

Interview with Thelma Caldwell for the YWCA of Asheville 100 Years Oral History Project by Dorothy Joines on November 18, 1992

JOINES: This is November the eighteenth 1992, Dorothy Joines, talking with Thelma Caldwell. And I first heard about you from Florence Ryan who last week turned ninety-eight. And I said, who is Thelma Caldwell. And it was a great introduction for me because I made up my mind that one way or another I was going to have some time with you. And I went to the meeting where all of you were being honored. And we'll talk about that as we go on historically. But start out with you and where you began and how you became involved and what you did.

CALDWELL: Well, I was born in Rockingham, North Carolina. And that's a small town on the other side of Charlotte, North Carolina about seventy miles. And I went to school, college, Shaw University in Raleigh. And after I graduated from Shaw University I taught school in my hometown for ten years. And that's where I met my husband. He was a CCC Camp director and he was being transferred to Portland, Maine. And so it meant that I had to resign if I was going to be with him to go to Portland, Maine, so I resigned teaching and went to Portland, Maine.

And it was an experience that I, that's hard to describe because I could never, could never forget it. It was my first real contact with a white person. Our superintendent came to the schools and he, of course, distanced himself.

We went to town every afternoon. I have another friend that I just visited recently in Washington. And we laughed and talked about it every afternoon. We didn't have anything else to do. We walked about a mile to town, looked around, window shopping, bought a little stuff and then came on back.

And, after going to Portland, Maine, though, it was an experience like day and night. I'd never had any contact, as I said, with a white person on a social level. And there, oh, we were just on the dance floor and we were going places together. And someone heard about me at the YWCA and invited me up to a public affairs meeting. And I went there and fell in love with the YWCA. And I'm still in love with the YWCA. They took me in like I was a long lost friend. I'd never felt so welcomed. I just felt like I had been knowing them all my life.

So I started taking classes there. I took an art class. Didn't even know anything about art, but I just took an art class there. And I visited their various public affairs attendance. And, one day they were going to bring Joe Lewis there. And I was to bring a few friends from the USO. All of us went. And that place was really, really crowded.

They'd never seen--. They didn't know that that many blacks were in Portland, Maine, because when I went there there was only five families, five black families living there. And we worked with the sailors as they came in from the ports, my husband did. And I just worked with (unclear) just did anything to make programming.

We had all kinds of little games and activities and naming. And would start sometime with one person's name in a row and see how many could remember each person's name all the way around until you get back to the next person. And that was stuff even they hadn't gotten, you see. So that was new to them.

So, after I got so good in Portland--. I guess I was in Portland, Maine. I just felt like that I went there first as a volunteer and they kept saying you do so many little things up and out of the place so much that they suggested that I become a professional worker. And they wrote themselves, the director did, to Wilmington, Delaware. And they made me the teenage program director.

And so I had three applications from the YWCA and (unclear). I said what kind of place is this where you can get three applications to go to work. I could have gone to Philadelphia. I could have gone to New Jersey and other places in New Jersey. And then I chose Wilmington, Delaware. And that's where I went for three years as a teenage program director.

And it was the most widening experience I think I ever, I really ever had. I just don't know. It just beat teaching all together, and yet I thought teaching was great because I had the eleventh grade and then the twelfth grade. It was first eleventh grade and then extended it by a grade to the twelfth. And I just thought boy, this is something. I put my whole self into it and before I could do anything they were saying come to Dayton, Ohio. And that's where I went and spent, I think it's eleven or twelve years in Dayton, Ohio.

And I went there as a branch, what they call a branch executive. And as a branch executive director you, you work in your neighborhood which was in my particular case, it was a black community. So it was called the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA. So I worked there in Dayton until, oh, I got promoted I guess I would say to associate executive director. And then I retired and came home. My husband's job gave out and came home.

And wasn't home before too long before they said they--. I got a letter wanting to know if I'd like to go to Horton, Papua, New Guinea. And I said, Papua, New Guinea, where in the world is Papua, New Guinea. And they laughed and they, we knew that was the first thing you were going to ask, where in the world is Papua, New Guinea. I said, yeah. I'm just ready to go. So, maybe it was six or eight months later that I left here and went to--. I left here on a leave of absence I would say and went to Papua, New Guinea.

And when they saw me--. I don't know what they were expecting because they had the picture. But they stood there and just looked. They didn't come to embrace me. They didn't do it. They just looked. And finally, the girl from Australia who had was, had married one of the Papua, New Guineas, she put her arms around me and then the other girls all came up and put their arms around me. What was this like?

And all the way in the car to the YWCA they talked, the, the New Guinea language, a pigeon language. And I couldn't understand what they were talking about. But they would laugh and talk and just be very excited about what they were saying. I sat back there and my stomach just going

around and around. I was wondering well, who are they talking about? Is it me? I would know if they was talking about me. So I gave it up as being meek because they finally, I could see they did accept me. And I stayed there and worked with them and—

DJ: Did they ever tell you what their reaction was?

TC: No. I don't think I ever asked them. And they were all colors. Because a little girl put her arm out beside mine one day and she said, brown, brown like me. But they varied in colors. They were almost as light as you are as far as light skinned would be because they were mixed with the Australians already, you see. So that made them a different—

DJ: But you never found out what they expected?

TC: No.

DJ: You still wonder.

TC: They accepted me. And figured it must have been all right.

DJ: And you were there for a year?

TC: Yeah. I stayed there one year. And, I didn't know how you would describe it except it was hot. And that would be, that would be the truth, hot, so hot that you could not put your hands on the table to write or anything like that unless you put a cover or a piece of paper or a towel or something under it. It was just hot. And there were two seasons, the rainy season and the hot season. And it was hot all the time, although the season that it rained it was real muggy, muggy hot.

DJ: And you had to make your own clothes?

TC: Yes. I loved to do embroidery work anyway. Needlework was one of my hobbies. So I began to take their patterns. And then be very reasonably could making my own embroidery around the yoke and the neck and down the front. I made several like that.

DJ: You couldn't wear the clothes you took with you.

TC: No. It was too hot for that. I carried mostly slacks. I had a dress or two but mostly slacks. And the dresses just didn't look like their dresses so I wanted to get in their clothes. And yet, Mr. Morie, I think that was his name, SiMorie, said that he would like for people who came from outside of his country to wear their garb so that they could see how we dressed and how people from other countries dressed rather than coming and copying immediately, you know, putting on what they had on. But that's what I did.

DJ: So it made you more acceptable.

TC: Yes. I felt that they accepted me more.

DJ: Did you learn their language?

TC: Just a few words. I could say buma-ha and like that and good morning and good night and good morning, you know, little things like that.

DJ: You said earlier that you loved teaching but there was something about Y work that was even more special. Can you tell me about that?

TC: Yes. I think it was. It was not a subject so much that I was teaching but it was teaching, working with people. And there we were in to changing

attitudes and ideas. And it seems to me that that was how you would get to really know them. You just wanted to be with them. You learned to love them instead of loving your subject. You know you weren't teaching English or teaching history, you were really just being with the people and working with them in a way that they felt--. They didn't really know they were being taught I don't think. I mean I think they just kind of accepted you and you accepted them and kind of mingled together.

DJ: You touched a lot of lives.

TC: A lot of lives, I have. And I have to look in my scrapbook sometimes to bring them all back. And then, when I do look at the scrapbook I can remember, oh, yeah, I see now what happened.

DJ: And you could see changes because of you.

TC: Yes. I could see myself changing, too. [Laughs] I learned as much from them it seems as they did from me.

DJ: You had a lot of shifts that you had gone through, a lot of shifts from going into a northern city and finding that the Y was very accepting, and then, knowing that--. With coming to Asheville, had you any experiences in Asheville before? Did you know about the city when you were--?

TC: I had a schoolmate here. And she's passed since I've been here. But I knew she was here. And that's where I stayed the first two or three nights and then after---.

This house right here was being built, the Slaughter house, Mrs. Slaughter. And then I moved in with Mrs. Slaughter and I stayed for the year. And after that year I built this house with my husband, we built the house here. We bought the land from Mr. Daly and built a house here.

And so, I saw them build my house. And every morning at eight o'clock, I declare, I've never seen anything more punctual, those hammers would stop. They were on time. They worked and then when time for lunch, they'd stop and they'd start right back on time. They did not waste time. I just couldn't help but admire seeing someone look as if they were enjoying the work that they were doing.

And Mr. Robinson really enjoyed building this house. He would show it off and tell people different features about it and things that he let me add to it and things that he had brought in from, you know, a design that he had found. And we just worked together on building it. So it's really my house.

DJ: You have a beautiful location and view of the city, and a neighbor behind you that you cared about and lovely rockwork at the front.

TC: Beautiful rockwork. They took pride in doing it. That was one of the things that made me happy about it. They, they enjoyed it.

DJ: What was Asheville like when you first came? You came with the hat and glove time.

TC: Oh, yes. I, you wouldn't dare go to church without your hat and gloves. And, and it was nice, you know. I mean it makes you feel good going with



your hat and gloves because you knew Sunday was Sunday and that was one of the ways you would know.

DJ: What church did you go to?

TC: I went to--. I attended all of them. My husband hadn't come. I used to visit around several churches and finally settled at Mount Zion Missionary Baptist Church. And it--. Of all the churches, one of them girls told me, of all the churches, you would go and choose that one. But that's, that's where the young lady that I, you know, replaced was speaking at the church on something. I've never really known too much about it. She spoke up and whatever she said didn't please the pastor or something. And he said something about, you told me that. And she dropped in her seat and she stayed in a stroke period for the rest of her life until she died. And so that was the period that I, that was that situation.

DJ: This was in church that it happened?

TC: It was church where the girl dropped down back into her seat from something that the minister said to her. And I never could it straightened out. But I didn't know that at the time. And so when I joined the church is when the preacher said you would go and join. I said that was the one I wanted to go to.

DJ: Well, you were called then because she was incapacitated.

TC: Yes.

DJ: And they needed--. They needed somebody.

TC: Yes. I had resigned from Portland, Maine. I was home not a whole year before they needed, they called me to come. And so I decided, well, I'll come and see. But I had made a reservation and had transported everything to go overseas with my three friends from Dayton, Ohio, two friends from Dayton, Ohio. And so they waited because that was in March and I came here in September.

DJ: And you were going to do what overseas?

TC: Oh, just visiting.

DJ: No Y work?

TC: No Y work, no, just, just going from place to place. When we got in Ireland the friend that was with us, that was her home. And so we went sightseeing all over. That was just my year. [Laughs] That's my treat to me.

DJ: And then they got you again.

TC: Yeah. I wasn't sure that that was--. I was through with the Y. I wasn't going to have to--. I wasn't even--. Any job I've ever worked on had teaching and was teenage program director. I would always leave that job with a good spirit (unclear) because you never know when you want to come back. You never know when you're going to get a reference. And, oh, I wouldn't leave otherwise so I was, I was in good spirits when I left.

DJ: Were you surprised when they called you?

TC: Yes. I thought, well, these guys, you know, I'll try it again.

DJ: Well, you really got yourself into a very difficult period.

TC: But see here there was two, there was a branch and a central. That's what we called them. The one on 23 Grove Street was called the central and the one over here on, what's the street over on, Ashland, that was called a branch. And my job, of course, having come from Portland, Maine, I knew it could work, you see. And my job was to see that they, they got together. We integrated. We went to break it down desegregation and at the same time we were getting exposure and maybe learning from each other things that we'd never learned, you see, in the classroom because you didn't have that kind of a contact.

So, when we moved here, when I came back, we were in the midst of building. They already had raised most of the money for the building. And they were going to build over here on South Richfork, the lower end. And someone found a better location. So I know that one of these pictures on January the thirteenth, I think the early morning (unclear) Mrs. Bryant was on, well that was when we had the dedication, the breaking of the ground. So I helped build this one up here because that was mine. That's where I started from the ground up when we built the YWCA. And they stayed there until I went over, till I retired and then I went overseas.

DJ: Tell me more about Asheville when you were here and the changes that you saw.

TC: Well, when I came it was just two, two separate buildings. And one night we went up there for what they call electoral. They had electors, I think they were called. There was members who could vote. And we had an

annual meeting. And I carried evidently too many. And that was a little more than Winston Hull wanted to see.

DJ: I don't understand.

TC: We carried too many blacks. This is one of the first occasions in which a lot of black people went to the central building. And see they would come for our annual meeting, be one or two. But when they had their annual meeting I just carried a batch of them. So there were too many for Mrs. Hull. She said she wasn't coming back if you were going to take over that one, too. Said we wasn't planning on taking that one, too, but we were there that night.

DJ: She was the director of the—

TC: She was the president of the YWCA. She was executive director--. I beg your pardon. She was the executive director of the YWCA.

DJ: Who were you all responsible to, headquarters, YWCA headquarters?

TC: First, it would be before we integrated and such, it was local YWCA that was responsible to the central YWCA.

DJ: So you were responsible to Mrs. Hull?

TC: She was the president. I was responsible to Mildred Parker.

DJ: Mildred Parker.

TC: Do you know that family?

DJ: I know the Parker family.

TC: Yeah.

DJ: That's Mary Parker and Frank.

TC: Yeah, Frank and Joe, that, that part, that family.

DJ: And they were involved with the Y as—

TC: It was their--. It was their Art I believe who was the executive director of the YWCA when--. I think so. I may have it mixed up, but I think it was their Art (unclear).

DJ: So how would you function and meet and make plans in the city? How would--? How would these two separate organizations—

TC: Only through--. At first it was only through the president, the chairman of the committee, or administration and myself. We would meet with the executive director and the board. That was the only connections we were having.

The black and whites were not mixing as such. And that's where I came into play was to try to get these two organizations as one. So the one organization--. It was one organization when I left and it's still one organization.

DJ: And, your experience in Portland let you—

TC: It freed me, I would say.

DJ: You knew.

TC: Because I knew it could happen. I knew it could work without the fences and the walls up because I had that experience with the USO, the girls coming and going and the sailors coming and going. It was, it was just like day and night experience. You went from a small town in the south where there was no mixing to, to a place where they went out of their way to mix, you know. And that was sort of the differences.

DJ: And knowing that you were able to convey that faith and competence to other people.

TC: I tried to and I think I did.

DJ: And you had a lot going for you, too. It was fortunate that you both had a new building.

TC: Yes. The central building was not new but it was, it was a residence and it was the Y. It was called the Y. And then when we started here and built the YWCA I guess what years was in between, like three or four years maybe, that building was, we were spending too much money on it. The plumbing was costing and everything. The electrician was costing. All this wiring and things were wearing out. They decided that we could try working in one organization. And so it was in building this, this branch here became just the YWCA.

DJ: That was fortunate.

TC: Yeah.

DJ: It was fortunate that you weren't dealing with two brand new buildings.

TC: No, just the one.

DJ: And, then you'd have that as an additional hurdle. The Y pool is very impressive. And that must have been not only very expensive to build and a lot of background on that, but a cohesive factor. Can you talk about that?

TC: Well, I think the--. It was something that they felt maybe blacks wouldn't use too much, you know. There was just all kinds of little excuses on the side for not really building it. But once we closed, was in the process of closing the Grove Street building, we knew we would have to have a pool.

DJ: Was there one at the Grove Street?

TC: Yeah, that was it. That was the only place there was a pool was at the Grove Street building. See, the branch didn't have a pool. And they pretended we wouldn't use it anyway if we had one because at that time blacks didn't want to get their hair wet. And they thought that might have something to do with it and so they wouldn't be attending. But, they didn't. They would go in the pool about as much as they've always gone in the pool.

DJ: And the fact that it was too expensive could fix that up.

TC: Yeah. That was it. Too expensive because they would say there was, catch hold of one of the pipes and it would break above where they were holding and so they couldn't--. It was just going to be too expensive to fix over.

And I remember one of the trustees was a Mr. Gill. And he said that he just felt like now was the time when we did it. Just go ahead into it. I

had good support. There was some, of course, who did not, who said they wouldn't be back, you know, that kind of thing. But we still moved on.

DJ: You mentioned the boosters. Can you tell me about that?

TC: Yeah. The boosters is a club that was--. The boosters got started while I was overseas. Jo Duckie was the executive director while I was gone. She was the program director while I was here. And so she was the executive director while I was gone. She was acting executive director.

And I don't know how the boosters got really started, under whom. I believe just a few of the black women decided they wanted something that they called their own and they started the booster club. And it became very supportive for the YWCA but it was separate. They met as a black unit.

And of course I had been working so hard. I had worked so hard to get everything integrated, all the fourth grade swimming classes and all those things. I just thought (unclear).

DJ: Two steps forward, one step back.

TC: And I remember Mr. Hite who said I would never integrate it. And I said I was going to integrate. And surely enough, we got it integrated but--. I think the only thing to do was to--. Asheville's, the YMCA finally did it. They just didn't need two as small as this community is.

DJ: Besides, it was against your principle.

TC: Right.

DJ: Now what did you do about integrating the boosters? Were you able to?



TC: They, they just happened since--. That's recent. I think they integrated while--. They hasn't been over two, three or four years, I don't think. Times flies so. But they just integrated. I was determined that we was going to be integrated all the way through. I, I--. It was going to be from all the grades and all the clubs.

I had one-third--. We'd go to these meetings. See we were working on--. See the whole community and the city and, and all was working on integration at that period. Well, I had one-third white, one-third black and one-third we would get all we could of various kinds of people with skills. It didn't make any--. So, so it was a well integrated board, black and white.

DJ: How'd you go about that?

TC: Well, I knew that--. I knew leadership--. Florence Stradley Christmas did, too, was here in the community. Florence Rhine, and there were several others, Mrs. Johnson. I can't even recall her name, Betty, Betty Johnson. All of us were working at it. Jo Denton.

And we, we knew people who, who we could approach the same way when we wanted to integrate the swimming pool. We got two little black boys first who said they didn't have to worry about their hair or anything and got the mother to consent. And it wasn't long before the mother went in with them and it, you know, grew from that.

It was intentional, everything that we did. It was no haphazard thing. We sat down and calculated the risks. And we also sat down and said who would help us do it. And, and (unclear). There were so many who were

just glad to be part of trying to break, you know, what was on that side.

Wanted to be saying that they were helping so we didn't have that much of a problem.

DJ: So you divided your board so that you were balanced?

TC: Yes. We were well balanced.

DJ: Did you work with people in education and the schools? Were you all--?

TC: Yes. We had a one-day--. It was a--. I don't know how often they would do it. But once a month the school would let the children come to the YWCA. And we broke them down into groups. And they had a day--. It was--. I think it was high school groups. We had a whole day with them there and worked with them in trying to--. Well, at that time, integration was so new. We were just trying to expose them and, and let them see that, you know, nothing was going to happen and everybody could get along and all that.

DJ: Interesting that the schools and the Ys have been more successful than the churches.

TC: Right. I, I guess the churches, that's the last hold. I guess they figure (unclear). They're not going to turn it a loose.

DJ: Interesting that.

TC: Yeah. At my church we had--. I know there was one white member, Miss McCoy. I know--. And she still lives but she's been ill for a good while. I know that. And there is a Nix family there. I think she's from one of the

islands. I'm not sure. But they have two lovely children. And I think that's it.

But the churches don't--. I don't know what it is about that, it that keeps them, except, I guess, it just feels like that is something that belongs to each person, their religion. They don't mix (unclear).

DJ: Could be theological that—

TC: Yeah. It could be that because each has his own.

DJ: You have difference in emphasis in the black churches just as you have in the white, I would imagine.

TC: I would think so. I really do. It would be—

DJ: You indicated you have tried out several churches.

TC: Yeah.

DJ: Did you find much difference between one and the other?

TC: Well, I just felt like--. Well, you know, I guess one of the main differences is I found more of the Mount Zion members working in the Y. And they would vie with each other. And that was one of the largest churches. And we--. One of the things we had was a big yearly membership drive. And that church brought in the most members. And so I went down there.

DJ: You went where your friends went.

TC: Yeah.

DJ: That, that's a large part of going to church. And, also, there is a theological difference between in, in the Christian from the very austere all the way through.

TC: This, this, this was kind of formal. It's getting so now it's not as formal as it used to be. We used to be real formal down there. But we have a young black highly educated minister. He has his Ph.D. He delivers a good sermon and he has some good organization. And now we're in the process of beginning to make plans to building--. I guess we'll renovate the building that we're in now starting with the roof which leaks, I understand, and then coming on down and completing the sanctuary as far as decorations and other I guess necessary--. I guess, I guess it's just to make the sanctuary more of a sanctuary. And then start into the Sunday school rooms and the recreation rooms that's in the making. We've been meeting now in the—

DJ: You've mentioned that there was a mixed family there. Do you see many mixed families in Asheville? And, if you do, how, how do they fit into the community? Is there—

TC: I don't run into too many of them. I'm pretty--. I guess I'm pretty close myself. I just go now to the church and maybe to the mall. And I have one friend who is white and we run around together. And that's just about the extent.

DJ: I know that sometimes they're more comfortable in big cities like New York, San Francisco—

TC: When I go to New York that my sister goes to, the church she goes to is just mixed, you know, thoroughly mixed. And so is the one Lawrence goes to. And Lawrence is (unclear). But he's a Methodist so he's--. I'm the only Baptist. The rest are Methodists. My mother was a Methodist. My mother was Baptist and then, and she married my father she went into the Methodist with him. And when he died she went Baptist. And of course, I had to go into a Baptist school somewhere. And when I came back I taught (unclear) Baptist school.

DJ: You mentioned, you mentioned family. You have--. Your, your sister you said is—

TC: I have a sister who lives in New York. And she'll be here for the Christmas holidays. And I have a brother who lives in Rockingham. And he'll be here for the, for Thanksgiving. So he's coming next Thursday. He'll stay with me because I'm alone now. My husband is in--. You know he's in the retirement--. It's home, health, Fletcher Home Health. It seems like it has a home health center. It looks like it has another word in it. But he's there and he's been there just about two months. So I'm, I'm really living here alone and that's a new experience. Opening the house at night or in evenings--most of the time I don't go out at night. But opening the house and finding no one here when he stayed here all the time. He never went out.

DJ: What did he do after he retired? Did he--?

TC: He just worked with--. He sold stock and bonds. (Unclear)

DJ: In Asheville?

TC: In Asheville, yeah.

DJ: But he came because you had your—

TC: Yes, because we'd gone to Rockingham to retire. That's what we thought.

DJ: And then you were how long--? How long were you with the Y here, fourteen years, wasn't it?

TC: I think I saw something in there, but I thought I stayed here fourteen years.

DJ: Yeah, I think so. And you've seen a lot of change in the city.

TC: Yes. There's been a lot of changes. People move now with much more ease. You know it's no question as to whether will I be served or won't I be served, you know, that kind of thing going and waiting.

I know I've gone it was mainly in Dayton when we were really breaking down some segregation was there. I'd go first and wait and see if they were going to serve. And, of course, we probably won't get any service. And then as soon as your white friends who've already planned this come in you get service. It was that kind of a, of a thing. It was the little nitty gritty, breaking down little things. It made you-- Well, when people see one person being accepted it gave them courage to go and do it, too, you know.

DJ: You were always on the front edge, weren't you?

TC: Yeah, pretty much. It didn't hurt my feelings that much, you know. I kind of thought I understood what it was all about and kind of felt sorry for, felt sorry for them. They didn't give me a chance to know them and they didn't, didn't get the chance to know me.

DJ: That was their loss. Good for you. Well, Florence was telling me about Mrs. Roosevelt coming to town.

TC: Yes.

DJ: And I don't remember very much about what the meeting was, but she contacted you and the meeting was held at your Y.

TC: Um-hmm.

DJ: And, evidently there was so many people there was a problem about whether the floors would hold her. The police would said it was overcrowded. Do you remember anything about that?

TC: Just vaguely, but I do remember.

DJ: He was coming through about the TV, TVA, wasn't that it?

TC: That was it. It was the Tennessee Valley or something like that. They were coming through. And, you know, that's very vague, but I do know that Mrs. Roosevelt came. And I had the opportunity to meet her and sit with her. And I don't even know what we talked about or anything. But it was just the idea and the thrill. And it was just a rich experience.

DJ: Well, the fact that she was doing that.

TC: Yeah.

DJ: And it was very symbolic.

TC: Very symbolic, yes.

DJ: Because I remember the experience in Washington, D. C. with Maryann Anderson. And she'd been a member of the DAR or Colonial Dames or something--

TC: The DAR is the one that wouldn't let her in, wasn't it? She had to sing on the Capitol and, you know--

DJ: Yeah. And so Mrs. Roosevelt resigned.

TC: Yes. I remember that, too.

DJ: That was a big boost, wasn't it?

TC: Um-hmm, it was.

DJ: Was that something your people were, were happy to see? Was that--?

TC: Yes. It was just another lift, something that they knew could happen, you know. And I think they were just proud, proud of being a part of it and being in the company of Mrs. Roosevelt. I had just about forgotten that one. But it was an interesting--. It was exciting. I just tell you. I just lived to the fullest.

DJ: The lifts that you've had you probably can remember high points. Were there others, anything that happened here in Asheville?



TC: Well, let me see. I know that--. I'm just sure there, there had to be.

DJ: The Parkers must have been—

TC: Yeah. We, we were--. We worked together in Church Women United. And I worked with ABW and I worked with United Nations Association. I, I was on a lot of boards. A lot of times it happened because black women were working a lot, you know, those who could be exposed were working a lot and couldn't make the meetings in the daytime. And I could make daytime meetings. When I worked at the Y I could still get off and go to daytime meetings. See that was a part of my job, too.

DJ: There are a number of organizations in town that I know nothing about. I went to the Gambe Festival.

TC: Gumbe.

DJ: Gumbe?

TC: Um-hmm. That was connected with the YMI. Is that what you're talking about? Yeah. That's once a year, too, and--. I didn't go this year but I've been a part of it, you know, in the past. And they have, I know, all kinds of food, do dances and things of that nature.

DJ: Tremendous spirit, tremendous.

TC: Yeah.

DJ: And I realize that there are a lot of organizations that I didn't know anything about. Can you speak about any of those?

TC: Let me see if I can. Now when I worked with the-- Well, I worked with the Church Women United. These are boards that I was on. And each board, of course, as a member we had another separate committee that they worked on. And I was working on membership committee. And that was—

DJ: Church of the United.

TC: Church Women United.

DJ: And this was across the board for all--

TC: It was across the board. That happened, too, while I was here.

DJ: And that was any, any church that wanted to affiliate itself.

TC: Yes, any Protestant church that wanted to affiliate. And they had a representative and then they also had a member-at-large so there would always be-- There could be more but there was three—

DJ: Was this national or was it local?

TC: It was national, I think.

DJ: What did you do?

TC: In Church Women United? Well, I was president. I started off, I guess, as the program director or program secretary or whatever they called it. And that was three, on three occasions, like World Day of Prayer, and World Community Day. And there were three of those days, World Day of Prayer, World-- My mind is slipping now. But there were three celebrations and I worked with those three celebrations. And one was the World and one

was the Day of Prayer and one was the community. We worked the programs to highlight those occasions.

And the Church Women United--. Not Church Women--. Yeah, Church Women United, still celebrate those three days every year everywhere at this date and time. So they always know that prayer's going on on those days around the world at some place every moment.

DJ: And what is their purpose?

TC: Working for world peace.

DJ: And, also, you say it's women, so that it's—

TC: Yeah, Church Women United. No, I don't think any men (unclear) even some groups of where they've had men. I don't think so.

DJ: Because they've joined the League of Women Voters and that's--

TC: They were--. That's the one that the men have joined.

DJ: It's always interested me that, that men would do that.

TC: Yeah, belong to the League of Women Voters, United Nations Association, Church Women United, Habitat. You know anything about Habitat?

DJ: No.

TC: Habitat builds houses for the underprivileged. They're building, building houses right now out in Oakland. And they're built at just cost because all of the workers volunteer except maybe the electrical wiring and something of that kind. Other than that it's all volunteer work. And, and they select

families that make applications for people who need a home that don't have own and would love to own one but can't get the down payment, commercial payment.

DJ: How is it financed?

TC: By volunteers.

DJ: And the electrical parts—

TC: That part of it has to be paid for so money--. I, I know--. I'm sure everybody else will do the same thing. They send contributions on a yearly basis to, to Habitat.

DJ: Is this local?

TC: Um-hmm. It's local and it's, and it's--. I've been to the whole southern region so Habitat must be--. And that's what the president and, and, what's his wife's name, President Carter is there, too. It's his main project now, President Carter.

DJ: I didn't know that.

TC: Habitat, building houses for the poor. Rosalyn is her name.

DJ: Is there--? Is there any federal money coming from that, to that?

TC: I really don't know. But I know it's done on a local basis.

DJ: And there's a local office here.

TC: Local organization right here. And Habitat is on Market Street.

DJ: Is that a new organization?

TC: No. I've been in it--. Oh, it happens during my lifetime. It wasn't here when I came. But I didn't organize it but I was part of the organization.

DJ: What else is being done about the housing?

TC: I don't know of any other work that's working on building houses for the underprivileged and poor except Habitat.

DJ: The projects are put up by, is it state funds or federal funds?

TC: It must be--. It must be some state funds because I went to a regional meeting in which there was several. There were thirteen states involved so it must be a state thing. And I know it's regional at least. And in order to be regional I guess it would have to be state, I mean national.

DJ: Richard Matthews is working with--. He's particularly interested, I think more personally than just because of his job in Monford, preserving the Monford houses and developing houses that can be saved.

TC: Yes. I imagine they're restoring those historical, some that have some historical meaning or value. It's in that area in which I think they have declared that a historical area. And I'm sure that's what they're doing just trying to bring them back to the original.

DJ: So that, so that at least they're preserved. I want to turn this tape over. I hate to catch somebody in the middle of a sentence but when this thing clicks off it sounds so--

{end of cd !1}

DJ: This is side two. And we have been talking off tape about all the experiences you had in Papua, New Guinea and the wonderful pictures that you had and the artwork that you've been doing since you retired. And I've been admiring that. This woman behind me with the intricate braid I thought was a very sensitive picture. I saw it as soon as I came in. And then I had a chance to go up and look close and see who did it. And, tell me about your artwork.

TC: Well, I thought I could do some painting, at least I wanted to do something once I left the YWCA. I wish I had known just a little bit more about what artwork when I was in Papua, New Guinea. But I didn't take any artwork there at all. I just wish I had.

So, when I started working--. When I retired I just decided something's got to give. I can't, you know, sit around and do nothing. So I started taking art classes at the YWCA. And I stayed with it for a while and then I started taking private lessons. And it wasn't really private lessons. It was Janie McWars. And she lives over in--. I think she's moved to--. It wasn't Weaverville, but it's some, another little town going--. I can't even remember the name of the town right now or the places she lives. But she taught over there and had a class of about twelve or thirteen of us and we met once a week.

And we were free more or less to do the kind of painting we wanted to do. And I did more abstract painting than anything else. I thought it was pretty good. I came back and just stood them all around. I didn't get any pay or anything for them. I just distributed them.

So I have all of--. Practically all the walls in the Council on Aging is artwork that I did. And then the--. There's another one we just finished talking about that the, Grover Davis works at and I have several paintings there. And, I just gave them around and one or two I sold. [Laughs]

DJ: Doesn't that make you feel good?

TC: Yeah. I felt pretty good about it. June Raye bought one and several other people bought one. She's an interesting person that you should talk with.

DJ: They've been very active. It's a couple and their daughter, Velma.

TC: Yeah. Oh, you know them.

DJ: No, I don't. But, I keep reading her name.

TC: Oh, well, she was very active. She's interesting. She was free. She's a housewife. I mean she's home now during the day. Her husband is the undertaker.

DJ: And that used to be a hospital.

TC: That used to be a hospital.

DJ: Was it a hospital when you—

TC: No, no, no. Jessie Raye was there when I came (unclear) so I don't remember it being a hospital if it was.

DJ: We had also talked about the YWCA which sent you to Papua, New Guinea. But, it is a world organization. Tell me about that.

TC: Yes. It's national and international. And, I had an opportunity to do the circle, I would say. I started as teenage program director and from there to what they call a branch executive director and then an executive director. And that was, the executive director was here in Asheville. And I was the first black executive director in the south. It was something that you can see we hadn't changed, hadn't (unclear) in the United States. And, my job, of course, was to build a strong association and to involve as many women in the community as I possibly could.

And so we had a well-rounded program. We had children's programs and we had teenage program director, and then we had an adult program director. And I was the executive. And we did a lot of work for three people. And we worked very closely with the school.

And occasionally, I think it was like on a, like twice a year, we'd have these workshop sessions. And the principal would let girls come from the school. At that time integration was just beginning. And so we had a chance to have an integrated group working in the YW that was out from the school. And there, we were really just working with the type of things, like making a person aware of another person. And they had a chance to explain, or to describe themselves and what they like to do. And in that way, each person tried to build on remembering what the other person said and tried to maybe improve on it by saying that she did a little something that was a little different, a little better.

And, you just felt like it was, when you left meetings you had a sense of having had some affect on them and they had some affect on you. That



was what I liked about it. It was different from teaching school but that's what I like about it. I liked teaching, too, when I was teaching because I didn't know anything but teaching.

DJ: But you're really teaching the same thing, aren't you?

TC: Yes. It's just like what you--. It's like teaching life almost, you know. And you do it through your interaction with each other.

DJ: Did you have that feeling in New Guinea?

TC: I developed it, yes. I had that. It just took them longer to get it, to accept me, than I was accepting them, you see.

DJ: You already had experience.

TC: Yeah. They, they, they're the ones that stood off alone. I was trying. I was working at it. But they had to stand and look and make up their minds for themselves.

DJ: Don't you find that's true of strange young children? They had to have their time--

TC: To, to, to get to know you through themselves, you know.

DJ: To see if they're safe.

TC: Yeah.

DJ: Sometimes people feel very threatened.

TC: You're right.

DJ: And so you were working on that always.

TC: Always. And I'm going to say I don't go out to say this is what I'm going to do, you know. No, that doesn't enter my mind. But, I, I feel it's a by-product that happens. I get to know people. People get to know me. And, I don't think I'm hard to know. And I don't think other people are hard to know either. So we just let it off and see (unclear) keeps on. Everybody's busy going their way, you know. They don't have as much time as we used to.

DJ: But when we join an organization I think that ninety percent of what's happening is what's happening with the people there and then the other ten percent is getting the staff selected, the telephone call or the things budgeted or whatever. But, the name of the game is the people.

TC: Yeah, the people. Getting to know them and like them and work with them. Make them feel good about themselves when they sort of feel like they can't do anything, they're not worth very much, you know, especially if they see somebody else that can do so much more than they can, they want to kind of draw in. But each person has something to give and make a contribution. And so we said go for your thing. Do it. The girl said flaunt it if you got it. Toot your horn if you have it. And she was taking some words from Malcolm X and he was saying something like fly like a butterfly and sting like a bee, you know. Those were his words. And I heard someone in the movies was going to act that part and say those same words since I've been listening. The movie comes to town today or tomorrow, Malcolm X? Well, I'm not sure just where I was. But, it's the YWCA that I will always

toot and encourage people to take part. And I think those who do have a rather rich experience if they stick with it. Go more than once, at least you have a rich experience.

DJ: When I was at the Women's Center I was very interested in the young ladies I talked to and their feeling of being able to help the young mothers feel good about mothering. And, that even though their lives might not be rich and fulfilling, there was a better chance for their children to go on.

TC: We started a program. That's--. It was the YWCA. We were told if we get five pregnant girls who were dropping out who would want to go to school and would come to classes that the superintendent would furnish the teachers and pay them. And they did. They paid the teachers to work with the girls.

DJ: They weren't allowed in school at that time.

TC: Yeah. The moment that they found out that they were pregnant—they'd whisper it to one of their friends. Their friends was whispering it. They were expelled. And that's where we picked them up when they were expelled from school.

DJ: What changed that?

TC: I think the whole feeling of accepting these four or five girls that came here at first. And they themselves being changed passed the word on. I think it's mouth-to-mouth. It was hard for me to describe. But it was the feeling that you were doing something worthwhile. They were doing something

worthwhile. Everybody was getting something out of the, the act that we were--. And it wasn't an act, it was, it was sincere.

We had--. I had gone to a national convention in which they said intentionally work, plan it. And so we would plan these occasions and get the girls at first who could and would. And then a little later on they just accepted it, you know. Like sometimes you want to get a discussion going you can plant one person in the audience to ask a question. And then that person gets up and asks the questions, you know. Then it gives the other persons in the audience courage to get up and ask a question. So we did those kind of things, you see.

DJ: I've never been in a situation where that was done. Tell me how you did that.

TC: Well, the planning of a question? You find one person that you know that would ask this kind of a question. Because we'd say that same question is one that somebody else wanted to know, too, so you ask it. And they'd get up and bravely ask that question. And because it didn't look as if it was coming off any paper or anything, anyone else felt free to do it. And we'd have lively discussions. We had a whole five-week series in terms of five weeks. And each week the discussions were something different, education, employment, jobs, things of that nature.

DJ: This was open to the public.

TC: It was open to the public

DJ: How did you advertise this program?

TC: Oh, we just had an eye for--. The papers were pretty good about just getting articles in the paper. And then the ones who were there always carried the message to someone else. We could rely on that (unclear).

DJ: You held your meetings at the—

TC: At the YWCA.

DJ: --the Y.

TC: Um-hmm.

DJ: You had a lot of attendance.

TC: Um-hmm, we did. There were nice groups. I guess they're still having nice groups. I just don't know (unclear) myself so much. But I imagine they're still having large groups. Or at least the people who want to go know what the YWCA's all about will go.

DJ: And they felt comfortable and at home.

TC: Yeah, and comfortable here.

DJ: And they could really speak their minds.

TC: Um-hmm. And for five weeks we did that every Monday night. Those were big sessions now on Monday night. Challenge to integration, that was the theme. Then when--. I'm not sure just where I was supposed to go from there, but except to tell you that when I did go to Portland, Maine, that's when everything opened up for me when I retired from teaching. That was the beginning of it. And from there I went to Wilmington, Delaware. I was

the teenage program director. And from there I went to Dayton, Ohio. And then I came here. I retired and then I came here. And then I decided to build here. And I've been here ever since.

DJ: But you came at a crucial, crucial point.

TC: It was a time when changes were being made. But it just needed someone to keep pushing at it, working at it. The changes were in the air. And there was some resistance, of course, to it. And there were some who wanted to see the changes brought about.

DJ: The Vietnam experience affected all cities. Did, did you have a feeling that it was much of an issue in Asheville?

TC: I don't really know because there are a few in our church that I just didn't know their names and such. But I do know that they were involved. And would come back and they would talk at times about it. But I was not that close to that (unclear) group to really know.

DJ: It didn't affect the younger ones who were coming to the Y?

TC: At that time--. From the Vietnam War I wasn't there (unclear).

DJ: So, you didn't see any of the repercussions—

TC: No. What I would see would be in my church.

DJ: And, how about the other organizations that you belonged to? You had the Humanities—

TC: No, Humanities Council. And that was working on literacy at the time. Trying to make sure that all groups that were organized was teaching everybody to read so that no one would be left out and the community could do them right.

DJ: How was that organized?

TC: Well, I'm just sure that we just started from a small group.

DJ: Was this local?

TC: This was local. This--. There was two groups. I may be getting them mixed. But, the local one, we just started with these five pregnant girls. And then the superintendent, the principal, gave us permission to go ahead and work with them and recognize them because the school couldn't do it.

DJ: But was that with the Humanities Council?

TC: No. The Humanities Council was quite different. I do have some material on that. The Humanities Council was when I went each six weeks, I think we went to places like Greensboro or Raleigh or Durham where they held their meetings. And I was a part of that group. And there we were getting information on how to go back into the community to do literacy, to teach reading, to make sure everybody knew, learned how to read. But it was also teaching peace, working with people in a way that they learned to work with other people. That's the best way I would describe it.

DJ: And, where did you take your information?

TC: Where did I get, take it? I took it from--. I took it to the Y, my church, the AUW, Habitat, all those groups. But I was there and I'd always be a spokesman. I was serving on a board. And I was on five at one time. I decided that was, whenever my time would expire, I wouldn't, you know, accept another term until I was finally worked myself to about three, Community Relations Council and—what other board do I serve on now?

DJ: What did you do in the community to foster this reading literacy?

TC: We worked through the, through the school. I think that was the one who was giving us the opportunity to work. I think that's the one (unclear).

DJ: Were you recruiting volunteers to help in the school?

TC: Yes. We had, we had--. They had--. We were helping in the school but they were helping, permitting the girls in the program to start--. You see it was started--. This program now called the alternative school started in the YWCA. And it was, again, getting girls back in school who had dropped out. And when we, when we, after we had got that going very well they kept it going and it's still going. It was--. Now it's one of the strong pieces of program.

DJ: Where is that?

TC: Right up here called alternative school right next to the YWCA. Those were girls and boys who turned--. First it was just girls. But those were girls and boys were dropped out of school for one reason. And the school they would fine them for little of nothing. I mean expel them look like it'd be (unclear). And then for a week they'd pick them up.



DJ: How'd you find them?

TC: They came to the Y. And then once they'd come they'd see the girls who were there and they brought more. It was a recruiting job, too. You'd announce that there was going to be a program or a meeting or certain things were going to happen. But it was more or less word of mouth.

DJ: Is this a separate organization now that was started with the Y?

TC: It's part of the school system. I guess it goes--. I don't know how far it goes. Whether it goes just through, I guess, through high school, the alternative school is. I really don't know.

DJ: You think it's funded by the city school?

TC: I think it's part of city school, yes. It's definitely part of the school.

DJ: I know that the Y started a number of programs that launched out and went on their own like the rape crisis and they, they were—

TC: Now, the rape crisis still might be a part of the YW, I'm not sure.

DJ: I think it's gone out on its own.

TC: Oh, it's on its own now.

DJ: Yeah.

TC: Well, we started that and I don't know how many different kinds of programs.

DJ: So you were the mother when the (unclear) went off.

TC: We did a lot of different things. We even met with the city, the city school the council, I guess it was called. We met with them several times. When it came to Habitat, we worked with that a long time. And then we worked with United Nations Association for a long time. All of them were working almost like the same goal. We were working toward peace and world understanding and things of that nature.

DJ: Does the Habitat organization meet on a regular basis with its membership?

TC: Yes. And they're over on Broadway. That's the street that they're on now.

DJ: They have a local office.

TC: And they sell now lots of clothing, not clothing so much as furniture. Things that people give them is one of the things that they do to keep the office up. And then they have of course this council thing that goes on and then the building of the homes.

DJ: They are mostly interested in construction of homes for people who can't afford it. Did you work with the YMCA or the YMI in any joint projects?

TC: Just on programs. I've done speakers who spoke for them several times. And I had one joint task force over there. I can't even recall what it was. But, mostly, I was just as a resource person. I didn't, I wouldn't call myself just day to day working but just called in.

DJ: And when the integration came for the YMCA was it somewhat the same as your integration or did you--?

DJ: A little slower. The men didn't move quite as fast as the ladies did. And held on to two units for a long time and then finally merged. And I don't know whether the YMI, I think it was a separate organization all along from the YMCA. I think the YMCA and the Y Central branch merged. But the Y, I think the YMI was always a separate organization. I'm sure there's somebody in the community would know more about it than I do because I jumped right in from what I had to do here at the Y part, and I don't know all of that.

DJ: And the NAACP, was that active when you were here?

TC: Yes. They're still-. It's still here.

DJ: Was it active when you came or was it starting then?

TC: All of these things were getting started about the same, same time.

DJ: Did you have a network so that you knew pretty much what the other people were doing?

TC: Yes. We, we kept up with what was going on. And we tried not to—

END OF INTERVIEW