way life happens.

As I said before, I was trying to figure out what I was going to do next and I was trying to get out of Barnard and make up some classes, and I was still stuck—sort of—in a very difficult field, this pre-med stuff, and this biology, chemistry, physics stuff. And physics didn't appeal to me, so I dropped the medical course that I had been on and I had been talking to this ecologist. I was taking an ecology class that was very nice at Columbia and I was talking to the guy about whatever it was, and he came to me and he said, "Are you interested in going to epidemiology school?" I said, "What in the world is that?"

[00:21:37.15] Q: [_____(??)]

[00:21:39.00] Polk-Stephenson: Epidemiology. Public health. I said, "Well, I think I'm interested in public health, I'm not sure." So he sent me up there; I met Dr. Susser who was head of the department in the Columbia University School of Public Health—which is now the Mailman School [of Public Health]. I got a full scholarship to get my PhD, which was very nice, and a federal grant. And there I was up in the medical school dorm, and fortunately or unfortunately I met my first husband [Eric Polk]

there and he, unfortunately, was a male chauvinist as it turned out. See, I could be manipulated, that was the problem. Now, I'm remembering. You see, my personality change was the fact that I could be manipulated. And so he basically, I don't know whether he knew—he didn't do it purposely, he wasn't a venal person by any means. It was just that he was the one studying in medical school, and he had done it late in life, and he was very serious about it. So I was helping him. And he'd pooh-pooh everything that I was doing. And he pooh-poohed it to the fact that I just dropped out. And when he was in his internship at Cornell, I wound up finishing my classes. I had two classes left, I was able to do that remotely, they let me do that. And when he was in his residency up at Harvard I did my thesis on the epidemiology of neural tube defects in Boston.

[00:23:40.19] Q: [_____(??)]

[00:23:42.00] Polk-Stephenson: The epidemiology of neural tube defects. Neural tube defects in Boston. Neural tube, like an anencephaly, spina bifida.

[00:23:56.06] Q: Tell me more about what you discovered(??)

[00:24:03.00] Polk-Stephenson: I found that it appeared that there might have been some relationship between the incidence of those diseases and Irish people, or people from that neighborhood who ate a lot of potatoes. Then I believe, years later—and I can't confirm this, because I didn't keep track of that real well—but I believe they found some kind of a vitamin that was deficient, that did help cause some of the neural tube defects and it could very well be that it was a vitamin found in potatoes. During the

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[00:24:47.07] Q: [_____pregnancy(??)]

[00:24:50.30] Polk-Stephenson: I don't know. It had something to do with that, and I think I, on the periphery, had found it. But I'm not quite sure. Because—long gone. And after that when I got to the public health school I worked with Dr. Zena Stein, the wife of Dr. Mervin Susser, about Down syndrome. And I did write the first article that would have expressed the best way to prevent Down syndrome at that time and an entire epidemiology of it—like the causes, the effects, etc., in different populations. But we suggested what we called, “elective abortion.”

And so I was very involved with all that kind of stuff at that time. I was very involved in organizing the committee and then the effort of the school—which had been my idea—to use community-based organizations as teaching and learning grounds for the students so that they could get their credit there. And so we went around to places like the Esperanza Center [for people with developmental disabilities]—that's the one I remember, it's so easy to remember—and senior centers and things like that. And some people volunteered to do that and—then, like everything else, I went on to do other things because I got interested in something else next. It's like I go from project to project.

[00:26:46.16] Q: Tell me again. Where were you doing this research work on Down's syndrome(??)

[00:26:51.10] Polk-Stephenson: Columbia University School of Public Health.

[00:26:52.18] Q: So, before you went to Boston(??)

[00:26:57.00] Polk-Stephenson: Yeah, it was before I went there to Boston. It was practically before I knew my first husband, yeah.

[00:27:05.01] Q: [](??)

[00:27:12.30] Polk-Stephenson: Right.

[00:27:14.00] Q: And, where did your husband do his internship and residency(??)

[00:27:16.05] Polk-Stephenson: Right. He was at Peter Bent Brigham, Harvard University teaching hospital] and Harvard—he did something at Harvard. Oh yeah, he was a Fellow.

[00:27:25.23] Q: [_____ (??)]

[00:27:43.26] Polk-Stephenson: He didn't care about stuff like that. It was not—this is all Andrea creating before she met Eric. (laughs)

[00:27:53.28] Q: [And, what were you doing while he was finishing his internship and residency(??)]

[00:28:05.30] Polk-Stephenson: Writing my thesis.

[00:28:08.00] Q: [_____ (??)]

[00:28:09.12] Polk-Stephenson: And bringing up a child.

[00:28:12.11] Q: [Tell me more about raising your son during this time(??)]

[00:28:15.04] Polk-Stephenson: My son was, maybe, four when we were up there. Five, something like that. It was nursery school, not kindergarten—because where did he go to kindergarten? Up in Maine, Portland, Maine. And after Portland, Maine, we were at Idaho Falls, Idaho. And after Idaho Falls, Idaho, we were at Spokane, Washington where my second son was born. And after that we were in—are you ready for this? Minot, North Dakota. So you wonder why—I always say he was a doctor who never could put his roots anywhere. There as always something wrong with the place and he always said it was because he got headaches because of air pollution. And then years later, he figured out it was the chocolate (laughs).

[00:29:08.23] Q: [Sounds as is if you moved around a lot during your first marriage (??)]

[00:29:17.27] Polk-Stephenson: Yeah, basically.

[00:29:19.17] Q: [What was that like for you(??)]

[00:29:23.12] Polk-Stephenson: Well, when he's in Maine—which is very nice, Portland, Maine—but it was too cold for me. He found a job because he decided he wanted to be head of the Department of Anesthesiology, not just an anesthesiologist. There was always a reason. Whatever.

[00:29:44.04] Q: [_____(??)]

[Technical difficulties with Skype]

[00:30:15.00] Q: [_____(??)]

[00:30:16.14] Polk-Stephenson: Okay.

[00:30:18.14] Q: So, before our technical difficulties, you were talking about what it was like for you to move around a lot in your first marriage(??)

[00:30:27.25] Polk-Stephenson: It was interesting. Every two years or so we moved. Sometimes after a year. It was really weird. But when we left Minot we went down to Saint Petersburg. We lived there, more or less, for three years. So my son finally—we were talking about it last night—one place he got to go for two years to school and actually graduate. In sixth grade—fifth grade. By then I had left and moved myself to Tallahassee with my youngest son and came back for him [the older son?] after school was over and divorced my ex-husband.

[00:31:10.05] Q: Tell me about supporting yourself and your sons after your divorce(??)

[00:31:17.20] Polk-Stephenson: Yes and no. I mean I'd do projects, I'd do some teaching—I taught physics and biology and I think some kind of math in a tennis academy.

[00:31:34.04] Q: Where did you teach(??)

[00:31:35.15] Polk-Stephenson: Near St. Petersburg somewhere. I didn't do a lot of work. I was bringing up children.

[00:31:42.25] Q: How many children do you have(??)

00:31:45.30] Polk-Stephenson: I only had two. Two boys.

[00:31:48.05] Q: Tell me more about your decision to divorce your ex-husband(??)

[00:32:02.15] Polk-Stephenson: You sure you want all this stuff? He was a male chauvinist. I didn't like being chased around the house and some of the stuff he said to me. It was awful. Well, it was decided when my two children were there and Woody had already decided to say, "Why don't you divorce him already?" Because he was yelling at me so much. Because he was disappointed in himself and he was taking it out on me. And he pushed me. He'd never laid a hand on me. And he pushed me in front of my two-year-old son and said—what did he say? He said—oh no. Winn [now Wade], my son, said to him, "Don't you hit my mommy." And so one thing led to another, and there were things that led to other things that led to other things but I was talking with the head of Epidemiology at USF [University of South Florida] School of Public Health about publishing my thesis, because we were still working on that, kind of. And he said to me, "Would you like to go to Tallahassee for a job interview?" Because they needed somebody; and that's how I wound up in Tallahassee.

[00:33:26.08] Q: Tell me more about your thesis(??)

[00:33:33.00] Polk-Stephenson: It was birth defects, which I had worked in. Obviously I had done some research on that. And I helped catalogue some of the birth defects. And I guess I was using COBALT [programming language] at the time, believe it or not. But it was only a temporary job and then after that one I wound up working there for about fifteen years in the Department of Health. And

then I got tired of it. I got bored of it and I happened to be offered a job out of the blue at FSU, Florida State University, as Director of Research in the Undergraduate Program and I did that for—that was also a temporary job. Did that for a few months then I got hired as—what did I do next? Then I went to the legislature because I was doing contracts then. And I did the dentistry study on whether or not to privatize the board of dentistry. That was a complete success and while I was doing that I—

[00:34:38.06] Q: Tell me more about the dentistry study and your part in it (??)

[00:34:41.05] Polk-Stephenson: Well, the committee voted to go along with my recommendation and I went in there completely blank in terms of my opinion. I set up a study, and I did the study, and I presented the evidence, and my recommendation at the conclusion was that they not privatize the board of dentistry—and they agreed, they voted to do that. And then, as well, we got a couple of really nice notes from the head of the committee telling us what a great job we'd done. But while I was in the middle of that I also got some offer from the Department of Juvenile Justice to start another project that they were doing on fatherhood. They both knew I was working for both of them, so I'd work sort of six hours here and six hours there. I was, like, non-stop work but it was wonderful, no complaints.

I intermingled those two jobs for a few months and I had to set up—they had already picked out eight juvenile justice pilot facilities that were scattered throughout Florida. And this was before anybody ever heard of fatherhood or whatever, so I really think I did the first one because there was no research on it, practically. So I had to delve into psychology, all different things, education. I mean I had a psychologist at the juvenile justice department that could help me if I needed it.

[00:36:24.09] At that time I was in my second master's degree program at FSU [Florida State university]. I was in the school of—I think it's called "Sociology and Public Policy." They've changed

their name. But I wrote it in the last one [interview session]: Social Science and Public Policy. And so I had all these wonderful professors that I could use to help me, guide me also, when I needed help. I had some really good superintendents of juvenile justice. I'm very eclectic, as you noticed before. I like to do one project, get it going, and go on to the next project. So here I was doing two projects which really appealed to me (laughs). The money was good, too. So, basically they had been given a grant to do this a year before. So they only had another year to finish a two-year project and that was fine with me—I like to work fast. And during that period of time, I'll never forget, I was on the phone, I was on the phone, I was on the phone. Apparently my husband had been trying to get me, trying to get me, trying to get me. The minute I hung up the phone rang, my husband said, "Did you hear about it?" I said, "Hear about what?" He said, "Planes have gone into the World Trade Center."

[00:37:46.18] Q: Say more about your reaction to the planes flying into the World Trade Center(??)

[00:37:49.15] Polk-Stephenson: Yes, _____ (??), my husband who worked for the legislature—but that had nothing to do with me being there.

[00:38:01.07] Q: [_____ (??)]

[00:38:07.16] Polk-Stephenson: Yeah, so I went out and I saw what was going on with 9/11. What was so scary about it was that it was my son, my first son, is an attorney and he was working for the first Cadwalader, Wickersham & Taft, which is about half-a-block away from the World Trade Center—and I had no idea if he was alive or dead because I couldn't get hold of anybody in New York. My parents were there but I couldn't get ahold of them either, they were in their sixties. It was horrible, so I got permission to go home and my husband had already gotten permission—they had cleared out the legislature and he was home and we just waited and waited. We heard from my daughter-in-law—this is a funny story. The funniest thing about this is that my daughter-in-law's mother who lived in Ohio—

my daughter-in-law was still on her Ohio cell phone—my son didn't believe in cell phones at the time—she was a lawyer working in the Federal Building, the Federal Department of Labor building in Brooklyn and they had evacuated it. She refused to go because the only way she'd know if her husband was alive was if he came to her there because I guess they had a thing, "If anything happens, come to me here." Where she just knew it.

[00:39:39.11] So she just waited, and waited, and was able, on occasion, very infrequently, to get ahold of her mother in Ohio on a phone or visa-versa. Four or five hours after this happened we got a call from her mother telling us that Woody was alive, he had gotten to the—please, it's very hard to talk about—that he had been in the subway when it happened and somebody had flipped a switch and they wound up in Chinatown. Somebody saved their lives, they did their job. And he got out knowing nothing—nobody had told him anything. Oh, wait—he had seen—he was on an elevator, to one point, in Brooklyn, and he had been able to see a fire near the World Trade Center there. So basically what everybody in the subway was saying was, "Oh, another fire." Nobody knew anything. And when he got out, then he saw—the whole thing. People jumping, and everybody and— so he bought a disposable camera and took pictures. Those pictures have never been shown. And he got covered with ash, and stood there for maybe an hour, an hour-and-a-half, and decided that he'd got covered enough, he'd better go. He walked across Manhattan, across the Brooklyn Bridge, and found his wife. So she in her big heels, they had to walk two miles home. Whatever it was, ten miles home, whatever it was, it doesn't matter, they were alive.

[00:41:22.05] Q: How terrifying that must've been for you (??)

[00:41:26.22] Polk-Stephenson: Yeah, I think that probably precipitated them coming back to Atlanta where they had gone and met at the law school. And I couldn't stand leaving my grandchildren in

Atlanta every time I visited them, so I came up here. So here I am. And then my mother came, and my father. And then my other son came. So we're all here now.

[00:41:51.14] Q: Tell me more about your family and your family relationships (??)

[00:41:59.00] Polk-Stephenson: We're small, but we're close.

[00:42:02.22] Q: Tell me again: when did you move from Florida to Atlanta, Georgia(??)

[00:42:09.30] Polk-Stephenson: About eight years ago. Me and my husband—oh, in between! So in between I did a few other projects and then in between—they needed a bioterrorism epidemiologist and I had some bioterrorism training—in Sussex County, New Jersey. So I went up there and I was their epidemiologist for a while and they needed a director so they made me Director of the Health Department at that point. And after a year and a half of commuting, basically, back to Florida to see my husband, I just decided one day. I gave them notice, I said, “I can't do this anymore. Bye.” Two weeks' notice. But the reason I went was because I wanted to give back to some of the people that done so much to save people's lives and that had saved my son's life.

[00:43:18.11] Q: To give back to the first responders to 9/11 (??)

[00:43:23.18] Polk-Stephenson: That was pretty heavy. So anyway, it was an experience.

[00:43:27.25] Q: Tell me again for what organization you were doing this work(??)

[00:43:35.18] Polk-Stephenson: It was a county health department.

[00:43:38.27] Q: Where(??)

[00:43:42.01] Polk-Stephenson: Sussex.

[00:43:43.00] Q: Curious: Where in New Jersey is Sussex County(??)

[00:43:43.30] Polk-Stephenson: It's in the corner, right where the three—New Jersey, and New York, and it might be Pennsylvania, yeah. Or Ohio, I don't remember. Three states meet in that little corner there.

[00:43:59.20] Q: Think I know where it is(??)

[00:44:00.19] Polk-Stephenson: Northwest.

[00:44:02.15] Q: What other projects did you work on while you were the Director of the Sussex County Health Department(??)

[00:44:06.02] Polk-Stephenson: Yeah. Matter of fact we had—one of our problems was I had to trace back something from this man that almost died from—it turned out that's why he got sick, he was eating fruit in a can that had gone bad. Nobody knew what was wrong with him so I wound up tracing it back to Pennsylvania and having Walmart take it off the shelves everywhere. It was one of the interesting things.

[00:44:41.19] Q: Tell me more about your accomplishments as Director of Sussex County Health Department(??)

[00:44:48.11] Polk-Stephenson: We found a new disease, so that was fun.

[00:44:53.16] Q: Wow! A new disease! Tell me more(??)

[00:44:54.23] Polk-Stephenson: We found a new disease. We worked with CDC [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] on that. I don't remember the name of it but it was some kind of sexually transmitted disease. What else did we do that was interesting? We took in some busloads of people that had gone through [Hurricane] Katrina, so I had to do a lot of public health work with the people on that. Then there was some interesting stuff with the migrant farm workers. We tried to set up a program,

a pilot project to work with them, go to their community centers, their churches, and do blood pressure screenings, and inoculate their children.

[00:45:55.13] Polk-Stephenson: It was a very interesting job.

[00:45:59.13] Q: Tell me more about working with refugees from Hurricane Katrina(??)

[00:46:05.29] Polk-Stephenson: There's not a whole lot that I remember about that. I do remember that we needed to make sure that they were—I guess I'd say to them, "These are people. Do something. You have to give them all the things that public health people are supposed to give them. Not just treat them like scavengers." But I don't remember the specifics, exactly. There was a lot happening at the time.

[00:46:46.02] Q: What else do you remember(??)

[00:46:54.11] Polk-Stephenson: I don't remember. And then we did a bioterrorism exercise. That was the most fun. We did a bioterrorism exercise with Canada and England. It was an exercise. It was set up with the school. I had to work with the school, I had to set up PowerPoints [presentations] to train many different kind of people. Doctors, nurses, pharmacists, just people off the street. Whatever it was, and they all had to basically learn what to do during this exercise. We did it at a school. We had people that were the victims. So it was very interesting.

[00:47:41.27] Q: Say more about how it was interesting for you(??)

[00:47:44.19] Polk-Stephenson: Some people might not think so, but I thought it was (laughs).

[00:47:49.01] Q: Tell me more about what led you to leave this job that you seemed to love; what engaged you and provided you with fascinating issues to work on(??)

[00:47:58.16] Polk-Stephenson: I couldn't do it anymore. I was spending all of my money on airplanes—me or him. And, no, I couldn't do it anymore.

[00:48:09.16] Q: Where was he working(??)

[00:48:11.11] Polk-Stephenson: He was still working in the legislature. Jim Stephenson.

[00:48:15.13] Q: What kind of work was he doing in the Florida Legislature(??)

[00:48:16.16] Polk-Stephenson: Yeah, he was working for, the Florida legislature. He's an IT [information technology] guy.

[00:48:25.16] Q: Then, you moved to Atlanta. Tell me more about your decision to move to Atlanta and your life here(??)

[00:48:34.23] Polk-Stephenson: It's funny. I keep trying to figure out why I like living in a big house with a basement, and a pool table, and anybody that comes, "There's a bedroom for you. There's a bedroom for you, Jenny." (laughs) If you need it! It's because I didn't grow up that way. I grew up in a little box, in Stuyvesant Town. And nobody ever slept at my house from anywhere else, except maybe my grandmother when she was babysitting us. And I grew up in these big playgrounds. It wasn't a bad existence, I mean a lot of people that became famous grew up in Stuyvesant Town, but David—what's his name? Wasn't he Obama's Chief of Staff?

[00:49:22.01] Q: David Axelrod?? [Chief strategist for Barack Obama's presidential campaigns]

[00:49:25.30] Polk-Stephenson: David, yeah. You know who I'm talking about, from Chicago. He grew up in Stuyvesant Town. A lot of people did. So it was a good place to grow up, but I just never had that suburban thing and I like it. I grew my children up in suburbia, and once I could afford to get them out of townhouses—[I did], which was suburban enough for me. I'm happy even though, at my age, a lot

of people are downsizing. And my kids say, “Do you need such a big house, ma?” But, yeah. I want to go out and play tennis. I want the community, it’s a community.

[00:50:07.26] Q: Tell me more about your involvement in the community(??)

[00:50:12.25] Polk-Stephenson: So I was big in the community newsletter, and the social committee, and the communications. You know, the usual. So I do all that stuff and then every now and then I teach. I taught six weeks for biology. Every now and then I get a project—I went and did some work with CDC; I’ve been doing work with CDC over the last eight years—either I’m a contractor or I work for a contractor. They’re short- term projects; that’s the way I like it.

Then in between I get to do my travel agency which I have, which is Safe Harbor Travel. I’m perfectly satisfied. I’m taking care of my mother—I have to pick her up two, three times a week and do something with her. She’s ninety years old. We had a big party for her at the Capitol Grille. She’s doing great. She gets on her bike—you know the bike? She has her little golf cart that she gets around in (laughs).

[00:51:12.03] Q: [_____ (??)]

[00:51:13.29] Polk-Stephenson: And she’s Speedy Gonzales. I worry about her. (laughs). But she’s terrific. “Flowing Rhythm” is the name of her dance class she goes to, twice a week. And this woman, Cheryl, who’s doing this wonderful thing with—you know the people she’s living with over there are practically my age. A lot of them are. It’s just I don’t feel retired, I don’t feel old. When my grandkids were here this weekend it was fabulous, we did everything. The last time we were here we played with them in the pool. I don’t think they ever had so much fun in the pool. We really had a lot of fun. So that’s the way it is.

[00:51:56.13] Q: How old are you grandchildren(??)

[00:52:00.29] Polk-Stephenson: Twelve and almost thirteen. The other one's ten.

[00:52:07.20] Q: [_____(??)]

[00:52:31.10] Polk-Stephenson: I had a guy from Saudi Arabia living with me for a while. Well, this is the story. This is an interesting story. When we were living in Tallahassee and I built my house there, it was very nice. At the time I was working at FSU as the director of research. My son came home from—he went to the University of Florida engineering school but he was at University of West Florida. He came home one day with his roommate and said, “Ma, can Saleh live here for the summer? He’s going to Florida State University English school for international students.” I said, “Sure.” (laughs). My house is open to the world. So he took over where my other son had been—who was in college. And Saleh lived with us and I got to know him pretty well. He was Saudi Arabian. He’s from a very, very, very wealthy family. They own airports and all kinds of stuff. So I learned a lot about Saudi Arabia and a lot about the Saudi people when he was there. He called me his American mom. Anyway, that’s where that came from.

[00:53:53.23] Q: [We’ve talked about your career. Tell me about your experiences, if any, with discrimination as a women(??)]

[00:54:28.03] Polk-Stephenson: I’m trying to think. I’ve never—I’ve not experienced a lot of discrimination as a woman. I sort of bludgeon my way through things, being a New Yorker, and tell it like it is. People down here they just can’t get over the fact—last night somebody was saying, “You know, people in the South, what they try to do is they try to gently tell people something so they don’t

hurt other people's feelings." When they meet a New Yorker, that person just— just tell it like it is. "I don't have time for bull crap. Here it is." And so I've not found too much in the way of discrimination *personally, personally* as a woman. However, I think that it's easier to get a job at CDC if you're a male. But that—I could be wrong.

[00:55:29.03] Q: What about age discrimination(??)

[00:55:31.09] Polk-Stephenson: There is a great deal of discrimination against anybody over fifty-nine in this town. This is a very young city, Atlanta. And that's all I have to say on that now.

[00:55:47.28] Q: [_____ (??)]

[00:56:03.30] Polk-Stephenson: And Maine, and Maine.

[00:56:06.16] Q: Tell me about your political life(??)

[00:56:15.10] Polk-Stephenson: Let me tell you. When I was in Idaho, I got real, "Wahoo, Democrat Party," there. Well first of all, my ex-husband screwed me again. I had this job in Idaho, also, to be in the Epidemiology Department of the local hospital. And I kept telling Eric, my ex, "Well, I should call them and make sure everything's under control, right?" Because it was a few months later before we even moved. "Oh no, don't worry about it, don't worry about it. Don't bother them. I don't want it to reflect on me." And we got there and he had given it away to someone else because he hadn't heard from me. So I was a full-time mother in a big, fancy house and got really involved in Democratic politics, and went to my one and only—what do they call it? Caucus. It was fascinating because it's all determined by who shows up in this room in a school—who's going to go down to the state committee meetings, and everything. It's amazing.

[00:57:21.23] And the other thing, I did go to Pocatello [the county seat], to that [Idaho State Democratic Presidential Convention] and I would have liked to have been a national delegate at that time. But it was sort of pre-arranged. It's like people who are already in power had already decided, "Well, my nephew's going to go, my niece." You know. So it was like hopeless at that point, but that was very interesting. And I've been to state conventions. I was very active, I told you, in Florida. I went to—I have a picture of me with Hillary [Clinton], it's just beautiful. That was when she came down to Tallahassee for breakfast. We had breakfast with her in the State Headquarters on the way down to, I guess it must have been Miami, but I'm not sure—the convention—and I was a delegate down there also. So it's important to be proactive, in my opinion.

[00:58:20.10] Q: What's your involvement, if any, with politics in Atlanta(??)

[00:58:29.00] Polk-Stephenson: I'm secretary of the Gwinnett County Democratic party and the Gwinnett Democratic Women's Chapter of the Democratic Federation of Women. They say, if Gwinnett goes Blue, then Georgia will go Blue. Because we're the largest county in terms of population, and we have a huge immigrant population. We've got a big community of Koreans, Vietnamese, Latinos, we've got all kinds of people here. We've got Africans, we've got a lot of really, really interesting people. The key here is obviously to get people to register to vote, and not only register to vote, then, you got to get them to the polls. And now on-off-year elections—I was taking over for somebody who's in Africa right now as a candidate recruitment person. It's very, very, very difficult to get people to run for office. They don't want to put themselves out. They think it's going to cost a lot of money. Whereas for local elections, you got to start somewhere. So you start in a local election.

[00:59:42.17] You go to a city council. But half the people that go to our committee don't even live in the city limits—they're in the county limits, but not the city limits. So it's very difficult to get anybody

to run. And so we do have one guy that ran and got in because nobody opposed him. We have a few elections that are very, very interesting. They're trying to drive one woman who's not really a Democrat—but she's as Democrat as she's going to get—elected in Norcross and they've driven that *poor woman crazy*. Practically locking her out of office, taking away her duties—I mean the City Council is from the old school and hates her. So now she's got a couple of people running against her, so we don't know. There's a lot of interesting things happening in Atlanta as far as—I worked on Jason Carter's campaign, I worked on—what was her name who ran for governor? A former governor's daughter. Forget it, I forgot it. So it's fun.

[01:00:50.29] Q: _____ (??)

[01:00:55.17] Polk-Stephenson: We'll see.

[01:00:57.19] Q: [Thinking about what you know now, what wisdom or advice would you offer the You that entered Barnard College as a freshman(??)]

[01:01:18.28] Polk-Stephenson: I've said this, again, but I've really thought about this since I said it in the last interview. It's really important when you go into college not to have your mind set on what you're going to do or not do. I really think that I could have gotten so much more out of college had I been more open-minded about what I was going to take in terms of classes. And this whole cheerleading thing which you know about from the last thing [earlier session], I mean that was my opportunity to take something that I knew and make it something. To me it was a really big thing, and it was a really big thing to a lot of other people. *But to Barnard women, it wasn't so great, okay?* Can you explain that to me?

[01:02:09.28] Q: Don't think I can(??)

[01:02:14.01] Polk-Stephenson: Weirdest thing.

[01:02:16.11] Q: And, I acknowledge you for being willing to successfully challenge the sexual discrimination at that time in the Columbia cheerleading squad(??)

[01:02:22.13] Polk-Stephenson: Thanks.

[Insert from session one, March 18, 2015 interview:

POLK-STEPHENSON: You have to understand that it wasn't so much that we needed female cheerleaders as we needed it to be equal. We needed females in the university. Even though it was a college football team or basketball team, it was our university football team or basketball team. We needed to be able to be represented as females on that particular entity. It just fell into my lap in a conversation that I was having with an older alumna and I guess I had some experience doing something about it. This was before "women's lib" [the Women's Liberation Movement]. Women's lib did not exist at that time. I had never in my life been treated as less than a man. I just happened to have a very progressive father and a very bright and intelligent mother. I went through school being bright enough as the best of them, male or female. I went to all-girls high school, so I was never treated less than a man or discriminated [against as a] female. I was aware that men basically ruled the universe at that point in terms of corporations, presidents, and universities, and all that kind of stuff.

I was aware we needed to do something about it, but nothing had really coalesced yet, except that at Barnard there was always a feeling that women were, if not superior, at least on par with men and we weren't going to let them get away with it anymore. So anyway, this thing slipped into my lap. It was a day of protest and I was a protestor, because I didn't want things to continue the way they had been and I felt that women had just as much right to stand up there and cheer for our university as did men.

I did start the cheerleading squad and I wrote a letter to Kenneth Germaine, director of athletics, on May 5, 1969, and explained that I was a sophomore and that for the past two years I had been gathering information to start a cheerleading squad. I also wrote to, because I had been told that the Ivy League did not allow female cheerleaders, Harvard University—Baron Pittenger, who was director of sports information. He wrote, “Your performance concerning Ivy rules and Ivy office is an error. There is no league office nor is there a league rule that prohibits girl cheerleaders. Each college is independent to make its own decision. There are not any girl cheerleaders in the league yet, but I suspect there will be before long.”

Then we started it and I got another friend, a gal named Karen Rosa, to help me a little bit. I had the boys behind me and many articles came out of the sports information office, September 10th, 1969: “Girls Break Sex Barrier as Columbia Cheerleaders,” “Another Bastion of Male Domination has Fallen,” “Bars Down, Girls Add to Lion’s Cheers” (*The NY Times*), “Lion Cheerleaders Welcome Invasion by Andrea’s Army,” “Queen’s Girl Wins Fight to Cheer for Columbia,” [and] “Leggy Lovelies Lead Lion Cheers.” It was really fun and important.

There were a lot of different articles and various newspapers about it. I did the *Spectator* prophets. At the back of the *Spectator*, I don’t know if they still have it, but they allow you to become a “prophet” about who will win the game the next week, so I was one of those. It was a fun time and I think a significant time. Fortunately, the women’s movement at Barnard was progressing and people were being taught by people like Katherine Stimpson and others. We had enough. We had enough of the Vietnam War. We had enough of the way women had been treated by corporate America and by chauvinistic men in marriages. We had enough of being glossed over as not as important to our society and to our economy, and places like Barnard were ready to fight for our rights all over the country.]

[01:02:23.14] Q: [Tell me a little about your thoughts about retirement. Any plans for retirement, etc(??)]

[01:02:41.20] Polk-Stephenson: I can't wait until my husband retires.

[01:02:48.11] Q: [Say more. What are your thoughts about what you'd like to do once your husband retires(??)]

[01:02:52.02] Polk-Stephenson: I don't know but it will be done in a bathing suit, that's all I know (laughs).

[01:02:56.21] Q: [_____ (??)]

[01:02:57.00] Polk-Stephenson: In a bathing suit.

[01:02:59.10] Q: _____ (??)

[01:03:03.00] Polk-Stephenson: I hope so. No, we're trying to get more fit, and that's on the agenda. Plus everybody's got the losing weight thing. But in terms of what I want to do—I volunteered to be part of the committee for our reunion because some of the stuff that they do in reunions, that I've been to at least, they're a little hokey, you know? I could do without. I don't think they're going to need me because I'm here and they're there and they can do all the work. But if they need me I'm here to help with whatever suggestions.

[01:03:44.03] Q: [Great. We have a Class Reunion Planning call soon. I'd love for you to join the 45th Reunion Planning Team(??)]

[01:03:46.24] Polk-Stephenson: Oh, there's a call? Well nobody said anything. I wrote to her and said I'd be interested. I'm very interested in coming to the reunion but I just hope it's not a—it's hard for

people coming from far away. There's nobody left there, other than my friend, maybe, that can offer me a place to stay. Are we going to be able to stay in the dorms? And I want to bring my husband, so can he stay in the dorm? And if I bring my mother will she be able to stay in the dorm?

[01:04:23.21] Q: I think so. Barnard opens the dorms to Alumnae for the weekend(??)

[01:04:30.05] Polk-Stephenson: Well, she actually wouldn't even have to stay with us, she could stay with an aunt or something. She doesn't even have to come to the reunion, necessarily. But I'll get her up there.

[01:04:43.11] Q: What wisdom would you like to share with young women of today and the future(??)

[01:05:02.00] Polk-Stephenson: I think it's very important for everybody to be involved politically. If we're not involved then the next person's involved. And I think laws and things like that are very important. I wish I had become a lawyer. I think that would have been fun—I would have had a better handle on things. I think just not to be afraid to try new things all the time: try new things all the time. And respect everybody. Everybody has something really great to offer you. And once again, beauty is only skin deep. That's for sure.

[01:05:52.14] Q: And, an administrative detail: I need you to sign and return the Interviewee Release Form as soon as we end this interview(??)

[01:06:14.00] Polk-Stephenson: Okay. So what's your fax number? Oh, you don't have a fax?

[01:06:20.04] Q: No. You can scan it and then email a copy to me(??)

[01:06:21.22] Polk-Stephenson: And send it to you?

[01:06:23.08] Q: Yes(??)

[01:06:31.17] Polk-Stephenson: I'm sorry I'm not more interesting, that's all I can say. (laughs)

[01:06:35.23] Q: I think you've had a very interesting life and made some wonderful contributions in the field of public health. Thank you so much for being willing to share your story with women and scholars, today and those of future generations(??)

[01:07:01.23] Polk-Stephenson: Well, you're welcome, and thank you for taking the time to bother doing this.

[01:07:06.24] Q: My pleasure(??)

[01:07:12.07] Polk-Stephenson: I think so.

[01:07:13.23] Q: [_____(??)]

[01:07:23.00] Polk-Stephenson: You too, bye-bye. I can't get over this. I'll tell you the truth. I really can't.

[01:07:25.02] Q: Say more(??)

[01:07:26.00] Polk-Stephenson: Yeah, I love it. It's great, but I don't bother with it most of the time. Just if I need it.[??]

[01:07:32.18] Q: Before we go. For the record, what's the official name you'd like associated with your interview(??)

[01:07:55.21] Polk-Stephenson: That's my legal name, Andrea Polk-Stephenson [spelling]. But I was Andrea Guterman—Andrea Vicky Guterman Polk-Stephenson. With one "t", Guterman. And that's, I guess, how I graduated Barnard. So that's probably on my diploma.

[01:08:15.12] Q: Speaking of Barnard—just want to check—given the amount of college time you missed while you were recovering from your accident, what year did you graduate from Barnard(??)

[01:08:16.26] Polk-Stephenson: Seventy-one.

[01:08:17.22] Q: Wow! That's amazing! You made up all that work you missed!(??)

[01:08:19.21] Polk-Stephenson: Was who I was.

[01:08:23.03] Q: Tell me about your last name: Polk-Stephenson(??)

[01:08:25.06] Polk-Stephenson: My double married name (laughs). My children are Polks, okay? And my husband's a Stephenson. So I changed it to Polk-Stephenson so I have everybody happy (laughs). You haven't told me anything about yourself. Can you just tell me just so I have a feeling?

[01:08:46.13] Q: I'll be glad to share some of my life with you after we finish your interview(??)

[01:08:49.00] Polk-Stephenson: Okay, and then we can go on.

[01:08:51.14] Q: Tell me more about your children and grandchildren and your relationship with them(??)

[01:09:57.00] Polk-Stephenson: I have two boys, okay, from my first marriage, and Woody has married Lorraine and they're both lawyers. They met at Emory. And my two grandchildren are just—they just are my life. One of them is being picked for special stuff at Duke and she's twelve years old. (laughs) You know, special. And the other one—I mean one of them is a brown belt, the other one's a purple belt or something like that in karate. They play violin—they're just the light of my life. They're brilliant, they're wonderful, they're beautiful. I love them, and they're fun, and I'm sorry that you don't have any. But I have a son who is basically an entrepreneur now, he's an engineer—an electrical and

computer engineer. He had some time between jobs so he started up his own company and now the startup, he finally sold something. *He sold something!* Last night, we celebrated last night and now we're not eating breakfast. Because we ate too much! (laughs).

[01:11:08.09] Q: [Congratulations! What does his company produce and sell(??)]

[01:11:16.23] Polk-Stephenson: “Bit” something, it’s called. It’s storage. Enterprise storage, storage for large companies but storage made by an engineer. Not by a computer programmer. So they’ve redone it forty-two different times and—an animation studio is buying it and they’ve got four or five other people that might want it, including a recording studio, so it’s very interesting. But he’s not married, and that’s the problem. We need somebody who is upper twenties or low thirties if you know of anyone.

[01:12:02.21] Q: My daughter, and, she’s too old for him, 44. She lives in the Aspen area of Colorado(??)

[01:12:10.02] Polk-Stephenson: (laughs) That’s just where he wants to move. He loves Colorado or Alaska.

[01:12:17.06] Q: [(??)]

[01:12:20.27] Polk-Stephenson: That’s a good question, I really don’t know. He was born in 1981.

[01:12:27.09] Q: [_____ (??)]

[01:12:29.27] Polk-Stephenson: If you have to say so, I suppose so.

[01:12:32.28] Q: [_____ (??).]

[01:12:35.11] Polk-Stephenson: Got it. You got out early. Seventy-one, eighty-one, right.

[01:12:39.26] Q: No, I dropped out middle of our sophomore year(??)

[01:12:41.30] Polk-Stephenson: So did you finally get a Barnard degree? What did you finally get?

[01:12:46.05] Q: No, I've never graduated from Barnard. I do have an MBA from Columbia Business School(??)

[01:12:47.30] Polk-Stephenson: But that business took you in anyway?

[01:12:50.26] Q: [_____(??)]

[01:12:52.00] Polk-Stephenson: That was pretty slick. How did you manage that?

[01:12:57.14] Q: Don't know for sure because Columbia B School admissions never told me why they accepted me(??)

[01:13:07.01] Polk-Stephenson: So you took over one of the buildings?

[01:13:09.13] Q: I joined the graduate architecture students who had taken over Avery, and, got arrested(??)

[01:13:25.03] Polk-Stephenson: Well, I feel like I participated. I was there at Dodge Hall screaming, and crying, and holding banners, and participating. Did you see the pictures she found of me?

[01:13:35.11] Q: No, I didn't(??)

[01:13:37.19] Polk-Stephenson: It's friggin' unreal. I'm on the steps of Ferris Booth Hall the day after it happened with another young man. And they never knew who that woman was, apparently. And I'm arguing with the policeman about what had happened. It's *iconic*. So I haven't met anybody in all these years who I knew was there, and did it. That's amazing, that's amazing.

[01:14:07.20] Q: There are many of us. Have you attended our B'71 Class Reunions(??)

[01:14:09.28] Polk-Stephenson: I think I've been to two. We never, ever talk about things like that. All they talk about is, this one's married to, this one has—I don't know, that's what I've had happen. And, of course, that's interesting in and of itself. But I always assumed that everybody that I knew in Barnard eventually became against the Vietnam War. Except some of those people that I argued with. I'm pretty active politically. I ran for office, I've done all kinds of things.

[01:14:45.20] Q: Tell me more about your experience running for office(??)

[01:14:49.04] Polk-Stephenson: I don't even want to tell you because I didn't do too well. But it was the best experience, it was a very nice experience. I loved it. In Florida I ran for County Commission in the capital in Tallahassee. It was in the primary. The guy, Cliff Thael who actually won that primary, I had been his campaign manager in two of the previous elections. So it was kind of friend running against friend and it didn't really matter. I just got my words out there and my wisdom out there and for years later, people would say to me, "I really liked that idea of that trolley." Or whatever it was. So it was a very interesting experience. I didn't listen to my campaign manager who actually used to work in the White House. So that was my problem. I thought I knew everything, which shouldn't surprise anybody (laughs). But I now know that I knew nothing (laughs).

[01:15:59.03] Q: When was this(??)

[01:16:01.30] Polk-Stephenson: Oh god, I don't know. Many years ago. Twenty-five years ago, something like that.

[01:16:11.13] Q: [(??)]

[01:16:13.00] Polk-Stephenson: I don't really know. I'll tell you the truth. I'm thinking how old my children were and I can probably figure it from that. (long pause) I don't want you to know about it because I don't want anybody to look it up (laughs). That's all, that's the end of it. Let's just leave it alone.

[01:16:34.02] Q: So—you'd like to not talk about it anymore(??)

[01:16:43.30] Polk-Stephenson: Yes.

[01:16:45.09] Q: At that time particular time, say more about what it was that piqued your interest in running for political office(??)

[01:17:08.17] Polk-Stephenson: At that particular time? I had belonged to the Democratic Party there for a long time because I lived there for twenty years. I think it was transportation that really got my feathers all up in an uproar. And that was one of my big things, was building transportation other than cars. So it was a big one, yeah. The democrat won that seat, so that was good. But I've been involved in politics my entire life because of my parents. I met Eleanor Roosevelt when I was ten. My parents have been Progressives their whole life and knew the Rosenbergs [Julius and Ethel], and went to Progressive [Party] meetings, and did all kinds of things. I'm surprised they didn't get—[have] something happen to them.

And everything about my life has been about trying to change things. And I still try. And so then you try to change things in ways that you're able to and so far as you're willing to go. At the time I just did not want to get arrested what we were just speaking about. But I wanted to express my anger at the whole community thing in South Africa, the war, and it was just a very tumultuous time. So I did it in my way. I mean I thought about going into the building but I didn't know anyone that was there. I think if I had known somebody I would have gone.

[01:19:12.29] Q: Tell me more about what you remember about your parents' Progressive politics(??)

[01:19:34.30] Polk-Stephenson: These are hard questions (laugh).

[01:19:36.00] Q: [_____ (??)]

[01:19:36.30] Polk-Stephenson: These are hard questions. (laughs) My parents would always speak about it. As a matter of fact, it wasn't like they were Progressive in the sense that they couldn't vote—they couldn't support a Republican. Because when Mayor [John] Lindsay who was a very good Republican mayor, I believe we worked to support him. I was out there handing out leaflets or whatever I could do when I was a little girl. When I got to junior high I went to demonstrations. Civil Rights was a big thing. And I went to the [Rev. Dr.] Martin Luther King [Jr.] "I had a Dream" speech.

[01:20:25.00] Q: [Tell me more about our experience attending the rally in Washington, DC, during which Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his "I Had a Dream" speech(??)]

[01:20:26.30] Polk-Stephenson: Well, I didn't march. I got in a bus, and they took us there, and I listened to it, and I heard most of it, and I said, "Boy, he can really talk, can't he?" (laughs)

[01:20:40.00] Q: Where were you on the Mall (??)[the National Mall of monuments, museums, and memorials].

01:20:50.27] Polk-Stephenson: It was just really on the side there, a block or two away. I didn't know where I was or what I was doing and I just went with the group. We were told to be back at a certain time, and it had already started, I remember that. I remember being way back on the left. I'm always

looking in the crowd when they show pictures of it because I can sort of see, in my mind, where I was. I remember hearing it and being totally impressed with what I was hearing. And you know, sometimes tears would come. And being oblivious to everybody around me, or the bus, or the time, or whatever. Just being focused on that speech and a speech or two before or after it. It's always been with me. It's here.

[01:21:37.20] Q: Tell me more about it always being with you(??)

[01:21:43.24] Polk-Stephenson: I've just always—I grew up in New York. Here I live in the South and it's a completely different situation.

[01:21:52.12] Q: Tell me more about it being different in the South(??)

[01:21:56.30] Polk-Stephenson: I grew up in New York and I live in Atlanta, Georgia. Or near Atlanta, Georgia. And it's a completely different situation. I never looked at people's faces and said that they're —skin color is just like eye color. It's no different and that's the way I've always been, and the fact that there were horrible things happening during the Civil Rights Movement and before that, and everything else, was abhorrent to me. So I just wanted to come out and be a face in the crowd and give my respect to the movement.

[01:22:38.24] Q: Give your respect to the movement(??)

[01:22:40.30] Polk-Stephenson: Who knew that it—I didn't know I was seeing an iconic speech. I had no idea.

[01:22:48.03] Q: What other political events do you remember while you were growing up(??)

[01:23:03.30] Polk-Stephenson: I remember when President Kennedy came—I don't know whether that was late teens. It was, maybe sixty-two or so. Sixty-one, sixty-two, I don't know. When he came

down Fourteenth Street and standing outside waving at him and Jackie in the convertible—whatever it was. That I remember. And my sister remembers it. She was a little older than me but she remembers she was on somebody's shoulders. And I remember all the horrible assassinations. What else did I do politically? I don't think I did a whole lot. I went to Hunter College High School and I remember I'd be in the stairwell arguing with people about the Vietnam War. I mean the gal who turned out to be my friend for life, Miriam Salholz. And people who all turned out to be very liberal and everything—not everybody was against the Vietnam War way, way back then in the early sixties. I remember just arguing with people about it for many years. But politically I don't think—it never occurred to me to run for student council. Like I mentioned to my granddaughter, Morgan. I said, “Why don't you run for student council?” She's in sixth grade, right? That's junior high today. She said, well, she can't because she doesn't have time because she doesn't have time for this, that, and the other thing, and they needed a certain day, but she's thinking of running for president—class president (laughs).

[01:24:34.12] Q: Your grand-daughter is running for class president. How great(??)

[01:24:47.12] Polk-Stephenson: I hope so. She just yesterday she got her Brown Belt—child Brown Belt—and she did seventy sit-ups and thirty push-ups. And so I said to her mother, “She's going to be real ready for the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] by the time she gets to college.” With Duke already practically recruiting her (laughs). So god only knows what's going to be in the future. Nobody knows! (laughs)!

[01:25:18.19] Q: Thank you for sharing your political involvement through out your life. I'd like to shift to your spiritual and religious life—growing up, in your adult life, now, etc. (??)

[01:25:27.30] Polk-Stephenson: Well, my dad decided he hated religion because of being brought up too religious. Then he didn't like his father much—but I loved him. And my mother wasn't brought up

in any particular religion. And they met, and they were beautiful, and they were young. It happens. And we all get old.

[01:25:56.19] Q: Say more about your Dad's religious upbringing(??)

[01:26:04.06] Polk-Stephenson: Dad was brought up as an Orthodox Jew, my mother was brought up by her German grandmother with nothing.

[01:26:18.19] Q: [_____(??)]

[01:26:28.30] Polk-Stephenson: They were here for many, many years—we're pure Yankees. We've been here since—we have pictures of the family, we had people in the Civil War—for the North, might I add (laughs).

[01:26:45.01] Q: [When did they emigrate(??)]

[01:26:53.04] Polk-Stephenson: Mid-eighteen hundreds I would guess. I'm guessing.

[01:26:56.19] Q: What did your Dad do(??)

[01:27:03.30] Polk-Stephenson: He was a buyer in the Garment District. So fashion was what we were all about (laughs). And mom was a stay-at-home—well, she used to work for the ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union] but before us. Years later when we moved from Stuyvesant Town to Queens she became a school secretary, and she retired after about thirty years with a very nice pension, etc. She was the principal's secretary for many years in a big high school in Queens.

[01:27:40.29] Q: [_____(??)]

[01:27:45.10] Polk-Stephenson: Dad went to University of Nevada and played football with people who became professional football players. Now he wasn't such a great, tall guy. He got pummeled. He

had a leather helmet that he wore. He'd go to the side with a concussion. They'd let him sit for a minute and then they'd say, "Go back in." Yeah, he was a running back and he got pummeled. He wanted to be a doctor, but he never finished because when he came back to NYU [New York University], I guess the war was on and he worked in the war industry. He worked for a very, very top secret—supposedly—medical firm. He walked around helping test uranium in his bare hands—he walked around with uranium in his bare hands—and helped build the bomb, I guess.

[01:28:47.15] Q: Carried uranium in his bare hands! Wow(??)

[01:28:48.15] Polk-Stephenson: I don't know whether he knew what he was doing but the Vice President of the United States came there once a week, that's all I can tell you.

[01:28:55.00] Q: Sounds top secret(??)

[01:28:56.03] Polk-Stephenson: (laughs) And Oppenheimer. They all were there. In and out, in and out. It was top secret, it was a French-Canadian-American firm, supposedly. But I'm not going to talk any more about it or where it was because—I don't think I should.

[Phone rings]

[01:29:16.21] Polk-Stephenson: Jim! (laughs) Secretary! (laughs)

[01:29:22.02] Q: Earlier you mentioned that your parents knew the Rosenbergs. Tell me what you remember about that(??)

[01:29:30.05] Polk-Stephenson: I don't think they were good friends, but they used to go to these Progressive meetings. I was told once that they met. As a matter of fact my friend Miriam showed me in the village the window of the town house—that still exists—where they used to sit and type. Supposedly the typewriter was taken from there. I don't know the whole story.

[01:29:56.29] Q: Thank you so much for being willing to share your story with me and women of today and future generations(??)

[01:30:20:13] [End of recording]

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