

BARNARD COLLEGE CLASS OF 1971 ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

The Reminiscences of
Victoria Taylor Robertson

2014

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Victoria Taylor Robertson conducted by Michelle Patrick and Robert Solomon on January 15 and February 26, 2011. 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.

Barnard Class of 1971 Oral History Collection Session One
Interviewee: Victoria Taylor Robertson Location: New York, New York
Interviewer: Michelle Patrick and Robert Date: January 15, 2011
Solomon

Robertson: I majored in biology at Barnard [College].

Q: September 1967, your parents drive you up to the gates, or whatever. You remember they gave us a flower, we went into our rooms. What were you feeling? What were you expecting?

Robertson: I remember being pretty excited about going away to college. I was the oldest of five, and I was interested in a lot of things and excited about going away. I had a boyfriend, and he was going to school on Staten Island, so that wasn't a wrenching thing because I was able to see him. And, I was just really excited about going to Barnard.

Q: Was it being outside the parental home?

Robertson: Yes, and also just ready to move on with my life. I think I had an experience, which led me to Barnard actually, between my junior and senior year of high school. I went and did service work with American Friends Service Committee building housing, repairing housing, in the slums of Indianapolis. And, one of the leaders of the group that I was in—there were twenty-one young people, and then four leaders, and one of the leaders was a woman named Sally St. John, who actually went to Barnard. I never heard of Barnard before, and when she talked about

it, I decided I wanted to go there, and my guidance counselor was, “Where, huh, what?” like nobody from my school—

Q: Really?

Robertson: Well, one other girl who was, everybody thought, quite strange, went to Barnard from the high school.

Q: Strange in what way?

Robertson: Well, she was a little different, you know. I come—I came from an upper middle-class, you know, Villager-clad community, in suburban New Jersey. But, anyway, I got in, and I went up there, and I looked at it, and I decided it would be a good fit, and I was excited. I just remember being, you know, real excited about getting on with—because I had already kind of been away from home, so I was ready to make that step.

Q: Was that social service-oriented a family thing, or personal?

Robertson: I think I had a lot of—my grandfather was a Quaker, and I was very upset about the war, as were my parents, and they had this sort of peace center in one of the areas of town that was run by the Quakers, and that’s how I got involved with the service work that I did the summer before my senior year. So, I was already sort of on that path

[Interruption]

Q: I remember the day that on College Walk they set up tables for extracurricular activities, and they had SAS [Student Afro Society], and SDS [Students for a Democratic Society] come. Did you sign-up for any of the—

Robertson: Didn't. I—

Q: You didn't sign up for any of those?

Robertson: I got—I don't know whether I signed-up for it, but I was very involved in most of my years at Barnard with the work at Earl Hall, which is where all the religious—it was right—do you know what I'm talking about?

Q: No, I don't.

Robertson: Okay, right across the street from Barnard, directly across from the entrance to the college, the gate, was a paired building to the chapel that was on the other side of the library. It was a round building.

Q: Okay, right.

Robertson: And, all of the religious groups were housed in there. There was a Catholic priest who was the chaplain at the university, Jim Ray, and then there were people, Unitarians and Quakers, group that I kind of hung out with. And, I think that my work, such as it was, at the college in that area was largely out of that religious com[unity]—you know, the religious—

Q: Came with a strong Quaker background and values.

Robertson: Yes, I mean, my parents were Unitarians at the time, but I got involved with the Quakers because of the war, and I've been a Quaker now for over thirty years. I went back—I live in my hometown now still, and I'm still involved with the Quakers very, very seriously.

Q: What were you doing in terms of the war at the time that you entered in '67?

Robertson: I attended street protests in Philadelphia and Indianapolis when I was there, and then later came back, and, you know, my parents did, my dad took my sister down—I went to a lot of Washington peace marches. While I was at Barnard I had some friends at GW [George Washington University], and I would stay with them. So I pretty much did that throughout my college career, both women's rights things, and the peace marches.

Q: Women's right as early as '67?

Robertson: Yes, and also you know civil rights stuff, and the war. I don't know whether I was—I just was concerned with all those things, and so I traveled.

Q: Was political consciousness as high at Columbia [University] as you had anticipated?

Robertson: Yes, I mean, it seemed to not be that heavily—there was so much the first semester I couldn't take it all in, you know what I mean?

Q: Could you expand on that?

Robertson: There was so much to get used to with the schedule, and roommates, and making friends, and I didn't—I don't think that I was looking as hard at extracurriculars at that time, and then later I got involved in very few extracurricular activities other than the work at Earl Hall.

Robertson: Yes, at the religious center with the Quakers and with the Unitarians.

Q: You want to talk a little bit more about that work, what it consisted of?

Robertson: Well, we did, we did some collections, we did like a money for groups that needed it. We met and talked about stuff, we had sort of little protests from time to time, and we were a group that made signs and went, if there was a war protest we would go to it, and stuff like that. I

mean, we, those were really—like, I didn't get involved in student government at Barnard, was sort of on the periphery on that, and mainly involved with those groups at Earl Hall.

Q: Was there a time that those groups at Earl Hall became more radical than you were comfortable with, or that you were radicalized, in other words the straight line, or was there some sort of peaking, or accelerating of—

Robertson: I don't think I ever really stepped outside the boundaries of what I thought was appropriate politically. I didn't, I wasn't a kind of person who was very radical. I remember going to, I think there were some things that, not the first semester, but the second semester after the [11:00 prom] we had. Then in '70 also, after the strike, and occupation of buildings, and all that, that we had a lot of people come to the campus The Grateful Dead came, and some radicals, I think Bobby Seal came, there were lots and lots of people that came. Some of the stuff that they said was too, too radical for me. So, I was never attracted to even SDS particularly. Like, the idea was fine, but the people turned me off, because I guess I was coming at it from more of a religious perspective. Not a traditionally religious perspective, but—and, I certainly, I got very upset at some of the stuff that was said about the women involved in the movement. I remember being in a rally one time—I think I left, because some guy was saying, “The only appropriate place for women in this movement is on their backs, and you're supposed to put out for the guys that are on our side,” and I thought what kind of self-serving expletive deleted is *that*? I thought it was awful, even when I was still an undergraduate. So, I didn't. I mean, the only things that I did that I sort of regret are getting very mildly involved with smoking marijuana, and stuff like

that, but I didn't even go crazy with that. Some of my friends had made different choices, but I'm the sort of—I'm a little—I'm a cautious person, I guess.

Q: Did you take part in the strike?

Robertson: I was not—I climbed out windows, and went that night that they occupied the buildings, and I was sympathetic with them, and I ran from the police, and got chased by horse police, and stuff like that, but I didn't, I wasn't screaming at the police, or anything like that.

Q: But did you occupy one of the buildings?

Robertson: No, I did not.

Q: You just happened to be there the night—

Robertson: We were on campus, I mean, there were—we left the building, and then another time we also went over, like the first night we went over just to be outside, because of what was going on, and then in '70 I also remember going over to, you know, I remember going over at night a lot. The first time we had to sneak out, because that was—we were climbing out windows of the dormitories, as I recall. I'm sure it was, I was dropping down on to—

Q: Because?

Robertson: Because we weren't—because we had parietals, and we weren't allowed to leave, and stuff like that. And, yes, I think, but I'm not, I'm just not a person who ever hit anybody, or screamed terrible things at the police.

Q: And that was your perception of most of the strikers.

Robertson: Yes, I think that there was a wide range of people involved in both '68 and '70. That there were people who were sympathetic to the principles of it, but disagreed with some of the strategies of it. And, I think, I mean that's not surprising to me, that people approach it differently. I was definitely in sympathy with what they were doing, but I don't, I'm not a fighter, or a—

Q: How far were you thinking you would go in protest of the war?

Robertson: I would stand and, you know, have my body counted, I would write to a Congressman, I would—and, then in '70 when the kids from Kent State were shot, I wrote for the *Why We Strike* Barnard pamphlet when Barnard decided to strike, and I wrote in favor of that. So I guess that was pretty objectionable to some of the people at the college.

Q: Did you find yourself in conflict with friends that you had made over political issues?

Robertson: No. I think that people who really disagreed with one another maybe became involved with different groups. Like, I think there were people at Barnard in our class who—and, we had many commuters, there were a lot of people who were going home at night during those years. So, I don't think they had quite the same experience as those who were on campus all the time did. But, I didn't feel that there was a lot of, like, fussing at each other. I mean, maybe I wasn't there for it, but I didn't feel that there was a lot of fuss—wasn't a lot of that. I think we each took different paths around those issues, and I think most people were in sympathy with the anti-war, most people were in sympathy with the women's rights stuff, but not everybody, I'm sure it wasn't everybody. But, with my friends there wasn't a lot of conflict. Some people weren't as involved as I was, but they didn't look down at me, or yell at me, I don't remember that they did.

Q: Did you feel any racial polarization around the strike and Hamilton Hall being separate from the other—

Robertson: Yes, I was always worried about racial stuff, always, always, like throughout all of it. And, again, even before I came to Barnard I was very aware, and concerned about—I mean even work—I did work camps in Philadelphia with Quakers youth groups and stuff, and I did that long-term one in Indianapolis. I was watching people in poverty, and people who were very different from me. I had the experience of being one of the few White people in a Black ghetto when we were working there, and I was always worried about that, since I was a little girl.

Q: Civil rights, human rights?

Robertson: Yes. And, in my community we—the community I grew up in was, you know, very racially integrated, even though it was an upper middle-class town, we had a large Black community, and the schools were integrated a couple years before I was born in New Jersey, in '48, or something like that. And, so I had lot of Black teachers, and Black classmates, and I didn't worry about—I mean I wasn't, you know, I didn't have a problem going to school with Black people, or being with Black people, or having friends, you know. So, I was mad at all that stuff that I learned as I got to be a teenager, about what was going on in the South, and what was, you know—I got mad at it.

Q: In terms of what was going on at Barnard, did you sense at a certain point that there was a bit of racial polarization between Barnard girls?

Robertson: Yes, I did, I thought—but, I also thought that in some ways it was important for the African American people to find a voice, you know, at Barnard and elsewhere. So, I didn't really take it personally. I didn't feel like because there were the socialist organization or the Black fraternities—I didn't feel like that was directed at me, I just felt that was important as far as gaining power, and gaining a voice, and I thought it *was* polarized, but I sort of, I sort of tried to ignore it. Not ignore it in the sense that—I just didn't want to be on one side or the other of that, you know, I didn't want to be—

Q: So, how did you avoid being on one side?

Robertson: I just tried to be a person to the people that lived near me, or who were in my classes, or whatever race or religion they were. I mean I just, I just, I tried to be who I was, and let other people be who they were. I wasn't resentful of people being angry. I didn't think—I had a problem with White people being angry, but I didn't have a problem with Black people trying to—maybe saying stuff, or being upset about stuff, of how they were treated at Barnard, or how they were treated in the university community, or how they were treated in the world at large. That was good that they were upset, and saying out, "I'm not taking it anymore," you know, that was fine with me.

Q: Who was your first friend at Barnard?

Robertson: Well, my first friend is still my best friend from Barnard, it's a girl that I roomed with. Joanie [Joan Wickler] was very different from me, she grew up near where I grew up, she grew up in Pennsylvania, but she was very into theater, and I was like Miss Prepped Out, blah blah blah, you know, and when you looked at us you would have thought, "Oh my God, they would never be friends," but we were roommates, and we just clicked emotionally, intellectually. I roomed with [her] for years, and even after we graduated from Barnard, and graduate school we roomed together up in Boston. I still—she lives in Oregon now, but we still keep in touch and are great friends.

Q: Where is the hurt coming from?

Robertson: Well, Joanie and I struggled with stuff individually and supported each other. I remember we were in Boston, and she told me, she said, “You know, I’ve decided that I really am gay, or you know, that I really do prefer women,” and stuff like that. We were rooming together, and I said, “Joan, why do you want to take that on?” like I thought, “Oh, because there’s a world of hurt, you know, and people,” and she said, “Don’t worry, I can do it.” And, she did, and she’s good, she’s got a lovely partner, and she became a doctor—oh, that’s another thing, she used to make fun of me for studying, and I was pre-med, that I never made it, but she was an English major that was in theater, and she left Barnard and went to a prep program, and then went to medical school.

Q: I’m still not getting where the hurt comes from. Are you worried about her, was it?

Robertson: I worry about her, but it’s not just hurt, it’s just a very deep emotional connection that I have to her, it’s not like I sometimes get upset, not because there’s any hurt involved in the relationship, but because it’s such a powerful and long, long relationship.

Q: You're still connected.

Robertson: Absolutely. Yes.

Q: So, you and Joanie—

Robertson: Joan.

Q: Didn't disagree in matters of the strike or—

Robertson: No.

Q: Any other friends that you remember that had a particular influence on you?

Robertson: Well, I still keep also in very good touch with Chris McDonnell. We're close and lifelong friends, and I know her kids, and her husband, and he passed away, and she's a teacher like me. She writes books. She lives in Boston. We're—I keep in touch with those two, and I feel very close to them, emotionally close to them, and we just never lost touch, and they're very important relationships to me, very important.

Q: When you entered Barnard, what did you anticipate your adult life was going to be?

Robertson: I think I did want to be a doctor. I know that I wanted to get married and have babies. I guess I thought I would just get a job and work outside the home, unlike my mom, but then I would have a family, which is [what] I very much wanted.

Q: Your mom didn't work outside the home.

Robertson: Not until my father retired, and all of her five children were raised.

Q: Let's go back. So, essentially you wanted to be a housewife.

Robertson: Well, no, I wanted to be a doc, and I wanted to be able to combine that with having a family. I very much wanted to have a husband and children, and a house, and all that stuff.

Q: And you thought that that would be—

Robertson: Yes—

Q: Something doable at the same time.

Robertson: Yes, I didn't get a lot of support from my family, but there was support out in the world. In other words, there were models, and many at Barnard, there were other people who shared that dream with me, even if I didn't come from a culture that particularly shared that dream.

Q: Was there any point at which you became discouraged about the possibilities of handling, or gaining both goals?

Robertson: Not until I was involved in it, because of course you think you can do anything, but then you find out that things are harder than you think.

Q: Can you expand on that?

Robertson: Well, I mean, I think, if you're pretty smart, and you have been lucky enough to have resources, and you've gotten your degree, and you have a job, and you know, and you say, "Oh, I'm going to add kids to this, other people can do this," and it's a lot harder than you think. It's not undoable. I did it, and I think my girls are fine. I think I'm relatively fine, but it's a lot harder than you think it's going to be to have a career, and also to have a family, and keep a house, and pay attention to your parents, and your community, and your church. It's a lot, it's a lot of balls in the air. And, I didn't come from that model, and so a lot of it was new to me.

Q: At what point did med school drop out of the picture?

Robertson: When I went on strike in 1970, I was taking organic chemistry.

Q: Can you tell that story from the top? Say what the strike was.

Robertson: The strike in 1970. I think there was already a lot of concern about the progress of the war, and there were demonstrations all over in colleges, and stuff like that. And, then when the

kids in Kent State got shot, Barnard went on strike again for the second time in our college years, and I was not having a great time in organic chemistry anyway. So I, in going on strike, went in and met with the professor, and she said, “You can take the exam in the Fall if you want,” or she said, “Or I’ll give you a pass, I don’t think you have a good enough grade to study all summer and take the exam.” I cried a little bit, and then I took the pass. I sort of knew that that meant that I wasn’t going to go to medical school, you know, or I wasn’t going to go then. So, I started casting around for something, because that was pretty late in the game, I should have been taking med cats [Medical College Admission Test] that summer and stuff.

Q: So, it was really a choice between [being] involved in the strike and really putting the pedal to the metal in terms of the—

Robertson: Correct, and I chose the political activity.

Q: Could you say that so that I don’t—

Robertson: Yes, I chose—I guess I was emotionally involved in the war and the strike, and I made a choice, and I knew it was a choice, because that meant that I could not go and do what I had planned to do, and go ahead and go to medical school. By not taking that exam, by taking the pass, the grades weren’t going to be there, the courses weren’t going to be there. And, I couldn’t do without an additional year at Barnard, or an additional someplace, you know, courses someplace else. So I sort of cast about for something else to do, and I came back in the Fall of

my senior year, and Chris McDonnell, who was my friend, was doing a student teaching block at Brandeis High School, in the Spring actually, and she said, “Vicky, why don’t you do it with me?” I said, “I’m not even in the ed program.” She said, “Come on, I don’t want to go down there by myself, you know—” And, I did, and I loved it. And, so that’s what I did. I ended up being a school teacher, a biology teacher, and I love my career, and I’m very glad I did it, and I had a great time.

Q: So, you don’t regret not having gone to—

Robertson: No, I mean, I liked what I taught, I liked biology, so it was interesting to me. But, it was interesting to teach kids as well as practice, or use that information to practice to help other people. And, may I say a lot of my students ended up becoming people in the medical professions.

Q: Your daughters?

Robertson: My girls are thirty-one and twenty-eight; they both went to Barnard, one in the class of 2001, and one in the class of 2004. They did a lot better at Barnard than I did. They didn’t have two strikes. They did a lot better academically than I did at Barnard, and they—Meg went on to teach English in New York, and now she’s in Arkansas, and teaching in a KIPP [Knowledge is Power Program] private charter, KIPP charter school in a very poor area, and she just had a baby, my first grandchild, and he’s a son. Not a Barnard man, I—and then Sarah’s also

a teacher, she teaches history in Southern New Jersey. She's twenty-eight. They're both doing really well, and I'm very pleased with them, and enjoy them and have a good time with them.

Q: You say you came in with a boyfriend that you had through high school, or—?

Robertson: Yes, he was three years of high school, yes, the last three years.

Q: It was a very serious relationship?

Robertson: Yes, yes, and I was sexually involved with him, and when I—I broke up with him midway through the year and got involved with a guy at Columbia and stayed with him through pretty much my senior year.

Q: Did you anticipate that you would marry him?

Robertson: Yes, I did. He wasn't, he wasn't really interested in getting married, and I was leaving to go to grad school, you know, the following year, and so I kind of broke up with him about Christmas of my senior year.

Q: Was that a big heartbreak?

Robertson: Yes, I said—I explained to you before that I just wanted to go through and get my degree and have a family and do all that. It put a little roadblock in the way, but, yes, I was disappointed, but I met another guy, and actually I eventually married the guy I met, who also graduated from Columbia too. Some—I think that the college experience that we had was very disrupted by all of what went on in the world and what went on as far as the college was concerned. We went in there, and we were going to teas, and keeping our door open when we had male visitors and had to be in by one and got demerits and all this other stuff. In one year, that freshman year, everything changed. We came back to a different experience. We came back to an experience where we were, I think, largely on our own, although I don't know if there were support services that I didn't take advantage of, but I had friends getting illegal abortions, we had a hard time [pause]—it was rough.

Q: Could you expand along those lines?

Robertson: I don't think that any—I don't think that my parent's generation, or the administrators of colleges, or high school teachers were prepared for drugs, and the advent of drugs in the high schools, which I think happened, the sexual revolution which happened, the disaffectedness having to do with the racial issue, and the women's issues, and the war, and all this stuff, it made people totally disrespect authority. That was good in a way, because they deserved to be disrespected for certain things, but the problem was that then I feel—and then in my subsequent teaching career, I don't think people got a hold of helping children again until, at least in New Jersey where I was, until the early 80's. So, there was, like, this time from, say, the early 70's,

until like maybe the mid-80's when maybe, and some high schools probably earlier, probably happened in the late 60's, like '69 to '83, like fifteen years, where adults did not know what to do with children who were older, children who were in late high school and college. The kids—I went back to teach in my hometown high school for a while, and they had an open campus. They let kids—they didn't have to come to study hall, they didn't have to come to lunch, the kids were high as kites, and in class, like after lunch it was, like, are you kidding me, you can't teach these kids. You weren't allowed to say anything, because there was no legal protection for the teachers, so that everybody kind of skirted around it.

Anyway, I think they threw the baby out with the bath water, as my grandmother would say. Instead of—you didn't have to be harsh or awful to people who were using drugs, or who were sexually involved, but you didn't [have to] totally abandon your responsibility for being supportive and helpful. And, I feel a lot of people were lost at Columbia and Barnard, because of drugs and because of sexual involvements that led them to get abortions and led them to emotional issues—there wasn't—I think now there's *sort* of support systems for that. My older daughter was involved in a very, very good support system at Columbia. Now they have all kinds of support, and in the latter part of my teacher career, like since the mid-80's, adults and authorities kind of got a hold of it in high schools more. And adults were acting like parents again. But, I just feel that we were the beginning of sort of a lost—I mean—who goes to college with all that we went through, you know? We were children; we didn't think we were. We thought we knew everything, but we were children.

Q: And you're saying that after Spring of '68 we were pretty much children on our own.

Robertson: Exactly right, and we *were* on our own, and they didn't—the adults in that situation—I don't—I'm not faulting them really, they didn't know what to do. It was a seismic change for them. They were used to tea parties, and people saying, "Yes, ma'am, and no ma'am," and hiding everything, not people coming out and saying, "Oh—", you know? They weren't used to it. They didn't know how to deal with. And I really thought that [Martha] Peterson, the president, was very, very supportive, and helpful, but she couldn't take all that on. She was nice to the girls that got in trouble having to do with the strike. She made some changes that were necessary in the college, but they didn't understand that people needed a lot more help and support—and, I say, I don't blame them, it was just a sea change, it was a very tumultuous time to go to school. And, I think especially for girls, but boys also.

Q: This is such an important statement, so I'm going to just belabor it, and ask you to say it again, so that I have a long strip of it without me saying yes, or punctuating it.

Robertson: The girl part.

Q: The going in and having the parietals, and the teas, suddenly all of that disappears, and there are no supports, because the authorities don't know how to respond. If you could just go back to that [pause]—

Robertson: I think that the years that we were at Barnard, and other colleges—I wasn't at other colleges, but I think that those years were not really great years for people to go through academically. And, I think that they lacked some structure, and some support that later students were provided with, and we weren't—because the adults who were in charge of us from our parents to the administrators, to the RAs [resident advisors], to everybody, the people who were in charge of taking care of us had no way of knowing how to deal with the changes that happened. They couldn't deal with drug use. They didn't know how to deal with it, whether it was punitive, or whether you would get support for people. They didn't know how to deal with the sexual freedoms—that no restrictions and no this, and no that involved. And, they were up against it, people were saying to them, “What do you mean I can't live where I want, do what I want?” and stuff like that. I don't blame them for not knowing, I'm just saying that we were left at sea by a series of circumstances that really nobody, our parents, or our schools, or the college administrators, and they didn't know what to do. Some of them approached it intellectually, and some of [them] approached it being supportive.

As I said, I thought President Peterson was very supportive of the girls who were dealing with a lot of the legal issues, and were arrested, and all this other stuff. But, as far as being able to know what to do about drugs, I don't think that happened for a really long time. I think that there's sort of a lost people, say the people born when we were in '48 and '49, up until the people born in '61, or thereabouts. I think up until the early 80's you didn't see the kind of responsible adult response to drugs, and sexual behavior, and other stuff that would have helped us. I think there was a long time when it didn't exist.

Q: Did you ever find yourself at a loss along any of these lines, where you could have used some support from a member of faculty or the health service, or—and you couldn't find it?

Robertson: Sure. I did not stray real far, I'm not a very—I personally am not a very brave person, I don't, I'm not interested in, you know, breaking laws, or putting myself at much risk. So, I used drugs, but I never got really high, I was never selling. I was reasonably self-protective. I was sexually involved, but I wasn't, like, going crazy, involved with tons of people, or I sort of had a handle on it, and even I felt like I could have used a little support at time, but it wasn't there.

Q: What kind of support?

Robertson: I think education about things, like education about drugs, education about relationships. I think support groups. I think counseling availability, these are not things that were available as much they should have been, and as much as they are now for kids that are having issues like that. I'm not blaming anybody, I'm just saying it's what happened, and we were—lots of people have terrible things, I mean, we weren't, we weren't trying to scrape through on the Depression, you know, I mean, other people suffer terribly, but as far as what I wish had happened all over—and I have friends that went to other colleges that had the same problems, it wasn't like Barnard was terribly negligent, it was just they didn't know what to do. How could they know? The world changed in those years really rapidly.

Q: Do you know people who were defeated by those changes?

Robertson: Yes, I briefly dated a guy who did a lot of LSD [Lysergic acid diethylamide] and [got] sent home. His mother had to come get him, he was on Clark 8, and you know, sewing buttons on ice cream, and oh my god, it was—

Q: Clark 8?

Robertson: Yes, it was the, it was the psych ward at St. Luke's [Hospital].

Q: Go back to the top of that story.

Robertson: One of the guys I briefly dated, liked him a lot, he was a very nice boy, and he got into LSD, and he ended up in a psych ward, and his mind was blown, you know. He, I mean, maybe he recovered, I didn't never know what happened to him afterwards, I just know his mom had to come out and get him, and take him back. I have a brother who was damaged by drugs, a younger brother. I think a lot of people made a lot of foolish choices in our culture at that time and hurt themselves. I didn't particularly—because I said I'm cowardly, and I'm not a reckless person, I'm just not. I'm reckless with things I say, but I'm not reckless physically or financially.

Q: The boyfriend, were there other people that—girls—

Robertson: Yes, people, like I said, people who ended up having to get illegal abortions, people who had to drop out of college, people—there was a lot of that, and it was hard. If they were in school today there would be support services for them, which I'm glad there are now, in almost all colleges. You can't prevent everything from happening, but you can have—if people need help there's a place for them to go, and that just wasn't a part of college life then, but it is now, which is good.

Q: How have those experiences affected your own parenting?

Robertson: Oh yes, I was a crazy person about drugs with my girls. Really a nut job.

Q: Go back.

Robertson: Yes, having—well, I not only had my own experience at college, but then I went on to teach for thirty-six years. But, as a parent, both from what I experience in college, and from my teaching, I was very—I wanted, I wanted my kids to think that they could come talk to me about stuff. Like, if you get sexually involved, and you need birth control, or if you get sexually involved, and you think you're pregnant, or if you're taking drugs and are worried about something, I'm not going to hate you for it. Please come and just tell me if you're struggling, you know, like that's the kind of message that I wanted to convey, because I wanted them to get support if they needed it from me. I talked very freely with them about sex, and birth control, and the emotional side of stuff. I don't think that they never had a bad moment, but my mom didn't

do that for me. I didn't feel that if I had gotten pregnant I could go to my mom and say, "Help me," you know. Or, if I had gotten into using drugs, I mean, I don't think that—I tried to let my kids know that I was available, and non-judgmental about that stuff, so that they would not be afraid to come to me if they got—went out on a limb, and were scared about something. I also, you know, tried to model by getting counseling sometimes, and I tried to do those things over the years with their knowledge, I wasn't hiding anything. I'm struggling a little bit, so I'm going to get some help, that kind of thing. I tried to do that. But, I was very, very cranky, and as careful as I could have been about being a parent, like where you go, I mean, I was very much less cosmic than—

Q: Cosmic?

Robertson: Yes, more hovering than maybe I should have been. But I was kind of cranky—and worried.

Q: Talk about how that was different from the house in which you were raised. Did your mother—and what was perceived as acceptable to talk about, or what was assumed, or presumed, or not acknowledged?

Robertson: I don't think, I think my parents were like the administrators of Barnard when the world fell in. They didn't anticipate that they would be discussing things like that with their kids. They, they—they had the world by the tail, they were the post-war generation. They were

making money, and they were—the country was on a roll, and everything was really great, and if you just fed your children and got them in good schools, then everything would be fine.

So I think they felt—I think they worked hard to do what they were supposed to do as parents, but I don't think that they anticipated the drugs, or the sexual activity, or anything like that. I don't think they thought that we would be involved in that. At least I don't think my parents thought that we would get involved in that. Because if they had, they would have said something. They didn't know—I mean, I'm sure they thought, “Oh, well, they'll have a couple beers or something.” They didn't know that there was, like, heroin, and LSD, and all this stuff where, in school—that that's what their kids were facing, and kids didn't tell their parents, you know, so they didn't know. Again, it was ignorance, not lack of love, I feel. I don't resent them for not knowing what they couldn't know, or feel proud of myself for knowing what I did, because my generation participated in all that, so why wouldn't you. So I'm not mad at them, how could they know? They couldn't know.

Q: Was there ever a time during your period at Barnard, that you behaved in a way that shocked yourself?

Robertson: Like I said, I'm not a real risk-taker. I got mad at myself for getting angry. I got mad at myself one time for being pressured into smoking marijuana. At one instance I remember I was mad at myself for doing it, like, going along when I knew I didn't want to.

Q: Can you talk about that instance, being pressured?

Robertson: Well, “Come on, Vicky, put your books away, let’s, you know, let’s have some fun,” and I was mad at myself after I agreed to do that. I was mad, because I didn’t have a good time, I didn’t enjoy myself. I was scared, and I was mad at myself for having been pressured into—again, the people who were pressuring me weren’t mean to me, they were having fun, and wanted me to, put me in such a—you know. So, I don’t, I’m not mad at anybody about it, but—

Q: It was scary. I’m just trying to get to the scary moment.

Robertson: Yes, there were some scary moments, but again, not—as I said, I was very, I was pretty careful. I guess I was always timid, a little bit timid, so I didn’t ever go, like crazy, whole hog doing stuff that I later regretted.

Q: I always sort of think of you as a person you would go to if you're falling through a rabbit hole, like, “Okay, well, find Vicky, she’ll talk you out of it, or she’ll fix it.” Did you find that you played that role for a lot of people? Kind of just the sanity—

Robertson: I don't think a lot of people, but I guess I played the role for some. And, they helped me out. I don't mean that they never had any hard times, but I never, you know, Joanie helped me out a lot in all those years that we lived together, of talking things over with her, and getting her feedback, and she was very sensible, and I hope I was sensible. I think we helped each other,

a lot of us helped each other, our friends. I do that now with my friends, when we talk over our kids, and what did you do when your kid was getting married, and this and that happened, and I'm—we try to be supportive of one another. I felt that that was there, but it was the blind leading the blind a little bit with all of us being twenty-year-old knuckleheads.

Q: So, we've talked about the scary parts, and the violent parts. What are some of the wonderful parts, or were there any wonderful parts, or thrilling parts?

Robertson: I'm really glad that I went to Barnard. I have great friendships, and great memories—

[Interruption]

Q: I was asking you the scary things, and the challenging things, what were the wonderful things?

Robertson: I loved Barnard for many, many reasons. One: I loved New York City. I loved being a place where—to me New York City is like the future. New York City has all different kinds of people, all different kinds of languages, all different kind of socioeconomics. It's just a wonderful place to be, for me. I learned how to navigate around the city, and how to be independent, and I was really glad I went there, and I think my girls are really glad I went there.

The other thing that I think was wonderful was to be in a group of people who love the world of the intellect. I *love* discussing ideas, and that isn't everywhere. I've always had to reign myself in, because I spend time with people in my life who aren't interested in that at all. So, it was just a great time for me, both as an undergraduate, and still in my friendships with the people that I met there, to talk about ideas, and trends, and what's going on in the world, and what do you think, and what can be done, and it was just a very exciting time.

Also, the level of scholarship was wonderful. The teaching was wonderful, what we were required to understand was wonderful. I loved my classes there—and into a world where women were asking more of themselves, and more of each other, and asking for more of the pie sort of as far as money, and jobs, and respect, intellectual respect and stuff. And, it was nice to have people that were on your team for that, that weren't trying to say you're too strident in conversation, or don't get a second degree, because that will make you less marriage-eligible, or whatever. There weren't people trying to discourage you from intellectual pursuits or accomplishments. On the contrary, people were trying to encourage you to fulfill your dreams professionally and intellectually. So I felt like I had company, I had support, great faculty, relatively small classes. It was just a lovely place to be. I often wish that I had attended it at another time, because I certainly would have done better in my classes without all of the disruptions that those two springs involved.

Q: If you could go back to that first day in 1967, and whisper words of wisdom to that young girl walking through those gates, what would it be?

Robertson: This is really stupid, but I don't think I would have been able to, or maybe even necessarily want to do things any differently than happened. I'd say sometimes—you know, sometimes I wish I'd gone ahead and become the doc, and done that, but I have a bunch of friends that are doctors, and I don't think that their lives are any more satisfying than mine. So, I don't wish it in that sense, it was such an important time to learn, and I didn't do enough learning during that period. But I was lucky in that I found a career, which my friend made fun of me about, one of the people I teach with, said, "Vicky, why did you pick biology, which has changed more during your career than any other subject that you—" So, I actually picked a subject to study that I could—or, to teach that I had to study, like, the whole rest of my life, so, because so much has changed in the field that I couldn't even teach it without studying. So, I guess if I had to talk to that little girl who was going there I would say—I don't know whether I *could* give her any advice, I really don't, because you have to kind of roll with it, you kind of have to go along with what your experience throws at you, what things are thrown at you, you can't go back and reduce stuff. I mean, maybe if had really hated teaching, or if I, maybe I would have refrained [from] going back to school. But, I really, even with all its warts, my life is just pretty fine, you know?

Q: Most of us just in the last couple of years have turned sixty, and I don't feel that our mothers' generation is a model for being sixty. Where do you think you are now? How would you define it? What your hopes, plans, are you coasting, is there anything that you're afraid of? Do you feel this period as a distinct period in your life, or do you see it more as a continuum?

Robertson: Well, I think the life right now for me is pretty complicated. My parents are both still alive, and Phil's parents are still alive, so we spend some time—not caring for so much, but, Phil more than I—doing things with and for our parents. So, we're in a caretaker role, even though our kids are on their own. I'm enjoying watching my girls get older, and now being a grandmom, I'm enjoying that, and that's not going to go away, you know. So, I really like the—I'm retired now from teaching, but we have to face different things. You have to face your own aging, the aging of your parents, your children really leaving home, going off and living some place where you can't see them very often. All those things are things that other people have faced, and I think if I have a goal it's to serve my community with the time and energy that I have, finances that I have, and to serve my family, and to be gracious.

Q: Tell me what you mean by gracious.

Robertson: I mean that I'm sort of calm, that I'm not jumping up and getting all rabid and excited about stuff in a negative way, do you know what I mean? I don't mind being excited about positive stuff, but I really—I don't want to spend whatever time I have left being negative, you know, I want to be a positive force, and I want to be calm and helpful and set a good example for my girls.

Q: Is there anything I missed that you want to add, you feel strongly about? A memory that stands out in your mind?

Robertson: I don't think so. No, I think, you know, I think that the questions that I've tried to answer have been good ones, and I think that the project is good, and I'll be interested to see.

Solomon: How would you compare and contrast the political environment then, and kind of the right wing 60's we're kind of going through now?

Robertson: Yes, I think that—

[Interruption]

I think that the political climate has a desperation about it now that it didn't back then. I think the kids were kind of desperate, and people were fussing over the children, lack of respect for authority, and stuff like this, but I think that the political conflicts that are going on now are not as specific, not—I think the political conflicts that are going on now are *really* hard questions about wealth, and resources, and stuff like that, that aren't going to be answered by a peace treaty, or women being given equal rights to men, or anything. These are—the problems that we're facing, and the difference between people who want to face them, and people who want to go back to the old way to make it like it used to be, it's a *big*, really, really tough, tough [fuss], and—I don't—I mean, I see answers out there, but the answer is going to involve all the countries of the world, and all the political ploys, and everyone cooperating, which I don't see, I'm kind of discouraged by it, actually. But, maybe there were grown-ups that were discouraged

when the cities were burning in the 60's, and—I think the issue is that we're dealing with right now are not solvable without huge amounts of cooperation, and I think the other ones were. How do you get all the countries of the world to agree to cut carbon emissions? How do you resolve the differences between the terrible wealth and poverty in our world? These are *enormous*, enormous questions, and people are afraid, and they are unwilling to sacrifice.

Solomon: What about the younger generation then and now? Like, the kids just starting college now?

Robertson: I think the kids in college are, a lot of kids in college are less racist, less homophobic, less than their parent's generation, or their grandparent's generation. So, I think all *that's* good. But, I don't think that—I think that they're more, they're more cynical about solving the problems of the world than we were, and maybe they're right, but I sort of wish they would be more active in promoting the things that I think are the solutions, which is sort of a redistribution of wealth and resources, and conservation, and use of all those things. So I hope that they do—but they *need* our generation to facilitate that through funding, and collaboration with other countries. And, other generation is still in charge.

[Interruption]

Our generation's still in charge, and I think that they're not doing that good a job in the areas that I'm talking about.

[END OF SESSION ONE]

Barnard Class of 1971 Oral History Collection Session Two
Interviewee: Victoria Taylor Robertson Location: New York, New York
Interviewer: Michelle Patrick and Robert Solomon Date: February 26, 2011

[Tape was broken. Lost somewhere here at the top is the mention of the death of Vicky's younger brother.]

Q: Did it have an altering impact on your family?

Robertson: Oh, yes.

Q: Would you mind talking about it?

Robertson: I think I can talk about it.

Q: You talked about your first friend, and your first roommate, but we want to do that again to take the name out.

Robertson: And the abortion question.

Q: Did you experience any culture shock during the first few months at Barnard?

Robertson: I don't think so, just being on my own.

Q: Was there something that was difficult or painful about being on your own for the first time?

Robertson: You know, and it wasn't that I was on my own, I mean I went away in the summer to some camps. I went to the Quaker work camp during the summer of '66; I spent the whole summer in Indianapolis with no one I knew in the beginning.

Q: So, it wasn't like your first—We've talked about the war. Did you or anyone you know have an illegal abortion?

Robertson: Yes, that question.

Q: Okay, because I wanted to get to pre-Roe [v.] Wade thing.

Robertson: That was my protest, so we still were out there trying to help them.

[Crosstalk]

Q: These are dippy Barbara Walters questions, but sometimes you elicit something interesting.

When at Barnard were you happiest? When at Barnard were you least happy? When in life have

you been least happy? When in life have you been most happy? What are you doing now, what do you hope to be doing in the future? Did you sum up your career for me?

Robertson: I think I talked about my career.

Q: Were there any obstacles in forging your career?

Robertson: Not really.

Q: So, it was a pretty comfortable fit?

Robertson: Yes, I got turned down for a job, a little better job, but it turned out to be a very good thing I did, so it's like—

Q: Is it a story, do you want to tell it?

Robertson: No, I mean, it's just a minor story, but I did at one point try to move into a more highly-paid supervisory position, and I didn't get the job, and I ended up being very glad that I hadn't.

Q: Anything else that you feel strongly about, or you think might be an interesting story that you would want to tell?

Robertson: I think that I was a pretty classic middle-class white girl in a bourgeois era.

Q: Some of them went in classic white liberal girls, and in the liberal era came out Josie Duke—well, Josie wasn't exactly the classic, but came out real different. Katherine did not graduate from Barnard. She went straight from a year and a half at Barnard, to getting married, having a baby, having various jobs, to Columbia B[usiness] school. She walked in and said, "Look, I don't have time for a B.A., just give me any test you want, I have to support my daughter," they gave her ten tests and said, "Okay."

I neglected to ask you about the brother you had who died of leukemia. Do you want to talk about how that altered the family dynamic?

Robertson: Yes, I think it did have an—I think the death of my brother had a big impact on the family. My mom and dad were in their early thirties, and I was I guess just eleven when he was diagnosed, and he was the fourth, and I the first of the children in my family. So, when he got sick we had a new baby in the family, the fifth child, and—so, the dynamic was you have five kids under eleven, and the one who's five gets diagnosed with acute leukemia. My mom spent a lot of time going back-and-forth to the hospital with him, and my grandmothers, you know, came and went, and tried to help out and everything, but I had a huge responsibility, especially from my youngest brother, the baby. And—

Q: You were the oldest child.

Robertson: Because I was the oldest child, yes. So that the dynamic in my family was sort of I was the bossy older sister, and I think that that wouldn't have been as pronounced. I think it wouldn't have been as pronounced without the terrible ten months or whatever it took my brother to die, going back-and-forth to the hospital. My parents did not tell us—they didn't want him to know, so they didn't tell us, and—

Q: That he was dying.

Robertson: That he was dying.

Q: Just that he was sick?

Robertson: Yes, and they said it was anemia, and they tried to fool us, and I was getting, I guess my mom says I was becoming a pretty hard questioner, and it was hard for her to lie to me, but she—they managed to—it was to protect him. I also know that now if there's a situation like that, where a child in a family is dying, there's all kinds of offers of support, and helping, and counseling, and all that stuff, but there was *absolutely* none of that, because my mom was an only child too, so I think that it was hard for her to even imagine the impact, you know, that it would have on the siblings, because she didn't have any, you know.

My dad was busy working, and trying to support five kids, and so there was a little bit of stress there, and, you know, she was carrying the full, you know, care, and transporting him back-and-forth, and trying to take care of us all. So, it was a really, really, really hard time in our family.

Then he died, and I—so they—I just think I wish that we had known ahead, that my brother, who maybe had picked on him a little, or whatever, you know, like, my, the brother that was closest to me, he ended up struggling quite bit. I don't, I doubt that it really had to, had a direct—was directly connected to Scotty's death, but I think that he may have, like, punched him, or done something when they were horsing around—

Q: As brothers do.

Robertson: As brothers do, and I often wondered, he was never able to articulate it, but I often wondered if his later struggles had something to do with the guilt and the pain associated with that loss, which he was unprepared for. I mean, he was a ten-year old boy at the time.

Q: Were his later struggles extreme?

Robertson: Yes, I mean, he has still a lot of problems. He's living in a rest home, and he has schizophrenia, and all these other things, but—I think my younger brother, the baby, also struggles, and for a long time thought that he was sort of conceived in order to—even though he was already born, he got confused, and he thought he was to make up for Scotty's loss. I mean it

was a lot of misinformation, and people, my parents were not supported in dealing with the repercussions of that for the family. So, that was, it was pretty intense.

Q: What about for you, did you feel responsible?

Robertson: I didn't feel responsible, because I think I was old enough to understand, I just never got to say goodbye to him, you know, that kind of stuff, so—

Q: Do you still carry that?

Robertson: Yes.

Q: Does it manifest in any way with your own children, your friends?

Robertson: Well, I'm probably—I'm the kind of person who communicates too much with my children. Do you know what I mean? I think I probably overdo a lot of my involvement with my kids, because I always wanted to make sure that—and I made tons of mistakes with my kids, I'm sure, that they'll probably tell an interviewer some day. I don't blame my parents, I'm not angry at my parents for—it's just to me it's just very sad that at the time they were struggling with something so huge, with so many little people involved, that, there was none, no, zero support that way. They went to a fabulous hospital, I mean, they went to Children's Hospital in

Philadelphia, it's renowned, it's one of the finest children's hospitals in the world, but not in 1960.

Q: Did you ever have the occasion to have to seek support to deal with one of your daughters?

Robertson: Oh absolutely. We've, all of us, I got divorced, and we had, you know, some struggles in our marriage that were obvious to the girls, and we went to counseling, and both, you know, as a family, and individually, and stuff, so yes, we had a lot more support then. It was more available, it wasn't like I was doing something that my parents didn't—

Q: A different era.

Robertson: Yes, it was a different time.

Q: I wanted to ask you, you had mentioned that your parents were Unitarian, but that you had become a Quaker, and I wondered how that happened?

Robertson: I told you while my parents—the Unitarians and the Quakers had a big overlap in their youth group, like a lot of people from Friend's school were in the Unitarian youth group. So, there was a pretty big overlap, but I got involved with—I went to a Quaker work camp when I was sixteen, and was involved with the Quakers even in high school.

Q: Because of being Unitarian.

Robertson: Well, I had gotten to know more about—my grandfather was a Quaker, and so I went when I was little with him, so I always had, like, in the back of my mind, that Quaker religion was something that I could deal with, and my parents became Unitarians, and for a while I was in their youth group, but there was a lot of overlap because of common interests, and the common—they have in common the fact that there's no creed, like you don't have to say the Apostles' Creed to belong to either church, you know, you just have to be a member of your church. So I think my parents were comfortable in the Unitarian church, less so in the meeting. But, when I, and when I came up to Columbia I was involved with the Unitarians, and I attended Quaker meetings sometimes, but I was mainly involved in Earl Hall with the Unitarian group there. But I found that in East Coast Quakers and West Coast Quakers, not in the middle of the country, and not in Kenya, and a lot of other places they have ministers, but on the coasts there's no minister. And, then you sit and meditate, and everyone's a minister, you sit quietly, and try to push everything else away, and let the spirit come into you, sort of. I just preferred it as a—it wasn't the ideology, necessarily, or I—the only thing I missed was the singing, but—

Q: The singing?

Robertson: But, no, the service itself is much, much more to my liking. I've been a member of the meeting for a long time, and I'm very involved in it, and like it very much.

Q: I know very little about Quakerism, except for the sitting and the meeting. Could you define it for us? Not at any length, but just for people who don't know what it consists of.

Robertson: Well, I think, Quakers believe that there's God in every person, it's fundamental to their philosophy. Therefore they are against killing, and war, and they're very interested in promoting social justice. Just because of that fundamental belief, that we are all, that we all have God in us. All of their actions, their social actions, and, you know, their involvement in politics is all on that, in that same vein. They believe that because God is in every person, that you can listen if you quiet yourself down, you can listen to the God within, or the spirit within, and you will find answers to your questions.

So, it's very similar, in the Catholic tradition—I've been reading a lot about this, there's centering prayer so that you can—the people who are religious people in all churches, I think, have—whose whole lives are this, that they want to be praying all the time. Not that they're down on their hands and knees all the time, but that whatever they're doing is prayerful. In other words, if they are teaching children, or working as medical people, or whatever, that they are listening to the God in them to guide them in their daily lives, like constantly sort of checking back. I think that, so I don't think that's just Quakers, but—

So, Quakers believe that when you stand and speak in meeting, that you have gotten to a place where you're sort of propelled out of your seat by your spirit to say something and share something with the meeting. It's a very powerful thing. Sometimes it's a little quiet, and a little

boring, but it's, when you have what's called a gathered meeting, where people really feel, not only is the spirit within each of us, but is moving among us, so that something that you say might be something that somebody else needs. I just believe in all those connections between people. I guess it's, too, from my biology, like we're all connected, we're connected with every creature on the planet, we're connected with the earth, and the water, I mean we're all one.

Q: And you continued your Quaker practice throughout college.

Robertson: I didn't join the meeting until I moved back to Moorestown, which is in the Philadelphia area, which is a very strong Quaker area. Moorestown has its own meetinghouse in the town I live in, and it's one of the larger meetings in the Philadelphia area, and a few hundred members. So, it's a—and, I'm very involved in it.

Q: So, you didn't continue your Quaker activism in college, or—

Robertson: Yes, I continued—I've always felt the way I did about social justice, but I didn't join or become an active member of a Quaker meeting until I was back in my hometown, and, you know, working, and getting ready to start a family. Then I decided that I wanted to join the meeting, so I started going, and I joined.

Q: Why was that, that you debated—

Robertson: I wanted—my parents did attend the Unitarian church for a while, but they did not seem to need a church, or a spiritual community that, like I did. I don't even know where that comes from. My grandmother said to my mother, "What's wrong [with] your daughter, Loretta, that she needs to go to church?" [Laughs] I come from a long line of un-churched people, and so they were all very—

Q: It was just something that you had—

Robertson: I felt as if I were drawn there, and so there I am.

Q: We had talked about your first friend, and your first roommate, and you said that you were very close. Just reiterate—

Robertson: Yes, well we, when, when I came to Barnard I was, you know, had sort of a Peter Pan collar, sort of prepped out like most of the girls in my high school. And, Joanie came, who was my roommate, assigned roommate freshman year, she had a big tent dress with flowers, and long flowing hair, and she was sort of the antithesis, she was all into theater. So, on the outside we looked very different, and looked like we were—but, our personalities meshed, like you can't believe. We just got along so well. She was incredibly honest, and kind, and we just got along great, and we still are very close friends, and it was a great support to me. I lived with her off and on for many years, up until the time I got married, both in New York at Barnard, and then up in

Boston we lived together while I was in graduate school, and so was she, and you know—So, it was—

Q: And you're still close.

Robertson: And we still are, and she—it's a great gift to me to have had, I mean, I, to have had really such a close, close friend be my roommate freshman year, I mean, that doesn't happen to everybody.

Q: When at Barnard were you happiest?

Robertson: I would think probably my sophomore and junior years I was pretty happy. I struggled a lot with the transition. I had a boyfriend from high school, and getting adjusted to living in New York City. I loved my classes, like, the school never bothered me, it was all the social stuff, it wasn't, it wasn't at all the school, I was completely and utterly delighted to be there. I wasn't, like, hoping to be the top academic person, I just wanted to learn, and be the middle of the pack, and I sort of was, and that was just fine. But in-between I think the turmoil of the '68 Spring, and then I sort of changed majors—

Q: From?

Robertson: I was pre-med, and then I decided I wanted to do something else—I was afraid it was too hard, and I wasn't smart or dedicated enough. I didn't study enough, with all the strike and everything. So, my grades weren't that good, and so I sort of switched, I thought okay, I'm going to do philosophy, or English, or something. Then I changed my mind back again, and I took a summer course in chemistry between my sophomore and junior year, and that was when I was most unhappy—I lived in a dorm, I've blocked the name of it, on 121st Street between Broadway and Amsterdam, and there was hardly anybody in the dorm, it was really desolate, I was alone, I was listening to Leonard Cohen, I went and got a psychiatrist. It was *awful*, absolutely awful. But, I got through my summer of chemistry, and then things started to look up, and I didn't continue with the pre-med because of the other strike in '70, I was taking organic chemistry, and I did poorly. So, those years were a struggle for me.

But, my senior year I had a pretty nice time, and I did student teaching. Chris McDonnell, another very close friend of mine from Barnard, was going to be student teaching in a high school on West 84th Street, and said, "Vickie, why don't you do it?" I said, "Because I'm not in the Ed program," and she said, "Just try it. Come on, I need company, I can't say in NYC and skip Easter break, and do all that by myself." I said, "Okay." So, I went to the Ed department and they said, "Yes, we'll let you. You can go down there, they want student teachers, and stuff —." So, I went down there and I just loved it. I had a great experience, the guys, and the women that I worked with down there were fabulous, and so then I went and got a degree, and got my teaching certification, and I became a teacher. So, in my senior year I really enjoyed teaching, and found my way, so that was nice.

Q: And, other than Barnard, when have been your happiest and unhappiest times?

Robertson: Yes, I guess my happiest times were when my kids were little. I just, I really, I really enjoyed being a mom—I was tired, but I really enjoyed being with them, and really I liked when they thought I was wonderful, and snuggling, and reading, and doing all that stuff. I had a lot of fun doing that. I loved my profession; the whole time that I was working, it was a rock for me, because I loved my subject. I liked working with high school kids. It was great. Also, I had a hard time when my kids were older, like late high school, early college, my marriage was falling apart, and my kids were struggling to get around me, you know, and arguments, and all that stuff. I didn't like that, I mean, that wasn't a fun time, and my marriage went south. Not because of that, but it was just all happening at the same time, do you know what I mean? So, that was a rough time for me, I think, my roughest time, other than losing Scotty, which I think was, like, was the worst time in my life.

Q: Was retirement difficult for you? Do you miss it much?

Robertson: I was still working—after my marriage broke up I lived by myself for about nine years, and a couple years into that I met Philip. I had had enough time alone so that I sort of got my bearings. And, then I met Philip, and I—

Q: Such a maniac.

Robertson: Right.

[Interruption]

Q: You want to go up and do the ground rules? Start again?

Solomon: No, you're alright.

Robertson: Yes, one of my college friends did have an abortion, and I am, she is pretty sure that it cost her the ability to have children later, she had an illegal abortion when we were freshmen in college. And, I'm still friends with her, so I know a lot about her, and—

Q: Did it go terribly wrong then?

Robertson: Yes, I think things can happen, it's so idiosyncratic what happens in a situation like that, I think. And, I—I believe in retrospect that I think my, from the stories that I've heard, that maybe my grandmother had one, and I think, I'm not sure about other people, but I think that illegal abortions were going on a lot, and sometimes in the upper middle-class community in which I grew up, I think DNC's [dilation and curettage] via a nice doctor would terminate a pregnancy for—I think that was going on even before people were even talking about legalizing

abortion. So, I think if you had some resources and some friends that were doctors, you were okay, but if not you were not.

So, I am not a huge, you know, proponent of abortion as a way to deal with pregnancy, I'm a huge proponent of getting good information to children, and also in communities, perhaps their schools, providing not only information, but medical services, and birth control, because it's just foolishness to have people be in that position, either a child that they can't or don't want to raise, or an abortion, but it doesn't seem like—I'm in favor of Plan Three, which is to supply children who are sexually active with birth control, and to de-mystify it, and, and make it a part of their care of themselves, like their vitamin pill.

Q: How does that compare to your parent's approach?

Robertson: I think my parents were of a generation that didn't even address it. Do you know what I mean? I didn't have—I myself did not have the experience of being pregnant when I didn't want to be, not for—I risked it certainly, but I was not, I did not find myself in that position, and so my parents never had to deal with it, you know, so I never watched them deal with it. But, it wasn't talked about, I mean, my mother, she just said something like, "Don't do anything with a guy that they'll talk about in the locker room," that was the extent of my sex education.

Q: Were there other ways in which you're raising your children different from your parent's raising of you?

Robertson: Well, certainly the birth control discussion was—

Q: Aside from that.

Robertson: I was a lot, my parents didn't know about drugs, drug use by their children. So, I certainly knew about drug use by children, both by teaching, and college. So, I was a crazy person about that stuff. I was talking about it, and I was a much more—and I had two, not five, and I was a hawk, trying to be. I mean, I'm *sure* that they got by me with stuff, there's no question about that, but I was—we talked about it, and I, about all of it, birth control, and drug use. I was pretty strict about what they did, and I paid attention to it. I caught them doing stuff, and I punished them. But, I think I was a little more aware of some of the pitfalls than my parents were, but you always get beat a little bit. But, I think I did an okay job with that.

Q: So, what are your hopes for the future, the next five or ten years? What do you want to do that you haven't done, or do again that you did do?

Robertson: I want to contribute what I can to the society. I want to give my money and time to causes that I think are important. I want to be a help. Philip and I are both helping both sets of parents a little bit, I want to continue to do that, and I have no idea what the extent of that will

be, you know, it's a crap shoot you don't know what help your parents are going to need, or whatever. I want to be supportive to my girls, and to Pat—Phil's son. So, I want to be there as a mom, grandmom, daughter, I want to—because I worked, I mean, I never really took time off, so I, I love this, I love spending time with Philip, I hope to travel a little bit, and mostly I want to find a way to face what the letting go process, and the aging process, and the loss of people that I love, and friends and stuff. I want to have some grace about [it], I want to figure out ways of dealing with it. And, I like reading history, and non-fiction more than I ever did before, because I read a lot of fiction, I love reading, and I think that history gives you a perspective on things that help you face what you can't know, and what you are absolutely certain of that you'll have to face in the future. So, I want to, I want to do that with some grace, and I'm reading a lot, and trying to get my head in a place where I can.

Q: That's the last beautiful statement, and I see it as the end of the mini doc, it's beautiful, it really is.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

Index

Brother of Victoria Robertson.....	24, 38, 39, 40, 49
Duke, Josie.....	38
McDonnell, Christina.....	13, 16, 48
Mother of Victoria Robertson.....	38, 39, 45
Peterson, Martha.....	20, 22
Ray, James.....	4
Robertson, Meg.....	17
Robertson, Philip.....	31, 49, 52
Robertson, Sarah.....	17
Seal, Robert.....	6
Wickler, Joan.....	1, 28, 46