RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH DIANE CROTHERS

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

Kathryn Tracy Rizzi: This begins an oral history interview with Diane Crothers, on January 26, 2022. I'm Kate Rizzi, and I'm located in Branchburg, New Jersey. Diane, thank you so much for doing this oral history interview with me.

Diane Crothers: I'm delighted to do this with you, Kate. I'm so interested in your approach to the questions that we will be talking about.

KR: Can you, for the record, please state your full name and where you are located?

DC: I am Diane Crothers. I'm located in Brooklyn, New York.

KR: What year were you born, and where were you born?

DC: I was born in 1946, December 2nd, in Framingham, Massachusetts.

KR: Let us start off today talking about your family history, on your mother's side. What do you know about that family history?

DC: How much time do you have? [laughter] That's a big question. I know a good bit about it, both because she told me a lot of stories and also because I've spent the last thirty years doing family history research, principally in Mississippi, where her ancestors were from.

Just to start with her life, she was born in Houston, Mississippi, a little town, in 1921. She was the fourth of six children, born to college-educated parents. Her mother was a normal school graduate and was a teacher. Her father was a Mississippi A&M graduate. At the period that she was born, in the '20s, some great uncles and great grandfather died, and some of the property seems to have changed hands. I have yet to be able to nail that down. But as a result, my mother and her family moved to South Carolina to a town called Tucapau. Her father had been working in the cooperative extension program in Mississippi, trying to get cotton farmers to rotate their crops, and that was an uphill battle. Then, the boll weevil came to town. All of a sudden, a whole generation of people could not make a living on their farms.

They moved to South Carolina, where he went to work in a textile mill. This was a wrenching change for men of his generation. He was born in 1882. He worked in a mill. It's unclear--he apparently had a barely white-collar job. My sister and I have visited this town to see the house that they lived in and to see what else we could find out, and I'm told by the current owner of that house on Main Street that if he lived there, he was part of management. However, my mother's memory of him is that he was always applying for a job and he was typing job applications in the kitchen, and according to her mother, when he got a job, he would "goof" it. But this was also during the depression. The depression affected him and his family such that the family splintered and he ended up dying of a bleeding ulcer in a charity hospital in New Orleans in 1940, separated from his wife and family, who had come North.

My mother was in about eighth grade and they lived in Chester, Pennsylvania, so she went to a northern school for the first time at that point. She was very smart, my mother, and she was not put in the top class because she had come from a southern school and the southern schools were

seen as so retrograde that even her A's and B's couldn't get her into this top class. She had an attitude about that the whole rest of her life. She didn't get the education that she needed. They didn't have enough money to send her to college. She was in the National Honor Society in high school. She was a leader in student council. She was voted most athletic. Her basketball scoring record stood for decades at Springfield High, but she didn't get to go to college. She met my father, who initially wanted to date her older sister. Then, when he called my mother for their first date, she said, "To what do I owe the honor of this call?" That's kind of how they began.

My dad was very bright. But he was a boy and was bright enough to skip two grades, so he went to college at sixteen. He had two sisters who worked to put him through. He went to Swarthmore College, so the family resources went to him. He had teachers who were coaches at Swarthmore who helped him get over there from Springfield High, and he had a fortunate academic career. He was a prince.

She was married for the rest of her life to a doctor, and she lived in Connecticut. She had a lot of resentment and poured it all into athletics and was a champion golf player. The year that she died of lung cancer, a little over twenty years ago now, she won a statewide championship for her age group. She was enormously competitive, ambitious, achievement oriented.

One time, she called me up when the UConn [University of Connecticut] women's basketball team was playing, and she said, "Diane, look at the TV. Jennifer Rizzotti is doing things no woman has done before." You would think that Jennifer Rizzotti was going to the moon. [laughter] But my mother grew up at a time when there were half-court rules for girls, restrictions on dribbling; all these things drove her nuts. Just a few years before she died, we set up an athletic scholarship in her name at the college in the town that she lived in in Connecticut for women athletes, and she cried so hard that her eyes disappeared. She was just all so puffy-eyed. She said it was the proudest day of her life, except when she gave birth to the three of us. This was a woman who was born too soon.

She was descended from slave owners in Mississippi and people who lost their enslaved people during the war, the Civil War, and even though they had an education, a formal education, the men and some of the women, they were without funds in her childhood. Her mother tried to make her only play with girls of their social class, and my mother would ask, "Well, I only have one pair of shoes or one dress. What is this distinction?" My mother, her whole life, was very concerned and interested in these social distinctions, and she didn't agree with them. She brought me up on stories of Jim Crow, and she didn't believe in racism.

KR: What stories did your mother tell you?

DC: About not being able to play across the race line, not being able to play with a little Black girl. My mother's mother, Effie Mae, told her that who you played with on Sunday was the way you were evaluated and judged, and you had to be playing within your racial and social class. She had friends across the race line. Then, many years later, when she was pregnant with me, she visited her southern [relatives], who were still in the South, her southern sister-in-law in Asheville, North Carolina, and they had a Black maid named Jessie. My mother was a very

outgoing person, and she made friends. If she took the train, she made friends. When she was in hospice care, she was making friends. She talked to Jessie, and my aunt came in and found my mother at the kitchen table having a cup of coffee with Jessie and really read the riot act to her later and said, "You can never give Jessie the impression that you consider her your equal." You could stand in the doorway and have a cup of coffee, but you could not sit at a table. That kind of thing is what she told me, which she found just insane. She also told me that her mother said that Black men could tell when you had your period and that's when they would try to rape you. As odd as that story is and as counterintuitive, that's what came down.

KR: In a lot of ways, it seems like your mother was ahead of her time. What influences did she have on her childhood that led her to question the norms that she saw around her?

DC: My mother was probably the most empathetic person I've ever known. My mother jumped across boundaries. If another person was in pain or difficulty, my mother was feeling your pain. I think it was that; I think it was her interest in other people and her innate sense of fairness. She just had a lot of trouble with unfairness and exclusion. When I questioned her, when I was in junior high or so, why there were no Jews at our country club, she was having a hard time answering that. She said, "Well, you know they're more comfortable with their own kind. They have their own country clubs, and that's how they prefer it." So, she struggled her whole life to get with the program of exclusion and segregation and all these things. She did her best to convey that, but her heart was not in it.

KR: How did the opportunity come about for your mother to pursue golfing?

DC: I think because the three of us were out of the house by then or in school full time, and she and my father, I don't know at what point they joined this country club in the town that we lived in, the city. I don't know how she became involved in it; my brother might know that. My brother and she shared golfing, and they played a lot and my dad played a lot of golf. My sister and I never played golf, so we don't really know much about it. She fell in with a group of women, and she went to all these competitions around the Northeast. That's where she met lesbians, for the first time, which had an effect on her as well, but they were mostly in the closet, which also had an effect on her. I think it was just an outlet. It was something you could do alone. It wasn't a team sport. She would take a basket of golf balls and go out to the course and just play for hours, just hit and hit and hit and hit and hit. She had a golf coach. He videotaped her. She just took it enormously seriously. At one point, when I was encouraging her to go back to college, once I was grown and I could see how much she had missed, she said that golf was her career, and I was very snotty about it and thought that because she wasn't getting paid money for it, it wasn't quite as real, is what I was talking about. [laughter]

KR: What sort of genealogical research have you done into your mother's side of the family in the South?

DC: I lived in Washington for twenty years, and I would take Toby, my son, down to the Corcoran Art Museum for some art classes on Saturday afternoon. It was two hours or so, so I would go over to the National Archives. This probably was in the mid-'80s. I would look into the census records that were in the archives. At the end of the afternoon, when I had to go pick

him up and take him home, I noticed that there were a lot of people with gray hair who were doing the same kind of research, and at the end of the afternoon, when you overheard people who were finding stuff in these records, they would start using the present tense about the 19th century. I thought this was fascinating. I had been an American Studies major, so I am interested in the past. I started doing that. Over the years when he was going to this art class and after that, I exhausted basically all the census records. Then, I found this cache of affidavits that were southern white men who had to disavow the Confederacy to fight for the Union, so that was interesting. I just tripped over that because I was done with the census.

Then, around that time, I had remarried, I was married to my third husband Steve, and he was a reliable enough person that I could leave Toby with him for a week. I went to Mississippi, I went to Memphis, and then I went to Northern Mississippi and went to Houston and went to the courthouse in Chickasaw County. In the basement of the Chickasaw County Courthouse, I found the deed when a Chickasaw Indian "sold" a piece of land to one of my great grandfathers. That was fascinating. Then, I got interested in the Treaty of Pontotoc and the land grab that went on and how the Callaways and the Pedens and the Reids, the three parts of my family that I'm most in depth in terms of research, how they got this land in the 1830s in Mississippi. They came from South Carolina and from Georgia and came west with their enslaved people.

Then, I met this guy, who is a second cousin of mine, who is a retired school superintendent in Memphis, Gene Callaway, and he had the same bug. He was a member of the Callaway Family Association, which I'm still a member of, and he showed me letters he had from our common great grandfather Cicero Callaway. Cicero kept a lot of letters. When his three sons were killed in the Civil War, he went downtown, such as it was, to get their last pay, and he had letters about that. I got to read that. Gene showed me a spool bed that had been transported from Georgia to Mississippi. He showed me a book of statutes that made advocating the end of slavery a treasonous or seditious offense, so that comes from the pre-war period obviously.

Then, later on, I ended up at the Mississippi Department of Archives and History. I've gone to the South Carolina Archives. Then, I joined genealogical associations. Then, when I found evidence that my mother's ancestors had owned slaves, I began to track those people, and of course there's a lot of difficulty tracking enslaved people before 1870. But, again, I was an American Studies major. This is natural to me, you dig, and I was a lawyer and an investigator, so you just dig and dig and dig and dig and dig. I joined the Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society, and that does a lot of research methods stuff. The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, I've been a member there for many years. My dad's family was firmly rooted there since 1800. I've taken research methods courses there, and they have an incredible repository.

KR: Let's talk about your father's side of the family. You said they were rooted in Pennsylvania in the 1800s. What do you know about your father's family history?

DC: Well, when I was growing up, I knew nothing about it, and I never heard anything about what countries we came from. This was all wiped away; we were just Americans. It was fascinating to find out that we had come from Scotland. About ten years ago, I went to Ireland, thinking that I was going to find a lot of stuff there, because that had been the last jumping off

point for many of the folks. But it turns out I was in the wrong country, [laughter] that it was really Scotland and that I was never going to learn Gaelic. So, there were going to be limits to what I could find out. [laughter]

These were Scots Presbyterians from Scotland who had various economic problems and famines in the Highland Clearances. Now, I've been to Scotland and learned a little bit about that. They were planted in these "plantations" in Ireland. When the royalty shifted back and forth from Catholic to Protestant to Scots to English, one religion would take hold within the UK, and the Scots Presbyterians were not Church of England people. The Church of England people didn't like the Scots Presbyterians, and so at one point, the church declared that if you were married by a Presbyterian minister, you were a fornicator. Now, this seems to have been a deal breaker [laughter], and a lot of people left at that point and came to the colonies. That may have been what led some of the Crothers line to come. They were also Covenanters. There's all this anti-Catholicism stuff going on in the UK at this point in the 1700s, partially about whether people needed to be educated or not and be able to read the Bible for themselves and whether the clergy should be educated, versus Catholics having, at that point, that the priest was the route to God and not so much that people should have an education to read the Bible themselves, they needed the priest in the hierarchy to interpret it for them. I come from this very argumentative Protestant line of people. [laughter]

The first guy I can find, Samuel Crothers, 1800-1866, he was born in one of the counties in Ireland that was part of these plantations, and so he came. He was a founder of the [First] Presbyterian Church in Darby, and one of the things he was famous for, that I found about him, is that he would read all night and cheerfully go to work all day. Now, that is something that there's a certain connection to. [laughter] In my father's family, there's some German. We've got Uber; I've got George Washington Uber, who fought in the Union Army. I've got his Union plaque up in my hallway. He had reunions of his Union group of soldiers that I have a picture of. It's basically Scots-Irish, names like Craig, that are in my father's family.

KR: You mentioned how your father had two sisters who supported him pursuing his education. Tell me a little bit more about your father's upbringing, about his parents and what they did, and also about your father's education.

DC: My grandfather George was a carpenter, a weather-stripping manager. He lost the family house during the depression. They moved to Detroit, back to New Haven, following his jobs. My grandmother, Edith, was probably someone who suffered from depression, and she was hospitalized late in her life probably for that. She was, again, very constrained in her choices. She was one of, I think, about four girls; I'm trying to remember if it's three or four. Her father deserted the family, and she never spoke his name again. He was German; Fritz was her birth name. She was probably very angry. She put all her hopes in my father; he was her prince. As he described it, she encouraged him to be a dreamer. He was clearly a very bright boy, but I have no reason to think that he was brighter than his sisters. She put all her hopes in him.

He was an adult during the Pentagon papers. Let's see, how does this go? When we were arguing about politics during the Pentagon Papers and Vietnam, he told me that he had been raised to believe that the best man in America became president, that that's how this works. He

was twenty-one before he understood that he would not be president, so that's the kind of mother he had. [laughter] He was a very bright guy, obviously, and very thoughtful in many ways. In his retirement, it was my job to keep him supplied with books, and so I would give him stuff like biographies of Mao Zedong and Ho Chi Minh and Nelson Mandela. He would just go through all this stuff, five hundred pages, and when I saw him, he'd say, "Did you know that Ho Chi Minh was a pastry chef in France?" and, of course, I didn't, I'm working full time, I've got kids, you know. He was an unusual man in that way. He was a Republican for most of his life until we turned him. The way that I turned him was a twenty-year subscription to *The New Yorker,* and that investigative reporting moved that man.

The two sisters, I think, also suffered from depression. I think one of them went part way through college and then dropped out, and she suffered from depression. They didn't have remarkably happy lives. They both got divorced. One remarried, one didn't. What else did you ask me? That was a huge question you asked me. [laughter]

KR: It was. It was a three-part question. [laughter]

DC: Oh, my God, come on, I'm not taking notes. [laughter]

KR: I asked about your father's education. He went to Swarthmore, and then he did become a doctor. Can you talk about his education?

DC: He had the kind of education that everybody should have, and this is why he loved Swarthmore. He goes to Swarthmore, he majors in economics. It's a complete disaster, he can't do economics, but he's a fabulous athlete. He was All-American soccer and baseball and basketball and all this. His professors would be watching him dig this baseball team out of whatever hole they were in and came up to him and said, "You need to change your field." They guided him; he became eventually a botany major. Now, he did have a grandfather who was a florist, so maybe there's a link there, in Philadelphia.

When it came time for him to graduate, he thought he'd be a coach, because he loved sports, or a minister, because his mother was very religious and Presbyterian and thought that was a good idea. His professors said, "Well, why don't you take the MCAT?" The MCAT was brand new. "You should go over to this building and take it." He did well, and what they did was they created a fifth year for him at Swarthmore, in which he would take all the pre-med courses. He would have a job, where he would meet the local train at seven a.m., teach the kids of the faculty soccer, and live with a Presbyterian minister, I think, in town. Maybe his parents were back in Detroit at this point. The only reason he went to Swarthmore was that they lived in Philadelphia; he couldn't afford to live anywhere else. He had this coach in high school who helped him get in, so money was a huge concern at each point. These professors took him under their wing. Then, he got into Yale Medical School. He had that fifth year of courses. They sat him down at Swarthmore and told him, "Do not screw up. You are the first Swarthmore grad to go to Yale. If you screw up, there will not be any others." So, he goes to Yale, [laughter] and he's like twenty-one at this point because he's gone to college at sixteen.

One time, when I was taking the bar exam in New Jersey, Toby was about two and I had already failed the New York Bar, and so I was very worried about this. My dad told me that at that time at Yale Medical, you just had one or maximum two times during the year when you had all these exams, and they told you the typical, "Look to your left, look to your right, two of you won't be here at the end of the year." He was so anxious about that exam that he slept in the same bed with his father all night, who held him. This is a remarkable guy who could share that level of anxiety with me, which really helped me get through this stupid bar exam, which I did pass.

He gets to Yale, and he never developed much affection for Yale. I think probably it was the elitism. At one point when I was teaching at Vassar, we were standing at a football game of my stepson's in high school, and my father just started on this thing about how wrong it was to have inherited wealth and that this was wrong to give babies essentially a leg up and then other kids would be going without and it would divert their whole paths in life. This was not your ordinary Republican approach. [laughter]

That's how he got to Yale. Then, he became a cardiology resident at Yale. My sister was born when they lived there. When I was born, he was in the Philippines as an Army doctor. It was the last year of the war or, I don't know, just after the war. My mother had been visiting these same relatives in Asheville, and she had slept in the same bed with who would become my cousin Anita. Anita had been diagnosed with German measles the next day, so my father was terrified that I would be born blind and deaf. I have the telegram that he wrote when I was born healthy and my mother was able to tell him this and he was so relieved. I'm born, and then my sister's born when they're at Yale.

Then, he's figuring out that he can't, he thinks, support a family on an academic income, so he goes into practice with a guy named Ros Johnson, who I think met him at Yale. They moved to New Britain, Connecticut, where I was raised. Much later, Ros Johnson would get a job at Brown University as the doctor there. When I was, I guess, a late teenager, he came to dinner, and he was talking about how many girls wanted abortions and that this was something he helped them with. I thought, "Okay, so if I am totally up a creek and this thing happens that I am doing everything in my power to avoid, I have this guy in my back pocket that I can go to." That was Ros. He lived at the top of our street, and we knew his kids. [Editor's Note: In 1963, Roswell Johnson, MD, became the director of health services at Brown University, where he worked with students who went to both Brown and to the coordinate women's college Pembroke. More information can be found at the Pembroke Center Oral History Project.]

When we moved to New Britain, first we stayed in a rental house, and then we owned a place where we had tenants downstairs. Then, when I was in third grade and my brother was born, we moved to the house that we would live in for the rest of my childhood. At that time, no Jews were allowed on that side of the street. It was a doctors' street, so the Jewish doctors were across the street. The people who were selling it, in something I read recently that I had written much closer in time, there was still a restrictive covenant on that property, that no Jews, Catholics and people of the Negro race, is probably what it said, could live there. The people who were selling it helped my parents get a second mortgage, so we could afford it.

In terms of anti-Semitism, when my dad had been at Swarthmore, one of his friends could not get into medical school because of the quotas on Jews. He went to some professor and put this out there and asked for help, and the guy did get into some medical school. Years later, when it was time for my dad to marry my mother, the father of that medical school student was a jeweler in New York, I think, and gave my dad this beautiful ring that my mother wore her whole life, it was her engagement ring, because he had helped his son get past one of those quotas. Can we take a two-minute break?

KR: Yes, definitely. I'm going to pause.

[RECORDING PAUSED]

KR: We are on and recording. Back to your father, just to get the chronology right, what did your father do first, his military service in World War II or medical school?

DC: I think he went in the middle of med school. I got his medical records, when I was looking up stuff.

KR: I'm just wondering if being in the Army, did he benefit at all from the GI Bill after his service?

DC: Yes, that's a great question. I have his military records and he is listed as a doctor. Hold on one second, let me just see if I can pull them out. Here we go. I have to credit you with the relative order of some of my files, because I have not done this ever. I have always had lots of other things pulling me out of a study. Let's see, this is my dad's military record. He's a private first class and he's getting paid. But you know they had a fire--and so this is limited--in '73 at this center. Okay, so he came out. I think he had service ending in September--that's not right. He may have come out of Yale in '44 to go to the military, because I was born in December of '46 and he's in the military at that point. Well, it's very blurry, these dates. I can't really see. Not very helpful, sorry. He's born in '20, he graduated, I think, from Swarthmore, he's Class of '40. Then, he goes to medical school, so he might have been just done with medical school, before the residency. I'm just not sure. [Editor's Note: The fire being referred to occurred in 1973 at the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis, Missouri. The fire destroyed the records of members of the Army and Air Force who were discharged during certain periods of time.]

KR: That's interesting. If he was a private first class, he was enlisted. I would think that a doctor would be an officer, so that's curious.

DC: Well, he was listed as a doctor, and his complaints were as a doctor about the unnecessary waste that he found treating people. Yes, private first class. He's in in '44. Maybe he's not quite finished with medical school in '44. I don't know. Let me make a note to see if I can find that. You're interested in if he is a doctor. I never heard any reference to the GI Bill, so I just don't know. He would have been at Yale Medical, and so I don't know that they would charge him. If he leaves to go into World War II, really are they going to charge him tuition money? I have no idea. Maybe I can get his transcript.

It's fascinating to get these people's transcripts. I got my mother's father's transcript from Mississippi A&M once on one of those Mississippi trips, and my great uncle was the editor of the college journal, *The College Reflector* it was called. At around this time, the South was having a cow because Teddy Roosevelt had invited Booker T. Washington to the White House, so there's this whole editorial in *The College Reflector* that I found digging around on one of those trips. [laughter] Anyway, I should ask for his transcript.

KR: When you were growing up, how much did your father talk about his military service?

DC: I don't remember particularly any of it. They had a scrapbook that he would send to my mother, and I have that scrapbook of his skinny little self. He was about six feet tall and about 150 pounds or 145 pounds, which apparently wasn't unusual. I've read a lot of draft cards from that period; there were a lot of skinny men. [laughter] Food wasn't particularly big. There's one picture in my mother's handwriting that has a caption, "Our Jap houseboy." I think that's got to be a Filipino because he's in the Philippines, but I have no idea. But I didn't hear much about it growing up, certainly not.

My father worked all the time. He was at the hospital to do rounds in the morning. He worked at the clinic all day. I was just reading a thing I wrote that his lunch was he would put a container of yogurt in the freezer or the refrigerator and he would eat it. That was his lunch, a container of yogurt, and he ate it with a tongue depressor. [laughter] He had his ascetic side. [laughter]

KR: On the flip side of that, did your mom tell you any stories about the war years?

DC: Yes. When she was pregnant with me, she lived with her sister and her brother and her mother. Her older sister Juanita had gotten married and she married a guy who was a successful businessman who ran a car dealership in Framingham. They had a big, beautiful house with lawn, and a brook went by it. A little summer house, a little cabin, was on this river. She lived there during my father's service. Her younger brother Jimmy, who I had an affectionate relationship with once I was born, he used to call me "Doodlebug," he was a teenager when my mother was pregnant with me and he would go on long walks with her and try to help her not be as lonely as she was. That's what she told me about that period.

KR: What did your father do during his career in medicine?

DC: First, he was a cardiology resident at Yale. Then, he joined Grove Hill Medical Clinic in New Britain as a pediatrician, and he worked there his entire life, retiring maybe at sixty-five, sixty-six, something like that. He was treated as a local God in that job, so wherever you went in that town--my brother, this is still happening to my brother, who is seven years younger than I am, so he'll meet somebody and she'll say, "Are you related to Dr. Crothers? He treated my this and this and this." Everywhere you went, grocery stores, wherever, everyone had been treated by my father, and he was seen as an enormously warm, caring, really kind of avuncular character in their lives.

He had a child once, a patient, who he lost to leukemia. We used to go to this Chinese restaurant occasionally, and that boy's parents owned this restaurant called the Char Far. Every time we went in there, my dad would just have this whole physical reaction to how sorry he was. I don't remember him saying anything to them, but his whole demeanor would just drag down. He never really got over [it]; any patient that he lost was enormously important to him.

When I was in high school, the only way I could see him was to go on house calls with him because he was working all the time. We'd go from house to house. I would hold the babies, stretch the babies out, or hold the light in the house where he was doing house calls. My whole childhood would be listening to him at night working through all his calls, "This is Dr. Crothers calling. What seems to be the problem with so and so?" He would just do call after call after call after call. He was the junior partner in that practice, and it wasn't until maybe I was out of the house or college or late high school that he got a third partner. He had house calls every other night. He was just working all the time. We saw him two weeks in the summer. We would go to Rogers Lake, and he would fish with my mother. They'd go out at four-thirty in the morning and catch shad. We saw him for two weeks.

KR: I'm wondering if you remember any major moments in history that had to do with your father being a doctor, for example, administering the polio vaccine.

DC: No, I don't. I remember he was strongly pro-vaccines. I remember one time when I was a teenager giving him a hard time about administering a flu shot at home and I ran into the bathroom by the kitchen and locked myself in and wouldn't let him do it until, of course, I lost that battle. [laughter] I don't, I don't. The only thing he ever read was medical journals. The only books in the house were medical journals, just a deeply committed, very scientific orientation. That's one of the ways that as we got into more and more conflict that I tried to reach him, tried to find common ground.

KR: Let's talk about your upbringing.

DC: Okay.

KR: What are your earliest memories of New Britain?

DC: Well, when we lived on Vine Street, we had the apartment upstairs. My sister and I would at night lie in our little bedroom with the lights out talking. We still do this. When we are together, we lie in bed at night talking, and we take a week vacation every year together. We visit each other two or three times a year. We talk every week for an hour, an hour and a half. It was my relationship with her.

In the City of New Britain, in first grade, I had a teacher I adored, Miss Young. Second grade not so memorable. Third grade, I had a teacher who taught us French, which I loved, and I was her pet. Then, in fourth grade, I refused to go back to school in the afternoon. What I remember from it was that it was a lot about science, and I was not happy about science. I never have connected particularly--social science, yes, physical science, no.

What I literally just found this morning was something that I wrote when I was doing film reviews for WBAI [Radio], so this would be 1970, and what I say is when I was eight years old, I became frightened of going back to school in the afternoon. There were kids from an orphan asylum, euphemistically named the "Children's Home," in my class, and I became terrified of being punished by the teacher the way they were for "misbehavior." [Editor's Note: Diane Crothers is reading from the document that she wrote in 1970.] "The psychiatric explanation of my terror was that I wanted to be as aggressive as they were against the teacher. A more plausible explanation has occurred to me since, however. I was already feeling abandoned, 'orphaned,' metaphorically speaking. I was terrified at confronting children who had actually been physically abandoned by their parents. Instead of directing attention to the sources of these feelings in the actions of my parents--for instance, why did I feel abandoned by them?--these feelings were deemed symptoms of mental illness."

My mother took me to a psychiatrist, and my sister also. It's a Jewish psychiatrist, Ted Goldstein. Here it is, again; they live on a segregated street. "He administered a battery of psychological tests, including a Rorschach. The results of these tests were twofold." Now, this information, I only got through my mother. She may have been having issues about how much my father worked, and her having to raise the kids alone. Who knows what's true here? I've never seen a report. "There was no father, no male figure, in any of the pictures I had drawn or interpreted. I was extremely 'adult,' which prompted the clinician to conclude that"--which this is a phrase I've never seen since this day that I wrote this--"'I had never had time for childhood,' a fuzzy non-statement that does not, interestingly, encourage further analysis. These conclusions were also viewed as symptoms by my parents, and I was taken to see this psychiatrist for treatment for several months."

Now, my sister was taken in, too, to see him. My brother, his little snotty line, which I think I've told you, is that there was probably a coupon, you know, two for one. She had the same thing, no males. Both of us, they did probably whatever the IQ test was, and apparently we were both about 140. We have fought for years over who was 145 and who was 140, but basically I'm the oldest, so I was probably 145.

Just about five years ago or so, I went to a high school reunion of New Britain High. I was sitting at a table with this woman Marti--Marti, let's just say that--and she was one of those kids from the Children's Home. She is a brown-skinned woman, whose father was a Kashmiri Muslim from India, whose mother was a white American, an elite woman. They worked in India where they met. They had four kids. The marriage ended and she brought all the four kids back to New Britain. She worked at the New Britain General Hospital, where my dad worked. She put the kids in the Children's Home. So, there were a lot of kids whose parents just couldn't take care of them. There's no childcare in 1950. According to Marti, her daughter, the mother would pick them up with a female friend once a month and take them out. Now, my sister and my brother were both in school with kids from the Home, and my sister was in school with Marti's brother. My sister noticed how shabby the kids' clothing was and that they were clearly one down. At that time, this little elementary school, Vance, was full of the children of business executives in Fafnir Bearing, Stanley Works, and then people like my father, professionals, so it was very white. I think Marti may have been the only brown-skinned person, and no Black kids, in my whole elementary school, she and her brother, who was in school with my [sister].

I asked her, since I had met her at this reunion, I said I was wondering if she felt or the kids from the Home felt particularly badly treated in the elementary school. She said, "Oh no." She said, "School was an oasis." Well, it turns out, because I got close to her in the last five years, she let me read her brother's memoir. The Children's Home was run by a Swedish minister, and it was apparently full of sexual abuse of those children with the most grisly stories that were in his memoir. What to her was an oasis in comparison might not have been such a great experience.

There I was at fourth grade, and it only occurred to me in the last couple of weeks, thinking about you and this interview, that she was both abandoned effectively by parents, poorer with the shabby clothes, and brown skinned. That was probably my first experience as a child across the color line. There were Black kids in my high school, but it was not until I got to Rutgers Law School that there were twenty-five or thirty percent Black students in my class. It was the first integrated education I had ever had. That was elementary school.

Then, in sixth grade, I made the mistake of becoming the first girl captain of the safety patrol, and two boys tried to impeach me and went around getting signatures from first graders and putting X on the thing. The main guy who did that grew up to become a sniper in Vietnam; he was a Green Beret, I think. That was sixth grade.

KR: Were you impeached?

DC: No. A major problem was that I had made my best friend the lieutenant and she was a girl. I didn't know about splitting the ticket, so this was my first introduction to retail politics. The principal came to the class and said, "Look, you had an election. This is what you voted for. If you don't want her next time, vote for somebody else. This is the American way." That was sixth grade.

I had also, of course, discovered boys by this time, and so there was a lot of interest in that and in spin the bottle and dance and all the other rest of that. It was an exciting time. Junior high was full of that. In high school, I was--I forget what the word is, I don't know if it's rushed--I was rushed by the best girl sorority, the Tri-Hi-Y. I found it too constraining after a year. I was just reading all the rules. No smoking, no pierced ears, no petting, no parking; there was a lot of rules. I resigned from that.

I adjusted to high school by becoming very competitive in the only thing that was open, which was boys. I just was crazy about this one boy, who was Greek and olive skinned, very good looking, whose father was a waiter. This was not the right choice. He was wonderful in so many ways. We maintained a relationship on and off for like thirty years. He was sexually, romantically just one of the healthiest, most participative and non-controlling men I have ever known in my life. I had to break up with him repeatedly [laughter] and find one that was acceptable, for which his father hated me. That was unpleasant. Then, when I snagged one of these guys that you were supposed to get--you're supposed to get an officeholder, like student council, of the senior class, a football player, somebody in the Royal Knights, the boys' best fraternity, so I got somebody who was all three. When he told me that he loved me, I sat up in

this parked car and counted out, out loud, to him how long it had taken me to get him to say that, which was six weeks. That was the playing field, boys, so that's what I did in high school.

KR: As you were going through your schooling, what were your academic interests? I am talking about junior high and high school.

DC: Right. Basically, English and history. I had a terrific history teacher. In my "Problems of American Democracy" class--I think it was in that class--you could get a subscription to *The New York Times* at school, which was big news to me. I'd never heard of it. I used to get that, and I used to sit in class with the paper open in my lap and read it. Then, at lunch, I would look at the job ads and the apartment ads and figure out that, "I could make this work. I could go to New York, and this is how I would do it." We had a class trip to the UN [United Nations] around that time, and I happened to have a navy blue dress on and I'm tall. One of the people took me for a staffer at the UN, and I said, "I could definitely do this." [laughter]

Then, I had a very good history teacher my last year, but he also asked me out for coffee. I wrote two great papers for him, which I found when I was looking through all these things, and I want to read you a couple of paragraphs. There's one on Jean-Jacques Rousseau, political philosophy, and there's one called "Karl Marx and Scientific Socialism." Here is my little seventeen-year-old self; it's like March of '64. This is Rousseau. Rousseau declares [in *Confessions*], "I had attained the insight that everything is at bottom dependent on political arrangements, and that no matter what position one takes, a people will never be otherwise than what its form of government makes it." I'm deeply interested in this. Then, we have this other quote from him. "I was never made for society where everything is compulsion and burdensome obligation. My independent disposition always made it impossible for me to bow to all that those who wish to live among men must accept. As soon as I can act freely, I am good and do only what is good, but as soon as I feel the yoke of men, I become rebellious and headstrong and then I am nothing." This is clearly what I am getting attracted to.

Then, with the Marx paper--both of these I got an "A" from this teacher. Now, Marx was Jewish. I just was picking up a biography of him not too long ago and I don't know if I knew that then, but I think I [did]. I mean, it's in this paper, so I think I did. Again, I'm being raised in an anti-Semitic environment, but here's this Jew who's a lawyer. We're talking about Marx, "His passion for the truth and his thirst for knowledge are his best qualities, or rather the ones I should be most likely to imitate. He lived as a man should in his own world, making some contribution to something he believes in, which is actually the reason we are living, to help in a great cause in which we fervently believe." Those two made quite the impression on me.

Yes, that's history. I think by the time I graduated, it was really history, although later on, there's still a strong interest in the arts. I was just reading something I wrote about Zelda Fitzgerald and women artists. When I was doing a film reviews for WBAI on films of interest to women, I wrote a long piece about the struggles of a woman writer and about what happens when she writes, in her life, to her work, etcetera, and I describe, which this thing happened in my second semester of college, apparently, I shared my diary from some class with both these professors. They were both English professors. The first one grabbed me and kissed me and told me, "I hope you won't misunderstand this." The second one told me, "You have a beautiful soul," at

which point I was getting experienced enough to say to myself, "Okay, where's the door? You need to be finding your way out of this room." It took me fifteen years to understand that I had given up being an English major as a result of those two things. That's another way I got to history and American Studies.

KR: Along those same lines, you talked about this high school teacher who asked you to go out to coffee and then you had these other two experiences a little bit later on. With that high school teacher, what happened, and then what was your takeaway from that that shaped you going forward?

DC: Well, I said no to going out for coffee. I knew that it was over some line that I couldn't have articulated particularly. Then, once I get into college, senior year, I stopped being willing to take any tests in high school. On my report card, it has a teacher's note, with an asterisk, that says, "No effort at all." [laughter] Apparently, I thought that they couldn't rescind the admission and that you could just say, "Okay, I'm done. I have jumped through enough hoops. I'm done." At graduation, this history teacher and my mother were both in tears at my pitiful performance as a student and just hand-wringing about my future. I don't know whether I'd told anybody about it or not.

By this time, I'm having so many arguments with my parents about sex and boyfriends and whether you can visit a boyfriend at a prep school or not, and between high school and college, I broke my curfew seven weeks out of the ten and was grounded. My mother was telling me, in ninth grade, "You can't French kiss until you're married," and I cried the whole summer because I knew I was never going to make it until marriage. [laughter] I had this adorable boyfriend, that Greek boy I told you about. I made it to senior year and then I French kissed with him one night to get him to come back to me, and he recoiled and he said, "Who have you been kissing?" [laughter] It was just four years of [being] pent up.

What did you ask me, what my takeaway was? I think that men in positions of power were something I had to deal with and negotiate around. When that guy in college grabbed me and kissed me and told me he hoped I wouldn't misunderstand him, we were talking about Thomas Hardy's poetry, which I love and thought that he would. It was a British literature class. I went back to my dorm and told this friend of mine that. Of course, this is 1964, so there was no language for sexual harassment. I'm talking to her--she became a lawyer, too--and we're trying to figure out what this was all about and just to figure out how to maneuver around it.

At that point, this was at Jackson, there weren't a lot of women professors. I was getting in trouble with the dean. They had this rule that the girls had to come home at ten-thirty and sign in, and boys could stay out all night. Before that, when I first got there, there was this good-looking blonde woman in the next room, and there was a freshman directory with pictures of all of us. These wretched boys rated all the girls on a scale of one to ten by physical attractiveness, and Lynn and I got to be nines and nobody got to be tens. [laughter] This was so arrogant, as well as so many other things. We bonded over that. She also was a free spirit and wanted to have sex. We were trying to find birth control; both of us were trying to find birth control. She and I led this lie-down strike over the hours. We all laid down in the front. We got a few girls to do this, "girls," as we were called. Other girls came in, who had signed in and been necking

under the trees until 10:29 and then came in and all fell on us. Mrs. Ryder, our dorm mother, said she made the dorm officers promise to help her in the middle of the night if we came for her, because she said that that Martin Luther King has them all riled up. That was the first year of college, and there was no place to go with any of this. [Editor's Note: Jackson College was the coordinate women's college to Tufts University. In 1980, Jackson became integrated with Tufts, although Jackson is still a legal entity, and the title of the undergraduate division of the university is the College of Liberal Arts and Jackson College.]

KR: During your upbringing, what were other formative experiences for you?

DC: Well, we've talked about my mother. At one point, there was a play on Broadway called *The Bad Seed* with Patty McCormack. My mother said to me that she thought I was a bad seed and that she thought she had taken the wrong baby home from the hospital. She was very ambivalent about the things that I did that pushed the boundaries, but she also very much identified with it, and so a lot of my childhood was trying to make sense of that, of what I was supposed to learn from this. I didn't want to have her life, clearly, and neither did my sister, but to try to make sense out of her life. I think that that was a major thing. Are you talking about up to seventeen or so? Yes. At seventeen, that's when Freedom Summer occurs, and so then a whole other chapter starts.

In junior high, all of a sudden, Jewish boys couldn't come to our parties, but Jewish girls could. Nobody could give me a straight answer on why this was. Another girl my age, her mother put that rule into effect. Then, some time in high school, a Jewish family moved in next door. He was an ob-gyn, and she had been what was called then a stewardess. She had been divorced, and she was the only adult I knew who read books. This was very formative. Again, it's a Jewish woman, so there's all this confusion about Jews are over here and not good enough, but then there's Karl Marx and there's Barbara Dorfman, these people who are much like you. I think that that sense of confusion was a big part of my growing up.

Then, also, my best friend through part of high school was the third daughter in a family in which the older two daughters had been elected homecoming queens, but my friend was very overweight and she was not going to get this. My mother had been voted "Most Athletic Girl" in high school, and she really had wanted to be voted prettiest girl. She really wanted *me* to be prettiest girl and get this election. So, the mother of my best friend said, "You could get this, but you're going to need to shut your mouth and be quiet," which wasn't really a possibility. [laughter] I just read in something this morning that I was runner-up, which I had forgotten.

The other thing that they did in high school, because I was as odd as I was, they developed a new superlative that was only used once for me and then never used again. Oddly enough, it's not something I am, "Most Dignified." [laughter] There it was. All the gender stuff, I'm trying to figure out--where were the people that were like me and were any of them women? I was certainly getting told all the time, "Sit down. Shut up. Come in at ten-thirty." Then, the next chapter is really going to college and trying to get birth control and other adventures. [laughter]

One of the things that did happen by the time I was seventeen is that my sister was suffering from depression. We were very close and still are. She had been bullied by these awful boys

beginning in the fourth grade. My mother was not a college graduate and couldn't really negotiate for her or set any boundaries or protect her in any way, so these boys harassed my sister for several years. When she would walk to the classroom closet and adjust her cardigan sweater to cover her breasts, the ringleader would say, "Crothers wears falsies." She was a doctor's daughter, and so she was in an elite group and they were going to bump up against that. Girls would say that they were going to beat her up after school. I would go pick her up at school to get her out of that when I was driving by then. She asked my parents to please send her to a boarding school, Northfield School for Girls, where her best friend was headed and they agreed. For a year, she had a really good education there. It was very rigid. It was part of Mount Herman, the boys' school. She's very bright, and it challenged her. She's always been close to animals and our family dog died, and she sank into a depression. She wasn't seeing colors, so she had to come home. She lasted a year and six weeks. She subsequently completed her bachelor's and master's degrees and had a successful career as an editor in the federal government.

Then, when my brother graduated from college in Connecticut, it became difficult for him to leave home despite his being admitted to an advanced program at the University of Washington in Seattle. I was trying to help him as his seven-years-older sister who was out of the house and all I said to him was: "Just wait until you get out of the house. Things could look better." He ultimately returned to college in Connecticut, completing a second bachelor's degree and a master's degree in counseling. He became a counselor and worked at a community college his whole life in Connecticut. He has a good life and is married to someone he loves, so that ended well.

Those things were going on, and anti-depressants had not been invented yet. That was very troubling. My father was confused, as probably was typical of the time, between being a father and being a doctor. He knew a lot of the people who were psychiatrists, professionally. That was confusing, in terms of how much male authority there was in our lives. It was a lot.

KR: I want to ask you what political discussions were like in your household when you were growing up and I want to ask that broadly, but I want to circle back to the story you told about your dad's friend, Ros Johnson, coming to dinner and talking about performing abortions. I'm assuming this is before 1973 and the *Roe v. Wade* decision.

DC: Not performing, but liaising, so that they could get [abortions].

KR: Okay, liaising. This was before 1973.

DC: In '73, I'm in law school, so yes.

KR: I want to ask about political discussions in your household in general, but about that particular discussion, what did your parents say? How did your parents react? How did you react to that? How did you engage? Do you remember?

DC: I don't remember that they said anything critical, and I probably expressed relief at the dinner table about it. Yes, actually, when I think about the dinner table that this took place at,

they moved there in '67. So, it would be late '60s, early '70s, yes, right around there. I don't have any particular memories of political discussions growing up because they were very open-ended and non-controlling. The only thing my father used to say, when I would bring up something surprising at the dinner table, like from *The New York Times*, he would say, "Well, that makes a good story." That was his very typical put-down of something that was, he thought, imaginative. We used to have arguments, he and I, about whether where you sat within a stratified society affected your notion of what was true or not. Clearly, that came from somewhere.

In '64-'65, he used to subscribe to *Time* magazine, and I was reading all this stuff about the civil rights movement, the lunch counters and everything. I would look at *Time* and he would tell me what was true and wasn't true based on what was in *Time*, and I didn't agree with it. One day, I took his *Time* magazine and I circled all the adjectives, and I said, "You see how this is slanted, Dad?" I never won any of those arguments, but we had them.

When the Pentagon Papers came out, he was so upset by that because of this thing of believing that the president was a moral person. They were fine about politics or things that were coming up. I would say I had a very kind of Scots-Presbyterian upbringing, that anything that I brought home was of interest, was worth talking about. He might not agree with me. He didn't think that his upper-middle-class, white-male-self affected how he saw the world, so we would constantly clash on that, yes. But that's a pretty sophisticated point in the '60s. [Editor's Note: The Pentagon Papers, officially entitled *United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967: A Study Prepared by the Department of Defense*, first received public attention on the front page of *The New York Times* in 1971. The document, leaked by Daniel Ellsberg, a RAND Corporation analyst at the time, provides a historical account of the United States' involvement with Vietnam and influenced the shift toward public disapproval of the Vietnam War.]

KR: You talked about reading about the sit-ins, the civil rights sit-ins.

DC: Right.

KR: As you were growing up, tell me about your rising awareness of the civil rights movement.

DC: All the way through high school, seeing that in the paper was just extraordinary. There was a guy, Claude Sitton, who I used to look for his [byline]. That's why I got interested at looking at bylines. I was starting to follow reporters, figuring out what their interests were, what their take was. I'm still doing it. I read an article this morning by Michael Powell in the paper about affirmative action at Brooklyn Tech, and he's a white guy who recently moved to Flatbush. I tend to know who these guys are, the people who are writing, and at that point, they were men. Claude Sitton was a Southerner and he was white and so he could infiltrate these white groups and get great reporting. He wrote very vivid stories about the conflicts in the South. Because of my mother's southern roots, I just felt very affected and identified with it, and also because I had so much experience of people telling me what I could and couldn't do. It was so profoundly aggravating.

One day, when I'm reading my *New York Times* in my lap in the "Problems of American Democracy" class, this guy who had a Polish last name, all of a sudden, I tuned into hearing him

talk and he said, "Well, these Spics that are taking over in …" It was something about that, "Spics taking over." I'm looking up and I'm thinking, "Who is this, and what is this?" That's the kind of prejudice that would be expressed. There were Black kids in my class, but I think they were in the commercial track. The man who became my fourth and perhaps last husband, whom I went to high school with, he was a poor kid who lived in projects, and he remembered who the Black kids were, but I think that's because they came out of his neighborhood. I did not see anything based on race in my town. There was one Black kid who was a musician, but that's it. In my community, the lines were drawn around Jews, and I could not date Catholics. [There were] Jewish boys who were funny and smart, Catholic boys who could dance, and they were both off limits.

One time when my mother's mother was visiting, she was having a fit because I was dating an Episcopalian and going to a dance at the VFW [Veterans of Foreign Wars] hall, which is where the Catholics went to dance, the kids, and there were a lot of Catholics there. It was a Catholic neighborhood. Effie Mae told me that, "Episcopalian is right close to Catholic. Those Catholics, they'll take you and they'll put you in a basement and you'll never be seen again." Now, this is a rural Mississippian woman born in 1888, so that was her.

It was mostly in the paper [that I was exposed to the civil rights movement]. The fact that they were college kids in 1960 in the sit-ins and that they were so young and they were my age. I have a line like that in my novel about, "There's a war going on, and I wanted to be on the front lines." My interest was in the conflict, in the advocacy, in the adrenaline, in the excitement, and this was all in the South. This wasn't happening where I was, to my knowledge anyway.

KR: Then, 1964, Mississippi Freedom Summer comes along. How did that influence you and propel you into the civil rights movement?

DC: Well, I thought that I should go. It seemed to me an obvious thing, but I was underage, so I needed parental consent. My father absolutely was opposed, and we fought about it bitterly. He said that if I was still so scatterbrained as to want to go the next year, I could, and he probably just thought the whole thing would blow over or that I wouldn't have the tenacity of interest in it. So, I couldn't go that year, but that was by far the most interesting thing happening in the world to me.

One of the things that was so attractive about it was how it was created from community, the organizing model was listening to people, you know, let the people decide. This was Bob Moses. It was not all about arrogance. It was not about men leading things. There were so many Black women who were leaders in that, and they took huge risks. There was all this death. They made incremental changes, which, it turns out, would have a lot of impact. All that was extremely attractive to me. It was the agency, that people could speak from the truth of their lives, where people were getting in their way and not letting them vote, for instance. It was just that you could push back, and you did it in groups. You did it in an organized way. You figured it out, week in, week out.

I was just reading, last night--did I give you that article in *The New Yorker* in November 1970, where Jane Kramer comes and she sits with our women's group for a year and then does this big

article about us and we each chose pseudonyms? I had to explain to my granddaughters what a pseudonym is. That was fun. [laughter] My name is Nina in it. I'm reading this article, and you can see in that article, as we are formulating a city-wide New York Radical Feminists, how much those early ideas of communal decision making and consensus building are present, as opposed to coming out of the New Left with a very top down, "This is how it's going to be," which was not attractive to me.

That was Freedom Summer. Then, I went to college. When you've seen all this stuff and then you get there and they're telling you, "You can't go barefoot to another dorm. You have to sign in at night," all these restrictions, you have a model for what to do, so you start to organize it. Then, when I went over to try to get birth control, before I had sex for the first time, this guy at Harvard, who was known for being a pro-student, student services doctor, I go over there and he asks me whether I'm engaged. I'm not ready for that question, and so my mouth drops open. He says, "Come back and see me when you have a ring." Here I am, so responsible, I am still a virgin and I'm trying to [get birth control]. Again, he's a doctor, and these rules are not written for me.

The other thing is I had this very attractive boyfriend, who I met just meeting eyes driving around New Britain and I'd see him in the Friendly's Ice Cream parking lot. He's from another high school, so I thought, "Well, how can I meet this guy?" So, I got a job at Friendly's because he was there. I wore a little half-slip that was black-laced, so when I bent over, you know, dah, dah, dah. That's how we met, and then I give up the job, which I was terrible at. [laughter] I would empty the ashtray too soon and start fires. We dated in senior year of high school, went to each other's senior prom, and he was very attractive in many ways. He would quote Shakespearean sonnets to me, when I passed him in the car, "When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes, I all alone beweep my outcast state." [Editor's Note: This is from William Shakespeare's Sonnet 29.] I mean, this was really heady stuff. He was a gorgeous, blue-eyed, six-feet-two, blonde-haired, funny guy. He was always trying to get me into bed, that first year in college. I was definitely interested, but I was not interested in pregnancy. He would talk to my mother, and she would tell me, "He doesn't want to marry somebody who's not a virgin." I was so ticked off at this point that I said, "How about if I don't want to marry somebody who doesn't want to marry somebody who's not a virgin?" Then, it turns out, we finally have sex on Washington's birthday, it's 1965, which was underwhelming. The run-up was a lot more interesting than this, but he then tells me the next month that all these months when I turned him down, he was having sex with a local high school girl. So, that's the end of that. I break up with him under a bridge in Boston in the car.

It was a rough first year of college. This double-standard thing was hitting. The birth control was hitting. The civil rights movement was on, and then I got to go to Birmingham that summer.

KR: Before you went to Birmingham, had you done civil rights activities either in Boston or in New Britain?

DC: No. In Boston, something else I just found that I wrote talked about, there was some sign up about a demonstration at Jackson, at Tufts, and I went, and what I wrote was it was like ten people kind of wandering around and not knowing what to do in the rain. It was just kind of

formless. But then there was this other sign, this little index card, that said, "People who want to go on a summer project to the South …" and that's how I got involved in this SCLC [Southern Christian Leadership Conference] project in Fairfield, Alabama at Miles College. There were about a dozen college-aged students from the Boston area who went down for that.

KR: First, let's talk about that process. You got the flyer when you were, in fact, at college.

DC: It was pinned up on a bulletin board, yes.

KR: This was something you were already interested in doing. How did that process unfold that you were one of those ten students to go down and work on this voting registration project?

DC: You know, I don't even know. My first semester in college, when I was having the guy grab me and kiss me, my grades were so poor, I was so untaken with college. We had a religion course that was required, and it met on Saturday mornings at eight or nine. It was "Religion in American Society," but, still. You'd get there, and the guy would just talk about Red Sox ball scores. That whole semester, I was like, "This is college?" I had a 1.06 average after that first semester, so they put me on academic probation. [laughter] So, I had to go sit in this little study hall the whole second semester and pay attention. I was trying to get my grades up because I knew I couldn't transfer without getting my grades up. Then, when this boyfriend turns out to be sleeping with the girl from home, that's March. So, really my spring semester was getting my grades up so I could leave and dealing with the loss of him and crying about that.

There's a woman who I've been in touch with since, after an arduous search for her. I finally found her through real estate records--I mean, really. Mary was from Emmanuel College, which is a girl's Catholic college in Boston, around there, and she and I were roommates in Fairfield. We went down on the train together, and that's what's in the novel. [Editor's Note: Diane Crothers is referring to a semi-autobiographical novel that she wrote, entitled *Nothing Personal*.] We were on that Southern Crescent train. She recalls how she got [permission]. I don't remember how I got [permission to go]. I know that I was eighteen by then, so I think I didn't need [parental consent], or maybe they consented. I just don't remember.

KR: You went to college when you were seventeen, because you were born in December.

DC: Yes.

KR: There was inherent danger in the work that you were doing in Alabama, in the work that all of the civil rights activists were doing in Alabama and throughout the South.

DC: Right.

KR: How did you feel going into it? How did your parents feel going into it?

DC: My mother wasn't against it. Her family was against it. I had an aunt that said, "Why doesn't Diane just go and work in a cerebral palsy camp? She'd do much more good for the world working with children." My mother's older brother, who still had land in Mississippi, said

[spoken in a southern accent], "The Negroes don't want any of this. This is outside agitators and New York Jews." So, she defended me to them. She understood why I wanted to go. My father probably still opposed. Many years later, when I had reconciled with him over our various difficulties, I asked him, "So, if you had to do it over again, would you have signed?" So, I guess he signed. "Would you have signed that form to let me go?" He said, "No, I would've chained you to a piece of furniture before I'd let you go." [laughter]

In Freedom Summer, those three students were killed at the beginning of that. When we went down, there was a heightened awareness of how dangerous this was. When they were putting us in at the Miles College Project, they didn't want to put us in someplace in South Alabama because somebody had just been killed there. There was a very open, strategic discussion of where to put people. [Editor's Note: In June 1964, Andrew Goodman, James Chaney and Michael Schwerner were killed by members of the Ku Klux Klan near Philadelphia, Mississippi. The three civil rights activists had been engaged in voter registration activities as a part of Freedom Summer, organized by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). On February 26, 1965, activist Jimmie Lee Jackson died after being shot several days earlier by an Alabama state trooper during a peaceful march in Marion, Alabama. On March 25, 1965, Viola Liuzzo was shot and killed by KKK members while driving a car in Lowndes County. Liuzzo, a white mother of five who lived in Detroit, had volunteered as a member of the transportation committee during the march from Selma to Montgomery, March 21-March 25, 1965.]

Okay, yes. Selma was in March, Easter, right around there. Oh, I should say too about that, I had been to a church in Boston, the Arlington Street Unitarian Church, on Palm Sunday, and that might have been the only time I went to church that year. They had this minister, Jack Mendelsohn. First of all, he's a Jew, and he's standing there in this Unitarian Church and it's Palm Sunday and the whole sermon is about the South and civil rights. I came out of there and I thought, "This is a church? This is so interesting." That was sort of my first contact with being a Unitarian, which is now what I am. Jack Mendelsohn was really a unique leader. At one point, the Boston Brahmins wanted him to change his name from Jack to John because it was too Jewish, and he refused. He was quite a one-of-a-kind.

KR: You were talking about the precautions that were being taken at Miles College to protect the civil rights workers.

DC: Right. We had this leader, Reverend Abraham Lincoln Woods, who was in it for the long haul. He's been quoted many times in *The Times*. He was quoted when the *4 Little Girls* Spike Lee film came out. He was our group leader, and it was a small group. It was just ten of us white kids from Boston. Miles College students had been working on voter registration for a long time. They had a dean from Harvard, John Monro, who was a very unusual guy, and he had given up an elite career at Harvard to come down to this barely-accredited historically black college with no resources. I don't know if he was dean of freshmen there or at Harvard. Miles was an interesting place. [Editor's Note: Reverend Abraham Lincoln Woods, Jr. was a native of Birmingham and an alumnus and long-time faculty member of Miles College. Woods helped mobilize support for the March on Washington in 1963, headed the Miles College Voter Registration Project, and later became president of the Birmingham SCLC. John U. Monro served as Dean of Harvard College and left in 1967 for Miles College, a then-unaccredited

historically Black college, where he became the director of Freshman Studies, after having worked there in 1965.]

We stayed [with] a family just a couple of blocks from Miles. I don't know if it was the girl or the mother named Melvin--I put in the novel everything I could remember about that house, and they had the room and the grandmother, although there is an imaginary character in the novel, the husband, who I kill off in the novel, but there was no husband in that house.

The rules are, as a white girl, you do not ever travel in a car with a Black man, or when you're going two by two to get people to register to vote, you are never paired with a Black man. Basically, you were always with a white man; I guess you were with white men, I don't really recall. We had one girl, whose name was also Diane, from Harvard, who thought these were stupid rules. She would break them, and she'd be in a car with a Black guy. We all thought she was going to get everyone killed. It wasn't until--she came back to Cambridge and she was on her bicycle in the middle of Harvard Square someplace and some cops were doing some kind of chase and they hit her and killed her. It was this completely happenstance kind of death, after she gets through this summer in Birmingham.

We would meet everybody over at Miles College in the morning and we would always have to wait for Reverend Woods. He would always be late. We were all revved-up, northern white kids at elite schools and joked at his expense that he's probably on pep pills and that if he weren't, he'd be walking backwards. We had absolutely no respect for the difference in these cultures. These were just long, difficult days of a lot of heat and a lot of RC Cola.

My friend Mary, my roommate, had a different life down there. She went to this place called Speakeasy and drank beer with all these people. I don't know. Then, this house was bombed a block from of us. When I finally got ahold of her many years later, like ten or fifteen years ago, and I went and interviewed her. First, I interviewed her not telling her anything that I remember to see what she remembered, and, boy, you would think we were living in different places. [laughter] But she was a Catholic girl and trying to be very Catholic. I wasn't and I was more interested in boys and men, and so I was having this other life of dancing around with white male volunteers.

In the novel, I put her with a Black guy, and the cops stopped them. See, now, I can't remember any more if that happened. I'll have to go back and look at notes from that. I think she did do that, and I think Reverend Woods blamed me and called my father. Then, we had a fight about that, and my father wanted me to come home. He was telling me to come home. I was ticked off at Woods for calling my father and being wrong about which white girl it was.

I managed to negotiate finishing the summer down there, until the bombing. The bombing was just like a day or two after the Voting Rights Act had been signed by Johnson, so it was a pushback. I'm trying to think when Medgar Evers was killed, if it was that. Medgar Evers, I think, was killed when Jack Kennedy made that speech. I think that's earlier, because Kennedy is still alive, yes, okay. [Editor's Note: On August 6, 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act into law. Medgar Evers, the NAACP field secretary in Mississippi, was assassinated at his home in Jackson on June 12, 1963. The assassination occurred a few hours

after a nationally-televised speech given by President John F. Kennedy, in which he promised that he would ask Congress to enact civil rights legislation.]

KR: What are the circumstances of the house getting bombed? Whose house was it?

DC: It was a house exactly a block away from our house. If you looked at a grid of the city, it was just one block away and it was right next to the Black elementary school. They were about to go up because they started [school] very early. This was August, August 7th or 8th or something. I remember going to a meeting and having Reverend Woods tell us that the project was ending and we could go home. What Mary remembers was that she kept asking me where was I that night, and what she remembers is Black men with rifles around our house defending it. I can't say that I remember that, but I've just heard it so vividly. I flew home and saw a cop at the airport and realized that he did not know who I was and did not know what I had been doing and that I was safe. There's this article, this gives you a feel for the time. Can you see the headline?

KR: I will read the headline. It says, "Volunteer City Student Aided Negro Registration." Is that a picture of you, Diane?

DC: Yes. It say Diane Crothers. It describes the events. This is August '65, *New Britain Herald*, and so this is the big news to the white reporter. "A local girl spent six weeks in Birmingham, Alabama this summer, helping register Negro voters and found it was like living 'in another country'." That's kind of a term of art for Mr. Baldwin. I think that came out before this. [Editor's Note: This refers to *Another Country*, a novel written by James Baldwin and published in 1962.]

One thing that happened was this scene on the train. I don't know if you've had a chance to look at that in this novel, where the conductor finds out what we're doing in Birmingham and he says that there's a dead n***** on the track in front of us. We're in Alabama and there's all these trees on both sides of the train. It's a very scary moment. Mary used to tell me that that didn't happen, and here it is, in August of '65. [Editor's Note: Diane Crothers is reading from the *New Britain Herald* article from August 1965.] "She said the first indication of hostility came when she and another girl arrived in Birmingham on a train. When the other passengers in the car learned of the girls' purpose in visiting Alabama, they began shouting and jostling the girls as they sought to leave the train." Well, that's kind of mushed, I don't know, because I don't think it was "as we got to Birmingham." I think it was "while we were on the train." "White policemen were unfriendly, she said, and would harass the volunteers in minor ways. Some were jailed for minor offenses, such as jaywalking. She said she observed only friendliness on the part of the Negros there," and this is the part that he thought was so stunning, I think, "And that if she had met any danger while walking through the city, she would not have hesitated to seek shelter in any Negro household." Just this whole notion of how separate the worlds were. "While such an observation may seem melodramatic, it's not entirely unfounded. On the last day of her stay, a nearby house was bombed. It was situated identically to the one in which she was living, one block removed. She suspects that the attempt was made for her house." We registered as many as five hundred voters a day. At this point, I'm transferring to New York, to NYU, and taking courses at the New School. "She felt an overwhelming sense of relief when she arrived in New

York on the return trip and was again able to look at a white policeman without feeling afraid." [I was] eighteen.

KR: When you were actually doing the voter registration, what do you recall about that process? Can you take me through a day and what you would do when you would be out going from house to house?

DC: A little bit. They would give us a map of a particular neighborhood, a few streets, and you would just work house after house after house. We met people--I remember one of the ones that made such an impression on me was this old Black woman who didn't know exactly how old she was and didn't know her birthdate because she was so unimportant to the society that records had not been kept on her. Again, a million years later, when I'm in the National Archives and I'm looking at the slave schedules in 1850 and 1860 when no one has a name, it's the same namelessness that I encountered in Birmingham for the first time.

In the novel, I make a scene out of this, where I'm trying to talk this woman into coming down and attempting to register and that this will be a group process, she will not be by herself, and that we will pick her up and carry her there, as we used to say. Jo Freeman, who was with an SCLC program--I don't know whether she was in Alabama or she was in Mississippi--but she has online these voter registration forms that you used to have to fill out to do this and I have the ones in Alabama someplace here. In them, when you try to register to vote, they put in the newspaper all your employers, marriages you've had, I think there was something about loans, but I could be wrong, and the *Birmingham News* would print this stuff. Your employers--and these were a lot of domestic workers--they would fire you for this stuff. They would just put it in the paper, and you'd lose your job immediately. People were afraid of being killed for it. Fairfield had--I don't know if it was U.S. Steel, but they had been affected by having the steel industry there for a long time. There were skilled jobs for Black men for a while. This is not rural Mississippi, where people were going to disappear overnight over this stuff. They were mostly afraid of job loss. When you look at the school desegregation cases, the people who brought those cases, they lost their jobs and were run out of town, and that's the kind of stuff that people were worried about.

During that six weeks that we were there, they took us on a trip to Montgomery, and we saw [Governor George] Wallace's house and we saw this portrait inside of him in which his forehead was lengthened because he had a very short forehead. It looked kind of unattractive. In this painting, he has his forehead lengthened, so we saw that as well.

There was also a billboard that said, "Impeach Earl Warren. Keep America white." We went by--and there's a scene in the novel about this--we went by the National States' Rights Party had a location there and it had snipers sitting up on the porch. They would have the Nazi insignia, the storm trooper stuff, the lightning thing, that was visible. [Editor's Note: The National States' Rights Party (NSRP) was headquartered in Birmingham, Alabama. The insignia refers to the Wolfsangel, a symbol used by military units in Nazi Germany.]

The atmosphere was very intimidating, and you knew that if you ever got arrested that that's when the people in Mississippi died when they got arrested. We were really trying not to get

arrested for anything. The daughter in the family I lived with had graduated from Miles College recently, and the only job she could get was a part-time job at a drug store. They had, in their living room, the typical scene of Martin Luther King and John F. Kennedy pictures up. We went to these mass meetings at the local churches every week, and there was a lot of singing. Many years later, I was in the Jubilee Singers at the Unitarian church in Washington and we sang a lot of those songs, which were so reassuring and so affirming. Many years later, there's a group Sweet Honey and the Rock, which is this acapella group, and Bernice Johnson Reagan, who was with the SNCC Freedom Singers, was a historian and a curator at the Smithsonian, and I went to some stuff when I was living in Washington there. One time, it was Martin Luther King Day and she did a thing about asking everybody in the audience who had been in the southern civil rights struggle to stand up. We did that, and she thanked us. It was an odd experience to feel that. I mean, I appreciated it and I appreciated where it came from from her, but we could leave, so that double edge of whether you're in the particular group or you're not and what is happening to you as a result or is not. That is really an important part of my political upbringing is how important those group identities were.

KR: You talked about the leader of this SCLC group, Abraham Lincoln Woods.

DC: Yes.

KR: Of the leadership staff of this project, who else was involved? What were the demographics of the leaders?

DC: This was a Black male minister's group, SCLC. The women were supposed to make the food and run the mimeograph machines and do the background work. A couple of these ministers came on to me sexually during the summer, and, again, I'm an eighteen-year-old white girl from the North, so they would be attracted to me for things beyond my own personality. I rejected that, but that was, again, just a confusing part of the whole thing. But there was a notion--and I heard it from a Catholic student, a fellow student of mine, in the MFA program I was in about ten years ago, he said that he had been told at his church that the nuns that came down to the Selma thing wanted to sleep with Black men and that's why they came down. I just thought, "And you would believe this because …" [laughter] There was this notion, though, that that's why white girls were in this. But I don't remember their names.

KR: Were there any Black women leaders in this local group at Miles College?

DC: Not that I recall. So much went right over my head. I was just trying to [adjust]. At one point, I was trying to adjust to grits. Mary and I were trying to eat grits for breakfast and be polite, and then there was okra and chitlins, oh, my God, more of the mundane things.

In my novel, I have her meet Martin Luther King, and she's expressing all her adulation. He's coming to a training session that they're running, and she stands up and she realizes that she's taller than she is. So, those kinds of things were very much in that; you certainly were in a role as a white girl to take direction. It wasn't my natural strong suit, so I was trying hard to do that.

KR: Well, we have been going for over two hours today.

DC: Okay, so we're up to [age] eighteen.

KR: We are up to eighteen, yes. How does it sound if we stop for today?

DC: Yes, that's fine.

KR: I will end the recording, and then we'll talk for a minute off the record. Is that okay?

DC: Sure, yes.

KR: Thank you so much for doing this first oral history session. It's been fascinating and an absolute pleasure.

----------END OF TRANSCRIPT----------

Reviewed by Kathryn Tracy Rizzi 4/13/2022
Reviewed by Diane Crothers 9/18/2022