Transcript – Maxine A. Smith

Interviewee:	Maxine A. Smith
Interviewer:	Elizabeth Gritter
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Interview note:	This transcript has ( ) noted where parts are inaudible. In addition, Maxine Smith placed a restriction on this oral history, so the restricted parts have been removed from this transcript.

ELIZABETH GRITTER: Elizabeth Gritter interviewing Maxine Smith on July 26th, 2004, in Memphis, Tennessee. [taped off and on again]

MAXINE SMITH: You'll probably have a lot of this if I start getting repetitious.

EG: Yeah, you gave me a really great overview of, well, in fact let me—[tape turned on and off again]. Make sure this is working. Okay. I'm wondering specifically about what you were, I know you were coordinator of voter registration for the NAACP. Did that start right after you became a volunteer for the branch?

MS: Yeah, that was one of my earlier assignments. It had to be '57 or late--. That was when they asked me to serve on the board after that effort to get in Memphis State and that was June of '57, summer of '57 that we were trying. Subsequently, sometime that year they invited Laura Willis—Mrs. Sugarmon then--to serve on the board. I think, you know, [there were] no women were on the board. The two of us, we just needed to resurrect the branch, I guess. With that, the NAACP had been kicked out of Alabama because of [its] failure to reveal our membership rolls a little earlier than that.

The field secretary for the NAACP--. He had the same position Medgar Evers had in Mississippi . Well, when we had to leave because we fought that in court, I think they accused the lawyers of barratry. But anyway, [that] had to be a little before then in that period, mid ’50s they had been kicked out. That was why there was that vacuum that Dr. King had to fill because the NAACP was, well Rosa Parks was the secretary of the branch but it could not function as a branch. I think we were out eight years at least before we won that battle in court. Anyway, long story short, Mr. [W. C.] Patton was an employee of the national office. So he came to Memphis because we were one of the few branches that had an office. It wasn’t much of an office. But it was the voter registration field representative say whatever. He was rather than the field representative for the state of Alabama he became probably regional voter registration coordinator or something. I may have the--. But he was in charge of organizing and getting more voters. It was a thing we continue today. The system has been really streamlined and simplified. But it’s harder to get them today in a sense than it was then. Me and ( ) we did have about 10,000 blacks registered to vote when we came back to Memphis in [the] mid ’50s, maybe about that time, I don’t know how much. I would say 1957 was when that real big effort came. But I must say also that the percentage of black and white registered voters has always been sort of constant. See if we were a third of the—. I don’t know exactly, but the white population hadn’t done anything much that was spectacular. So voter registration was just low period. They probably were ahead of us some because generally still voting patterns, whites still vote better, more often. That was not a big disparity in the number of voters when you think of the demographics rather. So we took off. We

used our—. I don't want to answer a question too long. Do you want me to go on with that?

EG: I understand there were some voter registration efforts before then?

MS: Yes.

EG: How did this effort differ from those that went before? How was it similar? Who were like the organizations conducting--?

MS: We had what we called the Bluff City Council of Civic Clubs which is headed, we just hate to see. I don't know if there's any trace of that left, the one that ( ). Mr. [Alexander] Gladney was a leader of it. We were so effective. Then right [at the] same time, just as Vasco and I were coming back here, Russ Sugarmon and A. W. Willis [Jr.] --I'm sure you've got those names somewhere--and others had organized what we call the Shelby County Democratic Club, which was the political arm. We all worked in harmony. Let's see, everybody was probably a member of each. But the NAACP being nonpartisan, they're political, could not go and, not recommend but—.

EG: Endorse.

MS: Endorse. That's the word I'm trying to--. Which the Shelby County Democratic Club could do. That was our political wing. We were organized by precincts also. The civic clubs were organized by precincts but they had a similar geographical [area]. And as I said people just served in the same and although they had a mission, maybe a little bit different, but there was no conflict. I would think the Bluff City Council of Civic Clubs was probably around before the political Democratic clubs, Shelby County Democratic Club. So we just worked. It sort of automatically fell in place to work in your precincts, in your wards because it was convenient. The clubs

would always emphasize or ( ) meeting with many they'd say do this--get the NAACP members from your block or whatever. We were assigned blocks from these three, not necessarily. as I said, we would commingle whatever the need may have been. The big thing here in the late '50s was voter registration. In those days, we had to, after coercing people to vote, we had to get them to go down to the--. Downtown to the—. What do you call it? My mind is so bad. Where you register on Poplar.

EG: The registrar's office.

MS: Yeah, the registrar's office. See we had nothing like the mail system, postcard system--that's very new--and we had to get drivers to drive them. But I've forgotten the space, very few before the end of the '50s, maybe roughly---. If I contradict myself, it's a matter of age. We had done about 50,000, which was hard in those days, which was hard. We weren't that long after [the] Crump machine. Crump died. Vasco and I married in'53. Crump died in '54 it seems to me because we were still in the Air Force when he died. So that mentality was still around.

EG: What mentality?

MS: The Crump mentality, the machine politics. The one thing good, I probably said this to you also. Crump did encourage folks to be prepared to vote because they felt he ( ). Rather than voting, they were voted. The good thing about machine politics our people were used to participating one way or another in the voting process. So if that's say, that's a good thing. That's probably why our numbers were not too far out of balance with the majority population at that time because Crump--. The forward thinking whites who finally brought an end to his machine would not be dominated by a machine. Of course he had his Crumplets. [Laughter.] We were called, those of us who

subscribed to him were his little brown Crumplets. That was a little before my active time. That was political situation that was going away, the Crump politics, and was not just Memphis. He kind of controlled the state in his heyday. So I guess he had begun--. I think Estes Kefauver, these are old names who--. They're a little bit old for me almost. He was going out. But those progressives at that time were Democrats. I guess that's what--. Democrats were supposed to be liberal. They fought that machine during this time through that period. I say '55. Well, before '55 because Crump died in '54. But oh I've forgotten just here lately. The last of his appointees just, not long ago just finally, he was too old to run or maybe died. I don't know. But that flavored the politics around here.

EG: Did Crump's death then provide an opening for more political efforts and power by African Americans?

MS: Yeah. I think that's what stimulated our good friends like Russell, A.W., Mr. Gladney, and others who were in these organizations to form these particularly--. We hadn't had a political group. We weren't--. [The] Shelby County Democratic Club was an organization of black Democrats. There was a Democratic party here, but it wasn't that inclusive of blacks. So our effort was to get the blacks registered, educated, participated. So the difference could be felt by the politicians. Let's say in--.

EG: Was this done under the auspices of the Citizens Nonpartisan Registration Committee? Was that like the organization that was like the umbrella for all these voter registration efforts?

MS: Yes. Actually I don't know which came first because under the Citizens Nonpartisan, you had your labor groups, your church groups, NAACP could be part of the Citizens, but that was an umbrella-type organization.

EG: So did the NAACP work under that auspice and also do separate voter registration drives?

MS: No. No. We—.

EG: Everything was under that.

MS: Actually, we were kind of the core of that because we had an office and others. Not that we were any different. We attracted in the mid '50s an enlightened leadership, and I am not casting aspersions on anybody, but—.

EG: Casting what?

MS: Aspersions on anybody. I'm not criticizing these people. I know when I came back in '55. The NAACP was just something we looked for, something you sort of grow up with. It was '54 before it, you know, in my lifetime that we knew, I guess I was a little young. The lynchings and all that. All these things were going on. The NAACP didn't just start when we came back to Memphis. Fifty-five, the year after '54 when this town had been very reticent of doing anything about the mandates of '54 and subsequently '55. We worked together, and it was no problem. I think problems began with our effectiveness. We got too good, and the white community began to divide and conquer.

EG: Is that a reason the Shelby County Democratic Club broke up?

MS: Yeah. Really because we, oh God, had very successful voter registration campaigns. There was no--. Actually as I said, civic clubs and everybody, they were in

precinct clubs and their particular civic clubs because the civic clubs stayed as nonpartisan. It's possible too because they had other missions. We weren't bothered about it then what hat you wore just so we made sure that--. Government officials looked at you. I don't know if they did in Memphis. I don't know if they had that much sense. But the state of Alabama as federal folks looking at you, trying to make you show your [membership] rolls which we've never done. They accused the lawyers of barratry.

EG: So you didn't face that intimidation in Memphis--.

MS: Yes.

EG: --that other blacks in other southern cities faced it sounds like.

MS: I didn't hear what you said.

EG: You didn't have like the intimidation faced by people in Mississippi for trying to register to vote?

MS: No, we didn't have that. We were sort of obedient to Mr. Crump, to Boss Crump.

EG: Is that why when there was this big push in '57 for voter registration, do you think that's the reason why there wasn't resistance from the white community to that?

MS: Probably so because they were used to black people being a part of the electoral process. I'm sure that element of white[s] who had fought the machine politics of Crump were glad to see us. I mean they looked at the leadership--Vasco, Jesse Turner [Sr.], Russell Sugarmon, A. W. Willis, A. A. Branch. Just a mass of people at all levels even Vasco's professor at LeMoyne--he was very active in the civic club. You had high level of black people who weren't looking for anything but political participation at I say in a mature fashion rather than driven. We determined our own political destinies. Boss

Crump couldn't tell us what to do. We were about a third of the population when we came back in the mid '50s. It was just, you know, it was so pure. See they were into the Shelby County Democratic Club a little bit before Vasco and I got back because the first person I ever voted for I think was Eisenhower. I thought black folks were supposed to be--. [Laughs.] When did Eisenhower run? You can look back in your--. They attracted us to Shelby County Democratic Club. We just didn't know. We had gone to the NAACP. They're black folks. I thought all black folks--. Abraham Lincoln was a Republican. [Laughs.]

EG: But then with the Shelby County Democratic Club you switched to being Democrats?

MS: Yes.

EG: Were you members of it then in the '50s before it was restructured after the '59 campaign?

MS: Yes. Uh huh. Uh huh.

EG: What was it like before it ended up being restructured after it--?

MS: The Shelby County Democratic Club. No, the Shelby County Democratic Club, this is our—there was a Shelby County Democrat—I don't know what they call the party.

EG: Oh you're talking about the—.

MS: I'm talking about our organization. I see Russ and A. W. as the--. Like people see me as the head, not necessarily of the NAACP.

EG: So you're talking about when they were head of it.

MS: So it was organized on the structure that we continued.

EG: The precinct level.

MS: Yeah.

EG: You were involved with it as a member. Were a member of the board of it at all or [on] the executive committee?

MS: Yeah. Whatever the structure was, I was part of that. I switched hats. Our goals were the same. I think Vasco was the vice president. In fact, Vasco was the vice president of everything. [Laughter.]

EG: Yeah, I ( ). Your name everywhere, your husband's name everywhere.

MS: He was always there. But—.

EG: I'm wondering about the '59 election when Sugarmon ran--.

MS: Russ Sugarmon.

EG: --for public works commissioner. I saw you were involved as head of like the youth committee in '59?

MS: I may have. You have to go back to the papers. '59, '59. Yeah, it's probably '57 or so we did this big—.

EG: The voter registration.

MS: Voter registration.

EG: I saw that this was the Volunteer Ticket campaign. What [do] you remember about that, the first--.

MS: About youth participation?

EG: Yeah.

MS: I mean like our Youth Council. Is that what we're talking about? Our young people, getting young people to vote. Those all were going on and still we haven't done as much with that as we--. Our college and high school students were participants. They began on their own initiative the sit-in movement. Although they weren't of voting age, see voting age then was 21. Very few even college students were. See, we had to work blocks, encourage people to register.

EG: So were they involved in late '50s? Were youth involved?

MS: They became more involved, let's see, in the '60s as the youth unit.

EG: As the Youth Council the NAACP took on.

MS: Uh huh. Uh huh. Because that's what they--. The sit-in movement started in '60. That's what really pushed them off. They had strong legs, they could hold a lot more. Of course I was pretty young.

EG: They did a lot of the block-to-block work.

MS: They went and got the people and—.

EG: Door-to-door campaigning.

MS: We had good volunteers of all ages who would come in. They had maybe arranged it. Somebody was in charge of transportation, probably.

EG: For transporting voters to the polls?

MS: Well, not only to the polls but [also] down to the Election Commission ( ).

EG: To register to vote?

MS: Un huh. Poor black people just didn't [ready?] to do that.

EG: Yeah, I wondered about the challenges you faced.

MS: Most folks didn't have cars. I think that organization did a terrific job [changing] the mindset of people who had been denied, not that they were denied to vote, but they were not really a part of system in a sense as far as determinations or what will be, what we want out of this politician, what do we expect out of our elected officials.

EG: You mean the Shelby County Democratic Club?

MS: Yeah. That's what I'm saying. I think that it was a good educational process because our people just had not been exposed to politics in that way. They actually felt a little earlier than that when Crump was in his heyday. And our schoolteachers--. Because Crump controlled everything. Schoolteachers were afraid not to vote what Crump told them to vote. That early leadership, Russell and all our friends, they just weren't going to let that go on. Russ was right out of law school. A. W. was right out of law school. Jesse and Vasco had been classmates in college. He had gone and gotten his CPA. He was working at the bank. He was the first black CPA in the state of Tennessee. This is the kind of leadership you had. As I say, most of these just sitting around your house.

EG: How did you persuade people to vote and register and become involved hopefully?

MS: That's what I'm just trying to remember. [The] NAACP--it was there when we got there—may have [had] 200 or 300 members, and it was not very active. Fifty-four hadn't caught on here because *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education*, nothing had been done about it. Through our civic clubs, there probably fertilized--. See, the Shelby County Democratic Club was last of these three. NAACP had been here. I don't know just when the Bluff City Council, how long it had been here. I think the kindling of real

meaningful political involvement--people had to get out of the Crump mentality. I don't remember it being difficult because in '59 we were enough of a threat for the newspapers to editorialize against Russell, just because they knew he was the best. They even admitted that he was the best. So we were quite, in those days, maybe we were a balance of power. That's what we were considered. I think the election of '64 we were the power. It was a gradual growing, and we saw what could be done through the political process. We didn't have folk who were looking for jobs. The people out there, they had jobs; they had professions. There was no self-interest. It was just a basic concern about us being voters rather than being voted, determining our own destinies rather than [the] political machine determining what our--. Politics has a place in everything. Politics runs our lives. Politics is everywhere, from the womb to the tomb, as they say. It's politics. So we had to try to make politics pure. We had to get the dirt out of politics. We felt the church belonged in politics. We needed ( ) preachers to endorse, to be partisan anymore than NAACP is, but we expect and the churches were very cooperative. We had meetings. We didn't have many other places to have meetings. Civic clubs met in churches, very few had club houses, if any had club houses [these were] at somebody's house or that kind of thing. It was neighborhood--. We pulled in our Greek letter organizations to make sure we had college people and then the Masons. They have a very, they're not a learned, but they're very, they say, brotherhood, Masonic order. White or black that's like a religion to them and that's still one our biggest allies. They have so many lodges. We still have Jubilee Day the first of January, celebrating Jubilee Day today. ( ) Emancipation Proclamation, whenever that was signed. But we began to get all these forces. People believed in each other. People didn't

question if they called me a leader. I still have problems with being called a leader. Didn't question any of us according to motive. It never came to our minds that people would. They really didn't as far as, I'm sure there were some. But that was not a part of our agenda. When we got and I know I've said this to you perhaps in some form or another. But as we got more power at the ballot box, the powers that be began to look at us, began to respect us. I can remember so well that--what's the name--Bill Farris, who died not long ago. He was head of the Democratic Party for a long time. He was a city commissioner, whatever they called them then. I can remember him being one of those powerbrokers that called. We would go with our concerns. In the early days, they would ignore us. I mean they would actually turn their backs as if we weren't there. But our success was the faith the people had in us. They may have been unlettered and unread, but they weren't crazy. They weren't dumb. They had problems. They respected us and looked to us to help them solve these problems, and then they could solve their own problems. Together we could solve our own problems. So that's where the political process is so, so very important. We can see it's a whole different story today. God, we're at one of our worst points politically. See when, I know I've told the story when Kennedy—I always call Clinton Kennedy. I'm talking about Kennedy. [Laughter.] He didn't carry Tennessee. I'm not sure he carried Shelby County. He may have, but he did look at the precincts in Shelby County and saw where he got ninety percent or whatever. I'm exaggerating. He may have carried the county, I'm not sure. I know Gore did. Generally since we're so predominantly black now--. But that's when he wanted to appoint, let's see. District attorney, what's the federal?

EG: It could be. I'm not sure.

MS: I don't know who it is now. [Ronnie Cole?] was the last black one, under Gore. But the first one was Odell Horton, who just retired as a judge. I don't know if you've run—. A very, very fine guy. But Russ, A. W. ( ) lawyers, any of them. Benny tended to be a little Republican in those days--Ben Hooks. But we were looking around, who can we get? It never entered their minds, any of them. Any of our lawyers working with us there. They weren't concerned about that. Odell Horton had just recently come to Memphis. Odell and I, he's from Bolivar, Tennessee up here. Odell and I are the same age so he would've been coming back to his home and then migrated to Memphis. He was in Memphis in the late '50s, by '60 anyway. I don't really just know when he went because we didn't know him. See, the rest of us kind of grew up here in school. But he had been here long enough to establish a reputation. So we said, "Let's get him. Let's get him." This is how we or I suggested him to whoever was working for the Kennedys to do that. ( ) install him themselves because the power structure, that was clear evidence.

EG: They wouldn't allow that to happen--the power structure here.

MS: They didn't want to. But when the president makes an appointment they stall as long as they could. But I think that was the beginning of recognition of power of the black vote. So Odell served capably as, I think, district attorney. No permanent friends, no permanent enemies. When, who was it? Now I'm getting the old folks, his son just--. Was it Clement? Yeah, I believe it was Clement. His son was a Congressman, U.S. Congressman.

EG: Bob Clement?

MS: No, his daddy who had generally been the beneficiary of the black vote. When he decided—. I think he was in Congress at this time. No, he wasn't in Congress. He was governor and he wanted to run for Congress. Who was he running against? Whoever he was running against had been one of the three or four southern Congressmen who voted for [the] Civil Rights Act of 1964.

EG: Ross Bass?

MS: Ross Bass, yeah. But he was saying, what part of [Clement's] campaign strategy was to criticize Ross Bass for voting for the Civil Rights—.

EG: Act.

MS: Act of '64. If he had been there, he wouldn't have voted [for it]. He completely ignored the big segment that had made him governor because from the Tennessee Voter's Council, we initiated ( ) and became a very effective statewide group that did the same thing across the state. We were all very active. The genesis of it came from the success of the Shelby County Democratic Club. So we just swung 100,000 votes away that he expected and gave them to Bass, and Ross Bass stayed in the Congress. That was our lesson "no permanent friends, no permanent enemies." These are lessons you have to give.

EG: How involved were women in the late '50s and throughout this electoral efforts?

MS: As usual, we were the mass in the background. [Laughter.] The mass, somehow I got to be one of the boys. I don't know why. But we were there.

EG: ( ) involved in grassroots work and—

MS: Huh?

EG: Did women do the majority of the grassroots work then, the door-to-door work?

MS: Yeah, because men were at work.

EG: Right. Right.

MS: Yeah, we were there. We were the work force. I think it's pretty typical of what men think of us. [Laughter.] I don't think that attitude has gone yet, but it's moving.

EG: Did you feel as a person who took more of a leadership role there was any sex discrimination at all?

MS: You know, I was never bothered by sex discrimination then. I said this not too long ago at the Women's Foundation, [a] year ago. The year I had had my surgery ( ). But I was saying Women's Foundation is a group of mostly very rich white women that I became involved with reluctantly. They do a good job. I guess when I retired from [the] NAACP they were forming then. They wanted black involvement. Their primary purpose was to raise money for needy social agencies, programs. It's a well structured--. I had the responsibility for forty years of keeping NAACP doors open literally. Our people didn't have money. That's why I worked so long without pay which I have no problem with. Whites weren't giving us money. We had to--. Until we got the corporate community involved, we just didn't have money. It didn't bother us really. Vasco will let Maxine, you know, we don't have to pay Maxine. Vasco gave her to us. I did start getting paid something when we started getting money. I've forgotten the point I was making.

EG: ( )

MS: Oh about women. But when you said sex but just last year [the Women's Foundation] honored me and that was my first trip and it was very temporary. You know, all the surgery I had last year. In my remarks I said, the way it came out, "I don't have any sex problems; my problems have been race," something. They laughed. They said, "Look at old Vasco." [Laughter.] I was saying, I was really talking about gender. I said, "What are they laughing about?" Then I realized. I said, "Oh." But in answer to your question, I was so busy looking for race I hadn't thought about gender because I think the discrimination against me came because of my ethnicity--.

EG: And not because of gender?

MS: --rather than my gender. Yes, ( ) I understand that women get a little ( ) because it's still it's not unusual for women to be paid less than men or for women not to get the ( ) ceiling. The glass ceiling. It's still a rarity [for] women [to be] way up there at the top, even white women. So that's a clear case of just old Ms. Brown. I chair the national education committee for the NAACP. We had to make all these cities we did, well we had five different cities where legal action had been taken. I think the governor of Kansas is a woman. [There were] two women on the stage with me at the program. I think this was maybe Topeka where and one her company--she was CEO of some big company--gave the NAACP, say, a million dollars. I don't know it may not have been. I was saying, now you know what, without the NAACP you wouldn't have been governor. Nobody gave no woman a million dollars ( ) NAACP or anybody else. I mean I said it jokingly but it was true. We have freed, begun to free gender discrimination. We have been quite a force in coming toward that.

EG: The NAACP ( ), yeah.

MS: Although we're talking about race from the very beginning. Then it became not the habit but a pattern to--. When women's issue--. When the women's organizations--. We have never been a misfit--women's groups and civil rights groups. We were natural partners in a sense because we could ally on equity based on race, based on sex, based on religion or whatever. So it was a natural. I think the NAACP had a lot to do in that sense. What's Al Gore's mother's name? Pauline Gore. She was way back there when Tennessee was the state that ratified the Equal Rights Amendment for women. Tennessee was the last state that made it. She was a fighter. But women's groups had not come into their own during those early years, but I think the NAACP paved the way for them. There was not a lot of connections between the Jewish and the black community particularly. As Kweisi Mfumi said, racism no matter what it's color, whether it's gender, whether it's ethnicity, whether it's religion and all that. It's wrong. It's just wrong. That is sort of like a creed with us. I've probably gotten off the subject. I don't know what--.

EG: Oh no, it's fascinating because I mean in academia we look at these intersections of race and gender but I haven't looked much at how the organizational intersections as well and what you're saying about the NAACP really clicks.

MS: Hm hm.

EG: I wanted to get back to--. You said W. C. Patton came and he was like your teacher for voter registration efforts. Were you aware—. I know from doing some research there were also these voter registration drives of the NAACP and even electoral efforts in other southern cities. Were [you] connected with other cities at all or aware of what was going on in other cities?

MS: I'm not sure I follow you. Nationally [the] NAACP does operate, we still do but we have to break it down by region.

EG: Okay. So it's like within your region were you connected with other people who were doing voter registration?

MS: Oh yeah.

EG: Were you aware of the voter registration work in other cities the NAACP was doing in the late '50s?

MS: Yeah.

EG: What was that? How much did you influence them or did they influence you or what was the nature of that?

MS: Well, I would say Memphis had a, being the ( ), say, like in our state, the NAACP structure--branch, city local level, state level, then regional level. Local level you have monthly meetings. Well, state now we are mandated to have a yearly meeting. But we have an executive committee. Then conventions, national, yearly. Then our region has seven, this particular has seven regions. So a person, say, like Mr. Patton was voting coordinator for Region Five which is—.

EG: Oh, seven states.

MS: Seven states with--. In our region all of them--Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Florida, Georgia. I see I have to count on my fingers so I don't get confused. We have similarities by nothing but geography. Then we have a national. We have a national department on political action. Then we have our Washington Bureau, which keeps up with the--. So it's a network for politics. So you see in a sense it's a network for politics.

EG: So how does that network work? Obviously at meetings you would discuss—.

MS: Well, going up we supplied figures of what which county has done. Julian Bond just [on the] opening night of the convention was talking about what cities, how many we had registered already in the last so and so and so. That's when the folks, just, well, they say "Maxine Smith did 18,000 in Memphis!" I say, "Oh?" [Laughter.] But these are, this is sort of how--. , I've got some things laying out I brought from church yesterday. It's really elementary in a sense because we have ways now down at [the] Civil Rights Museum, we can register them down there. The NAACP set that up several years ago in our information booth. Well, we can register folks from any state, any county. There's a way to do that now. I'm not computer literate at all. But Civil Rights Museum has that now. ( ) our church ( ) some from our state or anybody happens to come through town we can register them. That can be done. I don't know how to do it. But on local level, we keep and give reports to our state, local, state regional on up to the national power. Now in the last few years I don't think the money's out there now other people involved in non-partisan politics but who have the say [background talking on drinks].

EG: So like in the annual reports I noticed you put down voter registration in your weekly report.

MS: Um hmm and then the state conference is led by the state president and the executive board, and they have a political action chair and they keep the data we send and it goes on up the line. As I say one of our national departments is political empowerment. It goes on to them where it's refined really. They're not going to take the

word from a bunch of folks ( ) saying I registered 500 folks today. [drink conversation] Then as an adjunct to that, it's still political, we have what we call the Washington Bureau. I know you've heard of her.

EG: Hillary Shelton.

MS: Yeah, Hillary is such a [dear?]. You know they keep the vote, and we get the postcards.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

MS: At least twenty years I'd say.

EG: At least twenty years.

MS: At least and I could check that and be a little more accurate. [drinks delivered and conversation]

EG: So I'm wondering in the late '50s, what sort of connections there were. There must have been a political action committee in the late '50s on the regional, state level.

MS: Yeah. That structure has been in place. But you had, let's say [in the] late '50s and '60s, people in neighboring states were still being killed for registering to vote. ( ) that was a reason for Medgar Evers. Vasco was just asking the other night when we were at dinner, what was that guy down in Mississippi who shot Vernon Dahmer. So all that kind of thing led to our effort and our national effort to hold these national politicians accountable. See that was the '50s and '60s. That was the Medgar Evers. All those, ( ). Martin Kings.

EG: So they would pass voting rights legislation?

MS: Yeah, we pushed [the] Voting Rights Act--. What was that, '65? Those were real fights nationally, our combined allies, all our groups combined on that. That started right--. Clarence Mitchell was one of the most respected men that's ever been on the Hill. That's right.

EG: Who is that?

MS: Clarence Mitchell. He was the—.

EG: The lobbyist?

MS: Uh huh. They called him the 101st senator. The 101st, that's the position he ( ).

EG: Did you provide in the late '50s any assistance to any of these rural counties in Tennessee where it was harder to register to vote like Fayette?

MS: Yeah. Fayette County, yeah. I just happened to but yeah.

EG: Like what sort of assistance would you provide them with?

MS: Go up, we'd go help them knock on doors like we did here because we had a little more exposure ( ). To see that they were organized through our state, like the TVC, Tennessee Voters Council, then the Fayette County branch of the NAACP. The civic clubs--they were Shelby County. They didn't have the statewide [organization].

EG: Did you face—.

MS: We marched so many places across Tennessee and Mississippi.

EG: So you were also going to Mississippi to spread your strategies as well?

MS: It just happened we were there. Vasco was speaking there the night Medgar [Evers] was killed. There was ( ) organizations. You go to Mississippi tonight but it was a family affair. When they needed me come, come. But we still had the structure

there. That's why the NAACP has stayed solid. We have a very good structure. Look at SCLC, after Martin it began because it's centered on Martin. NAACP wasn't on a person. It was on that ship, that structure from the local—.

EG: The local branch, the regional, then the state, the national.

MS: Yeah and I'm not saying that critically of others, because anybody could drop dead. ( ) Dr. King was not dead. So you've got to have solid structure.

EG: Were you able to successfully register people to vote in these rural counties of Tennessee and Mississippi?

MS: Yeah, uh huh. I think they were--. Particularly and I guess we concentrated [our efforts[when we were out of Shelby [County], [to] these folks [in] say Fayette [and] Haywood [counties]. See those folks--. They didn't even get to see a *Jet* magazine. Haywood was just as bad. Haywood was majority black population for a long time. I guess when I first got here. Fayette probably too. I think Fayette was. And that was a threat to [the] white community--to let them vote. It was all about voting and political power. People then just saw us as liberators almost. They had so much to lose. See, we'd go up there and pep them up and help them go. That gave [them] not only encourage[ment], [but also] that gave them courage.

EG: Did you face resistance there?

MS: Hmm?

EG: Did you face resistance in those counties for registering people to vote?

MS: Personally, no, because they did not want to let the world--. After Ole Miss and some of these things, when the world began to look at us in the South and see lynchings, they did not want the world to know that. And we must've been crazy because

that's the days when they had those shotguns in them pickup trucks and we'd be walking down the street marching, "I ain't going to let nobody turn--." You throw caution to the wind. You don't have sense enough to be cautious. It never entered my mind to be afraid. I guess for people who were afraid we were like deliverers in a sense. People say, You don't have to." I said, "I do have to do this." "Your husband's doing enough." I said, "What's that got to do with what?" So we did what he had to do, what we were driven to, from deep down for some reason. Maybe it's because we had never--. There's nothing that special about us. Maybe that's where old Crump helped us. We'd never been told we couldn't vote, you know, my generation. They wouldn't have told us who to vote for. They couldn't get our votes. You could get it with a bottle of whiskey and watermelon. [Laughs.] That was actually going on. But that preceded us but during our lifetimes that was still going on. We were like, oh gosh, a savior who had come into their towns.

EG: So you assisted them in terms of like timeframe from like '57 onwards to the '60s?

MS: Late '50s and early '60s and on until they took those ( ).

EG: Oh because part too, the Tennessee Voters Council weren't they also concerned with getting groups organized.

MS: Oh yeah. See that's why we needed that statewide. I guess the hub of action, say Nashville, was a very strong member unit like ours in Shelby County. They could get in so many little areas, little towns out in Nashville. It was general. We weren't restricted to any [in] particular but it made sense that we would be in West Tennessee and Nashville might have come in because West Tennessee is where maybe

three-quarters of your black votes are in the whole state. So our concentration as far as Tennessee was in West Tennessee because of the geography and because of the numbers. But it's good to talk about this. I didn't mean to talk this long. [Laughter.] But it makes you remember how you, why you--. As I said they reached up and called--. Our national director of branches was helping the whole Mississippi situation in '63.

EG: Who was that?

MS: That at that time was Gloster Current who's dead. Have you seen that name anywhere?

EG: Uh huh.

MS: He's the one that called Vasco to come down to Jackson to speak—.

EG: Oh to speak with Medgar Evers.

MS: And that was in the midst of that big thing was voter registration. That was their *big* thing then.

EG: In the late '50s, what were you hoping to achieve in the short term and long term through these voter registration efforts and political action?

MS: Actually, we were crazy enough to want everything. There was no long term; we wanted it now. We wanted it now. We couldn't see the future. We never thought about the fact that, say, today 2004 that Memphis is majority black. We didn't know how to look ahead then. We just wanted my share of the pie right now. Now with maturity and with the passage of time you can look there. I'm the moderator of our church. This had nothing to do with what we are saying now. We just got a little building. I won't say a church, a structure. We're two years old now. We need this; we need that. I say, we don't have any money. We've got to have a budget. We've got to

go where we need now, what we do next week, next year. But we just knew that then. This was not a part of our mindset. We didn't know anything about that. But today I would've been looking at [it] in that perspective.

EG: Were you the first black woman elected or in public office with being on school board?

MS: No, Gwen Awsumb was on the--. Black woman you say?

EG: Yeah.

MS: Oh yeah, uh huh. I think so.

EG: Wow. So what was that experience like? I mean that's a very broad question but--.

MS: And again many people looked at, I didn't think of the woman part. [Laughter.] I didn't plan to be elected. That came after the school board [cuts?]. All I was planning—.

EG: That's right, the [school] protests.

MS: The protests, getting some representation. I think I told you how they decided to ( ) dropping my name and we've got to put our best foot forward. Not me. Not me. I must've wanted it because I stayed there twenty-four years like I was crazy which was a long, long time. I meant to tell Vasco. You don't know--. I'm on the state board of regents. See I retired from the NAA and the school board at the same time. Then Governor Bredesen appointed me to the state board of regents. For some reason it's very, very political.

EG: How long have you been on the board of regents for?

MS: Since '96. Bredesen was coming out so I'm in my second--.

EG: ’96 to present.

MS: Uh huh. Uh huh. My second term.

EG: You’ve been involved in school stuff for a long time.

MS: Not Bredesen but—. Yeah it came. McWherter because Bredesen just got in. Then Sundquist to my great surprise. I didn’t expect it because Republicans wanted Republicans and Democrats ( ). I told Don, I said, you know, I have never voted for you. I said I know it’s political because people think they’re sitting on the next right hand of Jesus, sitting there. It means nothing to me other than getting some black folk up there. Because when I first got there, I thought I was crazy we weren’t even supposed to talk.

EG: On the board of regents.

MS: Well, that’s just the unwritten. The little secretary, I would ask questions. I don’t know, I have never been on no board of regents. “Why so and so” and I said, “Where are the black folks?” I said, “I’ve lost them. I don’t see no blacks and very few women.”

EG: So you were the only black person on the—.

MS: I was the only black. I got to write the governor. We just, I was going to say, all this--my fight came to get some black presidents, some black administrators, just like it was in the school system.

EG: In the school system.

MS: There was one woman other than me, one white woman, and now we have a number of women and this--. I have to be on every selection committee because it has to

have a minority and I was it. I've been on the little state plane. It keeps me so nervous ( ) that little crop duster. So—.

EG: Do you feel that you have been able accomplish while on the board of regents getting blacks in more positions of power?

MS: Yeah, well, we've got five presidents. I have fought like a tiger. They have what they call the Maxine Smith Scholars. Charles Smith was chancellor when I got there and I just fussed all the time. I fussed because it wasn't right. So Geier, you have somewhere in your records. Geier was a plaintiff in the lawsuit charging discrimination of the universities of the state of Tennessee and it became Geier v. whoever, the whatever G-E-I-E-R. So that was, and I was actually a plaintiff. I say God. They laugh about me and say, "You've been everywhere." Said now you were a plaintiff and now you're sitting here. But anyway, because it was statewide--. I'm losing my point again. But Charles Smith, very sensitive man. He had been the state commissioner of education. He was a McWherter appointee. He was appointed the chancellor. He was the chancellor, head of the board of regents, the four to five schools under there. He set up this program called the Geier Fellows to give blacks, make them sort of like interns but at a high level. These are not kids out of college. Some have their Ph.D.s. [The program was] to make sure that there would be the exposure, the training at every level of the board of regents. They were called the Geier Fellows. I've got a little trophy there that he gave me. They changed that to the Maxine Smith Scholars, I think it is. That's one of the important things, not because of the name, [but] because I've helped a little bit black people get exposure or get not only exposure but get jobs in high rank, high level [positions] and it was almost a lonely fight. Very seldom didmy fellow regents--. I made the case so air

tight with the chancellor and with the type of--. You know, I ain't going to push no second grade president.

EG: To get promotions to like [with] the school system.

MS: Well, that's what I hope will happen to these people in the Maxine Smith Scholars program. Most often the presidents are people who come in from outside. It's open, wide open.

EG: Within the school system [they] get promotions. Some of these fellows, they started out as interns.

MS: Sort of. I think it lasts a year. And they're assigned to maybe somebody in finance, maybe assigned to the vice chancellor of finance. They assign somewhere in their own field either in the university or at the state office or somewhere so they'll be ready to be—.

EG: To be promoted.

MS: Yeah.

EG: Are these people just out of school or—/

MS: They're on jobs. [some talking simultaneously here; hard to follow]

EG: They're on their job.

MS: They're on their jobs in some related field.

EG: So they can apply for the fellowship.

MS: For the fellows. They just ( ) the other day they're getting applications. But another thing people often ask [is] what is your greatest accomplishment in the civil rights struggle? I would quickly say at some point and I still would say it: Willie Herenton. It has nothing to do with Willie Herenton who is now mayor but becoming

superintendent, a black man being recognized as *head* of *something*. That's the first time, that's why it was so much trouble getting him because even my liberal friends on the school board who'd promised they'd vote with us three blacks--. We thought we had two whites. They fought it so we had to boycott the city again. But we finally got that through. You had to turn the city upside down. Finally got ( ) black man can do it too.

EG: So you did [that] on the school board.

MS: On the school board.

EG: That you accomplished that.

MS: Yeah, well, [I] say me, it's all those who came out on Black Mondays, you know, I coordinated [it.] But it couldn't be me, Maxine is insignificant. But the greatest thing just happened. I got the note last week. We got two more black regents.

EG: That's fabulous. That's great.

MS: Un huh. I've got to write all of them. We've got three new ones. It's on a rotation now. But I told Bredesen, "Hell, I've got to have some help." Others were telling him the same thing, other Democrats. So it's the first time ever we've had more than one black at a time. We've got three black regents now, which may be representative of our sixteen percent in the state. But it's a ( ) I haven't figured it out to see whether it's enough. But it's a big job. I feel good about it.

EG: That's great. So is this the first time?

MS: Yeah. I haven't met them.

EG: You haven't.

MS: I just got the note with the names. I'm going to write, well, all three of them –[there's] one lady that's white--"Welcome to the board if I can be of, whatever I can

do." ( ) a training period and an orientation session. I missed [my orientation session. So I was a misfit from the very beginning. That's when I found out planes will leave you.

EG: The what?

MS: I say I've missed the plane to orientation. That's when I found out, planes will leave you. [Laughter.] It's been an interesting journey and all this comes back to [in a] great sense, voter registration. If you just trace it back, these are politicians who will sign this thing. It's political. It's political and having moxie with, well, more than having moxie, letting your elected officials know your power is automatic respect because the elected officials like to be elected.

EG: Yeah. Because you were saying in late '50s, early '60s the commissioners wouldn't meet with you or they wouldn't give you much respect.

MS: Uh uh. No. Uh uh. They, why? We didn't vote for them. We didn't have any power. We couldn't elect anybody but when they found out we could, that's why I gave you the other examples like Clement. [They] learned fast. Just don't be tied to anybody. That's what the Crump machine was all about.

EG: Something Russell Sugarmon emphasized to me when I talked to him about that how after '59 and 1960, you were able to make the deals with like David Harsh and Rudolph Jones and get leverage to get civil rights gains.

MS: Yeah.

EG: It's just incredible just in a year from going to being seen as like a threat to being able to negotiate and so forth.

MS: Uh huh. I just feel so feel so--. As you review these things--. You don't think of them. But I feel so fortunate to have just been a part of some of the major changes in this--. Nothing more dramatic has happened in this country than what has happened. In my life I have been the beneficiary. I have had the privilege to look at these things, not necessarily to participate, not necessarily to lead, to just be a part of it.

EG: It seems like your leadership philosophy, it's real, I mean very democratic. I remember you saying it before, "I'm not significant. The people who I worked with are."

MS: That's so true.

EG: Is that kind of your philosophy of leadership or what would your philosophy be?

MS: It's just Maxine. It's Maxine. The love of people. The day I was to announce for school board, political, politics, voter registration, I had my first heart attack. I couldn't go out. People because they loved me, they believed in me, got out and elected me. Vasco let me out for one rally. ( ) But they were out there for me. I mean what more could you want out of life than the love of people? I feel so strongly.

EG: How do you feel you were able to mobilize people?

MS: I have no idea. Because I never worked at it, I majored in French, biology. I majored in biology. I went and got my master's in French and taught school, taught French for a year or two, or I taught French for three years before we got married. When we came back home, Vasco didn't have any job. ( ) because he's so macho. His wife ain't going to work. I said, "Somebody's got to work." He hadn't opened his [dental] office here. I just happened to be free then because I didn't have any—. We had married when I left Florida A & M in '53 and going in service. He didn't go back to his

old practice. He came back here to open a practice. It took a little time. Being a captain in Air Force was no big bucks. We didn't have any money. They called me to teach at LeMoyne and he was very indignant because his wife wasn't going to work on him. "We've got to eat boy." That's just how men are.

Let me--. Just an experience. It's just one of the very emotional feelings, a spiritual moment. This year in Clarendon County, South Carolina. That's where the very first lawsuit was filed that eventually led to Brown. As I said we went to all of the cities. Clarendon County is a little spot in the middle of the road and it was something almost hallowed. I can't really describe it. We went to the church, you know, old country church. Wasn't a little bitty country church, it [was a] fair-sized church. Clarendon County is still very rural. We had gone into Columbia. That's the capital of South Carolina. Clarendon County is fifty or sixty--. Weren't any hotels or anything there. I tell you that was Martin King weekend this year because we were protesting. [The NAACP] still [has its] boycott of the state of South Carolina. We were protesting on the state house there but our mission really was to go to Clarendon County. A fellow drove up and somebody in the car on the education committee with me. "Oh there's Mr. Briggs from--." He lives in New Jersey ( ) or Pennsylvania. Somebody on the education committee knew him from their branch up there. I said Briggs. That name is familiar. The case in Clarendon is called *Briggs versus Clarendon County*. It was his father. He just put us in his little car four, whatever the car would hold, say five of us, and just took us down memory lane. Very little changed, physically taken place in the city. He showed house where the little black schoolhouse and then the white schoolhouse [was], where they lived, the house that'd burned down of the president of the NAACP. He went

how he lost his best friend. His daddy wasn't killed but they just--. Anybody who will put their name on that legal document to file suit, integrate the schools was shot down, burned out, run out of town, fired and when he said I was on a workshop with him, on a panel this last week I was in, you know, I could hardly talk. He said my daddy was my best friend and he had to leave to feed us--. He had to go somewhere else to try to get work. These weren't educated people. But I can't really describe the feeling of my adoration for those people. We don't know--. So few have done so much for so many of us. So how in the hell am I going to get out there and say Maxine did this, Maxine did that. Harry Briggs did it in South Carolina. [Linda] Brown, whatever her mama's name, her daddy's name and all over I could cite. The Medgar Evers did it. The Martin Kings did it. Maxine was just privileged. That was a privilege of 2004 of me to sit there with this man in Clarendon County and listen to that story. I've had the opportunity to do [that]. It was just more tension in Clarendon County. Say Wilmington, Delaware is a city. Washington, DC is a city. But you get the individual lives of people like the Briggs. God just gave me a great experience, that's all. It's a good thing my tear ducts are dry. I can't cry. I have lupus and I can't shed tears but I am full of--. When I am at these things I don't have to mess up my mascara. But I still feel. Quite an experience. And I say it's an opportunity for me--to make me grow.

EG: To make you what?

MS: Grow.

EG: I just want to see if there [are] any more questions—.

MS: I know. I've gotten you all off the subject.

EG: Oh no, this has been a wonderful, wonderful interview. I guess two. One is of all your accomplishments, why do you pick the one of having a black superintendent as the one you're most proud of?

MS: It was bigger than a superintendent. It was recognition of black leadership, ability of blacks. It could have been the head of the garbage—.

EG: So he was first head of any sort of--.

MS: Anything like that.

EG: Anything major.

MS: Yes. Major or minor. I believe if my memory is not correct that it was, ( ) became a good mayor. But that was symbolic of the recognition of the ability of blacks. It just happened to be a man as they most were then and still now. Another I think I told you that night I wish I had that picture. Willie and me were on the front of the *Commercial Appeal*. You know how tall he is; you've seen him I'm sure.

EG: Oh Herenton.

MS: ( ) back there. He was standing a level higher than me, which made him way tall. We couldn't speak. We just cried. I just had tears, of course, that lupus had dried up my tear ducts. That's a picture that I don't know how it got away. I don't have it. Nobody has it. It was on the front of the *Commercial Appeal*. Then when he appointed, some years later--since he was mayor that was when he became superintendent--Herman Morris, [who's] gone now unfortunately, as president of Memphis Light, Gas, and Water. Herman was our NAACP president, to see my protégés in those two very powerful [positions], the black mayor appoint the black president. It

was much bigger than Herman and Willie. It was black folks. We can and the world knows we can.

EG: Yeah, and starting from the groundwork that you did in the late '50s?

MS: Um hmm.

EG: Is there anything else that you want to add at all that we haven't talked about?

MS: I can't think of it. You can always call me and you'll catch me eventually. [Laughter.] I haven't meant to be difficult. I'm going to have to stop doing some of this running like I'm going Wednesday--. Of course this is something I don't want to go to because it's not connected—

EG: What is it?

MS: It's a sort of social service organization, a national women's organization that I don't have time [for]. I resisted being a member of it for most of my life, it's called Links Inc. It's black women. They have a little--. But I'm about to get out but if you don't go to the convention in so many years, you'll get put out. Nobody's going to put me out.

EG: No. [Laughter.]

MS: So I spent a thousand dollars keeping from being put out and then I'm going to get out. [Laughter.] That's the streak in me. First of all ( ) pile of women anyway. NAACP conventions are so different. I mean they're organized but just so wild in a sense, to the point and such good leadership. So I say going again [but] I'd rather be staying here for this. But ( ) Vasco because very few husbands. It's women. Folks bring their husbands but very few husbands. I wouldn't subject them to that. Say, it's

like a sorority. They made me president of my college sorority fifty years ago when I came back. I had to go through ( ) fifty years ago because we were married fifty years, say, oh, forty years ago. That was just before, that was in the mid '50s, just before I went to try to get into Memphis State. After that that was all she wrote. I just didn't have times for things like that. I didn't have time. I don't have time. I stay a life member of both groups because I look for them for support. I choose from them a few of the learned ( ) get out here and get some folks registered to vote. Give some money to the NAACP. Do whatever. Buy a table, and I get support from them.

EG: From the Links group.

MS: The Links.

EG: What was the other group you were referring to?

MS: My sorority, Delta Sigma Theta. But there are eight--four women and four men--major Greek organizations. I pay my dues. I get absolutely fantastic awards from them. But they're very supportive. Their aim is good but some other people take care of the sorority. Although they have service. They all have service. I make sure that they do some other than just meet and eat and say how great I [am.] But they, they're responsible for voter registration. I call ( ).

EG: So you use them as tools to get these more activist things accomplished.

MS: Yeah, they're doing better. Even the Links--. Youth things are not necessarily civil rights. They have a program national, international, youth, four national initiatives, which are good. They're good at. They can take care of well. I just don't have time to commit myself monthly or what not.

EG: What do you think can be done now and in the future things to make things better for African Americans and to get rid of if it's possible the ongoing racial discrimination that still exists?

MS: I do think we've got to insist that these things we have accomplished, the legal barriers that we've knocked down. They're gone, the legal barriers, unless we act like we still see them.

EG: Act like what?

MS: Like we still see those barriers. We do. There are still people who have the slave mentality and that's because of the evil system of discrimination and segregation that followed slavery which was probably more negative and more negative impact because it kept us as children, kept us dependent. Somehow in many areas, education. We have sixteen, eighteen standing committees and we change as the need--. And so much talk about Bill Cosby.

EG: About what?

MS: Bill Cosby and what he said. Bill Cosby told the truth. Somebody may have said [it] a little nicer. The reporter called me. I blasted them down in the dirt. I say you white folks aren't going to sit by and just ( ). ( ). "Mrs. Smith, cool it. Cool it." They called me. I didn't know why they were calling me. I happened to be sitting on the front row, right in front of Bill Cosby when he said all that. See, these are the blessings I've had.

EG: You were right there. Well, I'm not surprised--.

MS: I was there.

EG: Come to think of it.

MS: That was a part of *Brown*. *Brown* '54. That was the 50th anniversary. I was there as chairman of the education committee looking right at him. He was very blunt. I just didn't know just what their reasons [were] for asking me. I said, "Why do you?" I said, "Do you know what that occasion was all about? Have you not heard of May 17th, 1954?" I went down the line. I haven't been mad like this. This was just, with that effort. Have you ever heard of Ted Kennedy? Went down all the senators ( ). You know anything about Thurgood Marshall? All his associates are still living. I was telling him about everybody that--. Ruby Dee, Ossie Davis. They were this, that, and the other and here you are going to ask me about somebody ( ). Say you white folks aren't just going to sit by and ( ). I went off. I don't know why that ticked me off so. But getting back to your question—.

EG: You thought he was right.

MS: Yeah. As I said, somebody else would've expressed it differently maybe. He didn't pull any punches. But if we can't look at ourselves and see our face? I strongly believe that the whole system in our country has a lot of impact on that. It's a great deal responsible. Communities have not taken that responsibility on clearing off all these things. I cannot sit on my tail as a black mama, whatever mama-ing I've done is probably over, and stay dependent on welfare. All those systems [have] impacts. Although we came out of evil and cruel system, are we going to stay there? Because that system ain't going to pick us up out of it. We got to pick ourselves. My mama was poor. The year my daddy died, we wouldn't have had a turkey for Thanksgiving and might not have had one anyway if we hadn't won one with a nickel chance. She had to get out and go to work. Most black folks came up poor. Vasco's father and mother didn't have a

sixth grade education between the two of them. But they were determined that--. That's the story of most black folk of my age anyway. We fought to make it better. That's why our leadership is not doing this. [vacuuming in background] We tried to give our kids everything. The level of leadership that should've come out of the '50s, '60s. They're out buying their homes in the suburbs. There's nothing wrong [with that]. We want them to do that. But we gave them too much. We didn't give them the equipment for war. We gave them things in too many instances. So we've got to keep fighting the system while it still smothers, but we got to fight ourselves. We've got to elevate ourselves. I feel very strongly about that. We can't depend on—. I'm ornery. I don't beg Vasco. You know it's just not my nature. So we've got to depend on our own where-with-all and continue to fight the evils that make this situation like it is.

EG: Yeah so it's like two-pronged bringing ourselves up from bootstraps but also attacking the system--.

MS: That's right.

EG: --That keeps so many people down.

MS: Yeah.

EG: In the late 1950s, was apathy a problem that you ran across among blacks for participating?

MS: Not much. Nobody had ever. If there was apathy, they just hadn't belonged—.

EG: If there was what?

MS: They hadn't belonged to the system, to the fight. I don't think it was a matter of apathy because they were happy to see us. They were glad. I mean they deified

ourselves almost. That's why it was my privilege. When we first came back to Memphis, we said, "We have to find NAACP." I often say. ( ) twelve men ( ) as old as I am now and I consider myself still young. I always will until I die.

EG: I'm sure. I'm sure.

MS: But I looked at them as heroes.

EG: Looked at who as heroes?

MS: These men--they were men in those days--of the NAACP. That was the branch meeting. I was just so glad to be there. I was twenty-five-years old. So those were people very little education, and that's when our generation came and Russ [Sugarmon], and Jesse [Turner], and [H. T.] Lockard, you know I'm probably leaving out names, we got together. They started looking at us. We didn't get together. Really, they were our leaders. We just came back with fresh ideas, fresh blood. So people, there was just a small number here, but people in Fayette County were glad to see [us]. By that time, Maxine's been down there raising hell. Not necessarily me or anybody. They're glad to have us there. They were like--. Like in Clarendon County. That little church was packed. This stuff happened, ten years that case started before. That was the very first case. Fifty-four, that was maybe the lawyers started in the mid-'40s on that one. But that church was packed. The people were so glad to see us. Like the Messiah has come back--what we in the Christian faith believe. The NAACP had come to Clarendon and we were the ones. They felt, I mean we didn't even have the top dogs there. We had me and I'm national education director and two or three board members. Kweisi, Julian Bond wasn't there. It was a segment of leadership that should've been there. That was

what the visit was all about. But they looked at us in awe and I'm looking at them in awe. So I wouldn't say they were lethargic. What word did you use?

EG: Apathy.

MS: Apathy. They just had never--they didn't fight it. They didn't know black folk were supposed to be doing these things.

EG: Did you feel any resistance from people because I know like a lot of the leaders were middle class and that you dealt with more of the working, well black people then were working-class people?

MS: Uh huh.

EG: Were there any sort of conflicts?

MS: That really, that one thing. Well, I guess where there was ( ) "Why are you picketing this store?" Picketed Goldsmith's. We combined political, direct action, economic sanctions, legal. You've heard me say this--I didn't feel threatened. Heck, we made them—"Come on get on this picket line." They were my social friends, president of your bank, [A.] Maceo [Walker's] wife. They were one millionaire. I'm sure they had a million dollars back then. We just made them—"Come on take your turn on the [social?] line and give me five hundred dollar membership" and whatever way I just made them get involved. If you won't put yourself, put your money where you've got the money--.

EG: Wow.

MS: You've got a place at the table. But I haven't had any problems with my friends from whatever tier they happen to be on. We were just remarking the other day. Saturday night, we went to dinner with Vasco's oldest friends. In fact the wife and Vasco

started first grade together. Now she's very socially ( ). We're going to Atlanta together Wednesday. He had his eighty-fifth birthday Saturday. I was the baby of the bunch. Vasco had his eighty-fourth this month and so will Ruth. They're classmates. I'm ten years behind so I'm the baby of the bunch, but we just looked but that friendship has lasted. That part of my life is still there. But Ruth goes, I said, girl I haven't got time for that about a party. I said, Ruth just get it together. I still like parties but I don't dwell on them. We just say it's remarkable. It's a blessing. Eighty-five, the oldest one there was eighty-six. Seventy-four--me--with a ten-year gap between them. We had a ball. The head of the jazz department at Memphis State and one of the teachers and one of the graduates had his master's and he was so good. They both ( ) and Vasco. Those are blessings that came about from the movement. Sit down in the hotel listening and the guy from Memphis State, young guy, I had seen him out there. Never would've recognized him. He was so glad to see me. I'm the regent. I'm the one that--. I mean he didn't say this but this is the story there. I was the one that they wouldn't let in Memphis State, but now I'm on the board that controls Memphis State. That's the irony of it all.

EG: And now you're head of the education committee now of the national NAACP.

MS: NAACP.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

START OF TAPE 2, SIDE A

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END OF TAPE 2, SIDE B

START OF TAPE 2, SIDE B

EG: [What does the education committee of the NAACP do?]

MS: We [are] subject to the approval of the national board of directors which I serve on also.

EG: Julian Bond is chair.

MS: Um hmm. We make programmatic plans. Nationally we meet quarterly in person. There are four national board meetings and the committees meet at the time of the national board meetings. Often times we have telephone conferences. But we set the agenda. The staff is to activate the agenda, but it has to be approved by the board. We just happen to have a heck of a director. He's a young guy, Ph.D. from Harvard, law degree from somewhere. He's just so committed to education. God, he's in great, great demand. For the past three years we've--. *Brown* '57 was so big. You know, May 17, 1954. It has been our biggest—. Of course we have to carry on our scholarship programs. We have back-to-school, stay-in-school [programs]. We have programs that have been approved that we have to keep going. Out of Brown has come this whole reform program. See it's more than celebrating. We just commemorated Brown because it ain't ready to be celebrated. The promises of Brown have not been met yet. You may be interested just glancing--. To give you, I mean, ( ) Then, we have written every state in [the] union for a plan on what their program [is] to implement Brown. Do you know all but two states governors have applied. Now we're doing the measuring on that. All this is not because of Maxine but because of Dr. John Jackson. I call him my little baby. I was just mentioning ( ). I'm going to give you one [a booklet on education committee programs]. I've got some extra ones. Just to see what we have done. Strategic plan of where we want to be. I mean we ain't shucking and jiving. Five-

year strategic plan. We want so much improvement, measurable improvement in these areas. It's quite a program. I've shared it with the superintendent of schools once she gets some money--. She's a good lady--. The commissioner of education who is also on the board of regents--that's a given on the board of regents. I'm arranging a meeting, because she will actually be the governor's man, person--woman in this case. Superintendent--it used to be man. But actually this has got to be implemented state by state and region by region. See that's the structure and I'm not saying the structure is perfect because everybody doesn't have an education chair as they should. Every state doesn't have a state chair. But what was it, Wachovia, big insurance company—I probably said it wrong--they gave us, so impressed with John Jackson, our director, they gave a million dollars just to implement these programs.

EG: This was Wachovia?

MS: Wachovia, it's a bank.

EG: Oh Wachovia. Yeah. Yeah.

MS: He is so smart. I'm going to get up and get that too. But this is what I'm just giving you--. He heads the staff. They've got such dedicated little workers. They just love me. I've got a love affair with people really. Anything they can do for Ms. Maxine.

EG: That's great. Do you do a lot of traveling in your role as chair?

MS: Oh God. ( ) Vasco fussing at me. All the time. I travel ( ) gained all that weight back I lost ( ) weight. Eating the wrong things. I start having to carry my nitro. I sneak it out. I don't tell him. Yeah, I ( ) I didn't even think about nitro. I asked for—. I hadn't had nitroglycerin. He said well, I would expect you

to. If you did, we didn't fix it right. But now I'm abusing myself a little bit. I'm going to slow down because I can't go through that again. The second round about that. I can't--. This old body won't take it anymore. I can feel a difference physically. For the first time since surgery.

EG: Yeah, I was so sorry to hear about your health problems a few years ago.

MS: I have this scar from here to here. It's horrible. I've got a leg.

EG: I'm not surprised at all though that you were able to pull through and now are so active again.

MS: Yeah, I just don't give up.

EG: Definitely.

MS: Anything else you can think of?

EG: Let's see. [background conversation] Was there any intersections between the sit-in movement and the political action—.

MS: Was there any what? Now say that again.

EG: Intersections or do you think that the protest activities in the early '60s also made politicians more willing to respect you and listen to you.

MS: Oh very definitely. Until we got segmented—and I didn't dwell on that long—politicians began, elected officials I'll say, began picking people to hire, which was part of--. To use in some kind of way a position. They had a little evil intent in the way they did it. That was the beginning of a break in the leadership because those who were selected—. Not like the Odell Horton that we highly recommended. Generally we didn't make no recommendations. We just hired. We weren't employment bureau--. Those people had more allegiance to whoever hired them--. [books brought for Elizabeth

on NAACP education committee] These are two things. These are some of the ( ). You just take these with you. This here right here is what I was talking about.

EG: Excellent. Thank you very much. [background conversation] Oh you were saying about the fragmentation that the people who are hired--

MS: Their allegiance came to, say, that white man who hired them rather than to those masses of black people who had put the white man in the position. I'm just simplifying. So that's how you got this one over here making his little Democratic club. This one over here falling off.

EG: I saw that in the course of my research. All of a sudden there's these little political clubs all over.

MS: Your quality of elected officials is gone. They've got personal agendas. We didn't have any personal agendas.

EG: Right because you were saying before it was not about you getting benefits for yourself. It was about opening doors for the masses of people?

MS: Yeah, that's all. [*Restricted part of oral history removed by interviewer.*] [tape player turned off and on again] Classmates or and I know he was in our wedding. All of them were in our wedding. [H.T.] Lockard was president when we came back. He was carrying, he was state president when this little influx of us--. He had come back a little ahead of us because I guess he came right on back. He may not have gone service because, see, Vasco had to go to service two years. That was why we were a little behind them get back. Russell [Sugarmon] is my age and A. W. [Willis, Sr.] is my sister's age. But Vasco was intent on writing. [tape turned off]

--was a snake. Jesse was the diplomat. Russell was the intellect[ual]. We had different roles, didn't even have to rehearse it. Who's going to be bad man? Then who's going to be good one? It's just a thing of like mind. Like mind. But that was a cadre of leaders. I can remember Vernon Jordan, you know Vernon Jordan, came here. He was involved, and he was with United Negro College Fund, Urban League, ( ) and he had just never seen anything like this core of leadership that came here. All are independent, professional people in their own professions, but our lives were just here. On maybe not this floor [but] whatever house I had--we were on the floor of some house [making plans]. "What can we do? How can we do it? What's important?" But never a moment for ourselves. So many of us are leaving, have left. That's why there's an urgency.

EG: Yeah, there totally is. I saw Jordan was involved with the Southern Regional Council as director of the Voter Education Project.

MS: Yes, he was.

EG: Were you involved with that?

MS: Um hmm.

EG: What did you do?

MS: That was the first board I ever served on. I think they still send me--. I'm still on that old board member, Voter Education Project. That's when Vernon was still in Atlanta. He's quite a guy. Quite a guy. Yeah, they probably gave us that push in that area. It gave me some of that push. I don't remember. I met Vernon. He was a state secretary for Georgia.

EG: Of the NAACP?

MS: Uh huh. Medgar was for Mississippi. He was a state field secretary for the state of Georgia. We were at a meeting in Mississippi, a regional meeting. You know, just big kisses and hugs. We had good hotels and the one black lawyer down there. He had bologna and whatever so we'd have a hospitality suite. You didn't have hotels. They got homes for us to stay in and maybe something to drink. I don't remember. Vernon is quite a guy. He was standing at the door greeting everybody and I thought I was at his house. He gave me a big kiss. I said I guess I've forgotten this guy. He said, "My name is Vernon Jordan, what might be yours?" I said, "You mean I don't know you?" That's how I met him. Some[time] he started calling me mama. He never comes to this town. He stays here. He won't stay at a hotel. He stays here. He spoke for the NAACP the year before last. He wouldn't take a penny. Now they can ( ) he gets huge bucks ( ). He gets more than a million dollars just for [being] on the boards he serves on. So, but he's my child, stays over. But he was so impressed about—. We were all growing together. I'm six or seven years older than Vernon.

EG: By the leadership that was here?

MS: Yeah. Uh huh. As a race, we did a lot with so little. We were the privileged. That little cadre I mentioned. When you look at the masses. They just believed. They just believed and saw us as the deliverers in a sense I guess you'd call it. There was never a feeling of rank—you on this team I'm no this team. We just in there together.

EG: Yeah, it's really something all that you were able to accomplish.

MS: Yeah.

EG: And Ben Hooks was telling me that Memphis was a model for other cities in terms of voter registration and so forth.

MS: It was.

EG: He said that people would come to Memphis to learn about--.

MS: Yes, they would. Like I mentioned Vernon. We had a friendship but he would come to Memphis to see. We'd take our little pamphlets and things to the NAACP meetings. Other politicians, that was a nonpartisan thing. But it was a model for other cities.

EG: In the '60s, they would flock to Memphis to learn about your strategies.

MS: That's right. They sure did. No doubt about it.

EG: So it was people in the NAACP and others cities and areas.

MS: Uh huh and people with political interests or civic interests. We would be called to go to other cities to tell the story. I've made reference to ( ) among those New York Negroes who thought they were the greatest thing in the world. [Laughs.] I said, y'all when I go away I make y'all sound good. But y'all ain't nothing either. [Laughter.] I had a different speech for different audiences. Well, the same I didn't veer from the truth.

EG: Was it mainly people in South [but] also people in New York and across the country?

MS: Yes, I came up there to speak because for the tri--. New York, New Jersey. They've got a Tri-State something. Some branches that are close together--three states, New Jersey, New York, maybe Pennsylvania, up in there. I spoke at a lot of places across the country, because they were amazed. Black folks in South were kind of ahead--

we were ahead of a lot of northern areas. There weren't any segregation laws, but Harlem wasn't exactly a beauty spot. Had we not become [as] you say apathy, complacent--that set in when we got a few jobs, when we knocked down, when we had a few briefcases. I say, hell, they've got nothing [but pork chop sandwiches?]. I'm glad to see you with a briefcase. That came down and we got a little token advancement, and if we had continued that push, that drive of the late '50s and early '60s, we would have not been as much in the dilemma. ( ) time, we didn't have the drug problem. A lot of things we didn't have. Have the impact. All the different kind of promiscuousness that we just didn't have. I was just telling somebody. When I was in school, I remember one girl got pregnant. Now everybody is pregnant. Seventy-five percent of black babies are born to teenagers, well, no marriage involved. So we've let down a lot of things.

EG: So in the, I guess was it mid to late '60s when things got more complacent?

MS: Yeah. I would say so.

EG: So, there just weren't as many protests going on? I'm trying to get a little more specifics about how that happened.

MS: I guess then another thing [is] that see about by '65 we had removed every legal barrier of discrimination in Memphis, maybe Tennessee, wherever. I mean we had federal laws everywhere but we ( ) and complacency. But still--. Jobs weren't there.

EG: Was it harder to mobilize people then?

MS: Yes. You know what really brought people back, didn't last that long, then we started making [the] other--. The sanitation workers. Who would've ever thought? This was long before Dr. King came. The sanitation [workers]--we'd been working on this through [the] NAACP to get [them] decent working conditions, pay and everything,

perks. But whoever thought sanitation workers because they were ( ) of society. Nobody ever articulated that. But that was the force that brought us together. Then of course the aftermath, Dr. King came. That pushed on to [the] school board.

EG: Then there was heightened protest like--. Well first started with the voter registration for '57--.

MS: Uh huh.

EG: Then the push with the sit-in movement--.

MS: Uh huh.

EG. And then with the legal barriers broken, more of this complacency--.

MS: Uh huh.

EG. And then picked up again with sanitation strike and the school board?

MS: Uh huh. ( ) candidates. Another analogy that I've been given talking about *Brown*. What has *Brown* done? That's what I told these ladies, "*Brown* made you governor. *Brown* let your company give that million dollars. *Brown* let you manage this hotel. *Brown* put you as CEO of American Express." These are black folks now. Rosa Parks might not have gotten tired if *Brown* hadn't passed. There's a whole litany of things that people don't realize. *Brown* did that. *Brown* may have done everything right but desegregate schools. That may be our biggest failure, not that it's a failure but when you look at those grades, the grade levels. Those are the promises of *Brown*. That's what we've got to--. Our kids are down there worse than they were. Making all these side invasions of the whole movement. The things Bill Cosby talked about. I see all this as a continuum.

EG: So you mean the grade levels—.

MS: You can see here the different grades in the book there.

EG: In the education book. Sure. I actually just remembered I had this. I ran across this in your--. I have been looking at your papers at the library.

MS: Oh yeah. I've got to get--. Is there anything to see up there?

EG: Yeah. Yeah. Oh yeah. I ran across this document *Organizing a Successful Registration Campaign* by W. C. Patton that he did in 1966. And I was wondering how closely you followed this as he talks about there would be registration drives for like seven weeks at a time?

MS: Uh huh.

EG: Would be one of the strategies. And there would be, you talked already about there would be a car pool.

MS: Yes.

EG: And a publicity committee.

MS: Yeah. You're reminding me. Maybe I'd better go look at my papers. [Laughter.]

EG: Did you contact like WDIA and newspapers and television stations about--?

MS: Oh yeah, we had more support from black-oriented in those days--radio stations black-owned. We fought. See that's another fight. We had to fight to get ownership, control of the media. We fought to get writers in the newspapers, ownership of radio stations. See the fight has no boundaries really. This is really a reminder of so many things that [are] pushed way back in the archives of my mind.

EG: Well, I saw even WDIA had a white owner for a while even though [the station was] black programming.

MS: I can remember so well. What is the man, a decent guy.

EG: Bert Ferguson?

MS: Bert. He said, "Well, Maxine what do you want? I've got so and so and so and so." I said, "I want your job. It's as easy as that. That's all."

EG: Did you have like a recruiting committee that would find new workers in the voter registration?

MS: Oh yeah.

EG: A telephone committee.

MS: Yes. We had to get block workers. Each block. The idea would have been for an average-sized block. Some people, a lot of people had to take two or three blocks, recruiting people to be responsible.

EG: Oh a speakers bureau to appear before churches, sororities. Like public meetings.

MS: Yeah. You know how we--. [Laughter.]

EG: I thought this was close to what. Even though this was put out in '66--you must've done--finance committee to do fundraising.

MS: Yeah we had to do it. ( )

EG: Oh and here it talks about—.

MS: Some of these folks had cars and we had to run and chauffeur them and get gas. We'd give them so much a gallon of gas. I'm glad gas didn't cost two dollars. But it wasn't, we just, nobody had their hands out or anything.

EG: Oh block captains to make progress reports weekly to the leaders of sections.

MS: Yes. Those were some good days. Those were some good days.

EG: Oh and then you were director so you coordinated all this.

MS: Yes. Not too long ago I was on a plane coming from somewhere and then a young man--. I heard somebody call my name. He said I think you know some of my relatives or something. He said, "My name is W. C. Patton Jr. I said, "Baby, your daddy was my mentor."

EG: Another one of those connections like that—like with Clarendon County with the Briggs.

MS: Yes, that's right. I knew he had three little children. I probably ran into them some, and that was one of the little children. He had a very good job. So I've forgotten what it was but I was, we talked all the way because I want ( ) shut up because you see I don't ever shut up.

EG: How long was Patton in the NAACP office in Memphis? You said after he got kicked out of Alabama.

MS: Probably until he retired. Because maybe he went back to the national office. I'd have to look back at--. The thing about it. They were out of business for eight years in Alabama.

EG: Yeah, so the '60s he was there?

MS: Yeah, he was there during those times on through the '60s. Fifties and '60s. Because it took--. I would say he was here at least ten years.

EG: Oh okay. I ran across a transcript of an interview he did that's at Duke University now and he talked about how the Memphis branch was one of his best branches. So I remembered you mentioning him before. I was really glad to find an interview that he did. Did you have weekly pep rallies?

MS: Probably so, yes we did. Yes, we did.

EG: He says here "special attention should be given by the director and campaign chairman to the weak spots in the campaign."

MS: Um hmm.

EG: "And that's why it's important to have good active people."

MS: See we do, see Forty-Eighth Ward stayed today, I don't know if the demographics have changed so much. ( )

EG: That was I learned one of your more active wards.

MS: Yeah.

MS: The Forty-Eighth Ward. ( ) because that retained its leadership for a long time. I'd have to look at them again but as I said they've changed it.

EG: Frank Kilpatrick?

MS: They've changed it. Frank Kilpatrick, yeah.

EG: That's still I think your husband mentioned that, [at] the reception at the library [that] still that ward has the greatest length of turnout of any one—.

MS: What now?

EG: It's still the Forty-eighth is still ( ).

MS: It probably, the last time we really looked at it that way, because those things get deeply ingrained. That's where Jesse Turner lived. That's where Rufus Thomas, well Rufus wasn't doing anything but his wife Lorene [was]. See all them are dead now, but they left roots there.

EG: Was she helping you in the late '50s.

MS: Oh yes, she helped me too. She went away from here. Oh God. She was such a wonderful woman.

EG: Mr. Lockard mentioned Alzada Clark.

MS: Yeah, Alzada. I've got to call her.

EG: Oh is she still around?

MS: Yes she was elected as a delegate but she's just getting weak. Jesse Turner's widow was [also] at the [recent NAACP national] convention. Not that they're that much older but they're a little more infirmed than I am. I'm healthier. So many are dead now. Oh God, I'm getting lonesome ( ) said y'all are leaving me too fast now. I've lost some--. Look back and--.

EG: That's another reason to write the memoirs now so you can tap into the people who are still around and their memories and so forth.

MS: Yeah.

EG: How did you keep politicians accountable who you helped elect like with the Shelby County Democratic Club?

MS: Well, as I said the way, the classic example is we just didn't send Clement to the U.S. Congress.

EG: So they knew next time that they wouldn't ( )

MS: Yes. That's one that I can remember well. Oh people, they did, I've got to look at it again, how much they fight for the black vote. Then we had another mission too that is to get blacks elected too. A lot of attention went there.

EG: Did you feel that when blacks were elected to public office that they made as much an impact toward improving, toward getting gains for African Americans as you had hoped.

MS: Uh uh. Because you had a different caliber of blacks, a different quality. Their agendas were different than ours. Those gains, those legal barriers and all that, we had done that. But they should've moved in the more sophisticated--. But they were out there--. I don't like to generalize. Too much was for sale. You know, when you catch politicians taking three thousand dollars under the table with the recorder under. You've got a funny type. You see folks getting handouts or paying to mess up a ballot. ( ) Politicians to do something. Those things were unheard of in our day. People became disillusioned. You had so many the leaders out there they thought leading folks nowhere. They were self-described leaders. That's why I have problems with that word. Nobody knows they're a leader but them. I'm not saying it's all dismal now because hopefully whatever we did would make a permanent difference. Now a young man came to me, somebody invited me to lunch with a young guy, he's a lawyer. He was the city attorney. He was about fortyish. Just very, very young. He wants to run for school board because of the conditions. I've worked with him on committees in my old age. That to me is hopefully evidence that young people--. He has a nice law practice. He ain't looking for nothing. He serves his public. He serves as city attorney. ( ) that breed. I hope that's an indication that that breed is returning.

EG: When did you see this breed of good leadership that was intent on using their political power for the black community, did you see that go away in late '60s when blacks started getting elected to office?

MS: I would think so. Uh huh. Uh huh. Maybe late ’60s. Let me get these--.

EG: When the elected to—.

MS: Really I’d say later than that. Because during the ’70s, see I was on the school board in ’71. We were fighting. So it’s later than that. For twenty-four years I fought like hell and I didn’t have--. You didn’t have that many black elected officials using the school board. White was ( ) up as a stepping stone to something else. You begin to see their fringe of selfishness come in.

EG: In the ’70s?

MS: People using the school. I’m thinking just about the school board. I don’t think there is a more noble political position and folks said ( ) I know politicians that say, “How’d you get here? You were elected.” I said, “I’m an educator.” People see [being on the school board] as a way to get their name out there--to get an image out there to go to other offices. I guess that in my mind and they weren’t necessarily black people. Although some blacks were beginning to do it because we always did what white folks did. White folks were going from school board to judge and something else. That was the beginning [that] I can remember now of motives—as you’re making me recall--other than service surfacing.

EG: In the ’70s.

MS: Um huh. Because we used to work very closely with elected officials and getting the right people to run. When I left the school board after twenty-four years I should’ve been happy to turn loose but there were still problems. My protégé Peggy Harvey. I said, “Peggy you’ve got to run.” She died before she finished her first term. Just a feisty, smart, mean, I couldn't stand her. We fussed together ( ) death but

she was everything I wanted. Not that I said, "That's my seat folks. Don't you mess up my seat." Then I got A. W. Willis when she died. I said, "Ossie you've got to take A. W. Willis." But he wasn't interested in politics. That was really up to the '90s because I came off it in '96. [*Restricted information of oral history removed by interviewer.*] A lot of whites have come from our fight to get district elections. They never would've had a chance to get elected. Nobody knew them either. They didn't have that ( ) or anything else. ( ) help or hurt the system or help racism in a lot of cases. Those first guys, he was president of, oh God, what's one step off of--. ( ). Oh what kind of society. Ku Klux Klan.

EG: White Citizens Council.

MS: No, no, no. Little more recent than that. ( ) God, he hated black folks, and we sat next to each other on the school board. Seats are alphabetical. Somebody's name. But he was too mean like he'd get up. [I'd say,] "Bring me a cup of coffee, go to the--." He wouldn't even bring me a cup of coffee.

EG: Is this someone you served with on the school board?

MS: Uh huh. James Birch Society. He was president of the James Birch Society—.

EG: Oh John Birch.

MS: Yeah, John Birch. Yeah, that's what it is. Nobody ever heard of him. He went on from there to the court because he was a raging segregationist on the school board. I was so glad he got beat by a black guy. [laughter] Oh me.

EG: I wondered too if you felt accepted as a black member of the school board by the fellow people who were on the school board?

MS: I've never let anybody not accept me. Just real small ones are nothing to me. Anybody too little to get you a cup of coffee. I mean he was a nobody to me. I've always have had faith in Maxine. I know who I am. I don't mean I'm cocky. That may be how I'm saying the same thing. But the school board there were nine of us: three blacks, three in betweens—they call liberals, and three conservatives ( ). So if, although generally whites worked ( ) together there was some reason there were some--. On issues like superintendent we didn't have three. So we had to make the five, the majority. We had to upset the city again. We had to make ourselves big. I thought it was their privilege to sit there with me. That's the cockiness in me. No, I didn't think about rejection. I had the right to be there. I was duly elected.

EG: I guess what I was getting more at was did you feel that you were mistreated at all because you were a black woman on the school board by--?

MS: Not really. They couldn't mistreat me because we were equals. I just would get frustrated because I couldn't get a majority vote for most of the things I wanted without--. Memphis responds to crisis rather than being creative. ( ) Dr. King. All we had to do was give them a nickel raise. That's about all they got. I'm not advocating that. Their needs and their requests were so minor.

EG: It seems like these dramatic protests that you had to do was what was necessary to force change like the Black Mondays and eighteen-month movement and so forth.

MS: That's right.

EG: The political action worked to some extent with some things but the protests almost seem more effective.

MS: Yeah, it does. That's what people said.

EG: It seems too with political activity that sometimes you weren't able to get the person in power you ideally wanted to get in office, but you were able to defeat a more segregationist candidate.

MS: That's true. The lesser of the evils. Um hmm. That makes a difference. Maybe a stepping stone. Not what you want but like after the Black Mondays, we restructured the school board. Three ( ) we were all seeing ( ) more. That was the beginning. We just weren't going to have any more. ( ) make them think you, let them know you think you ought to have some more. Now we've got the seven out of the nine. As I say sometimes I don't know how good ( ). It's not always the right seven.

EG: Did you have, looking at this document again about voter registration stuff, [a] recognition program at the end for recruiters?

MS: Yes, we always had that.

EG: With certificates and stuff.

MS: Yes, certificates. Oh gosh. That means so much to people. That means so much.

EG: Yeah, did you have citizenship training schools?

MS: Yes, I remember that at LeMoyne College. At one session. I don't know how many we had. It was like going to school. See these are just very ordinary people. They felt like they were going--. We had a certificates and by that time, we had people in various, it might not have been all black but people, whites, they'd been put there.

Different levels of government, fundamental things. There were rights that they didn't know. And it was at LeMoyne Campus and it was like getting a little college degree.

EG: Did you teach these schools?

MS: Yeah, I—.

EG: You organized it.

MS: I organized them. But we had people from the different levels of government. That was during my days as executive secretary. By that time the whole program had come of course with all the help we—.

EG: So the citizenship training schools took place in the 1960s?

MS: It had to take place in the '60s. Yes.

EG: Like the Shelby County Democratic Club, [were] there any white supporters of the club?

MS: Very, very few. I can't even remember any. But as we began to elect more liberal whites, they became supporters.

EG: Because I saw like Hunter Lane--. I ran across a document where he gave like a contribution to Shelby County. What about with the NAACP work in late '50s and early '60s, were there any white supporters at all?

MS: Very few, some. But very few. Judy Draper, I could count the names almost.

EG: Did they support in terms of giving money or—

MS: Judy was thrown in jail with us.

EG: In the protests.

MS: ( ) just died recently. Now the money started coming really in the late ’70s.

EG: With the Freedom Fund.

MS: With Freedom Fund. With money ( )

EG: With the tables where you’d have the corporate leaders.

MS: That’s when they came. We have a few memberships. See like Judy was a member. ( ) Generally, whites just weren’t involved. Vasco can tell you more about this Leadership Council or whatever. There [were] black leaders meeting with the white leaders. White folks just generally weren’t involved. What’s this Panel of American Women, that was a group of white women who reached out to us some and then this luncheon group. ( ) somebody’s house or somebody’s church and they started eating lunch and things out there. It was the beginning but that was almost post-King.

EG: During early ’70s.

MS: Yeah. But the money started coming, I think the first dinner was ’76 of any size. We got the corporate tables and all that.

EG: Does this follow the old saying, “Plan your work and work your plan. Successful outcome [will not come] by wishful thinking. People plus plans plus hard work and some [finance will] yield success.”

MS: What are those out of the papers, out of some things I wrote.

EG: Here, I’ll let you look at it. It was [in] one of the folders on voter registration [in] your papers.

MS: Oh, this is Mr. Patton. That sounded like Mr. Patton. Oh he really taught us now. ( ) I wish we'd do this again. Do you know that's still the most successful way. That's Mr. Patton right there. Patton: "Plan your work and work your plan." That is Mr. Patton pure. See, I had a good teacher. I had a good teacher. He was plain old, plain old. He was all at the national meetings. I ( ) around and somebody would they got a minute I would run to Mr. Patton. Oh he was quite a character. He hasn't been dead too long. I don't know what too long means now.

EG: You did a lot of work with churches too. I know that it was fundamental to voter registration, political action, endorsing candidates.

MS: Yeah, our churches used to, wasn't, ( ) we had people at the doors. You had to be a member of any church. I'm a member ( ) I said my church. Now last Sunday I brought two or three home. Most people, we have [knocking on table] ( ) getting out to vote now.

END OF INTERVIEW

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