

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH PATRICIA GRAHAM

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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BUSHKILL, PENNSYLVANIA

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TRANSCRIPT BY

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Molly Graham: This begins an oral history interview with Patricia Graham. The date is April 27th, 2015. The interview is taking place in Bushkill, Pennsylvania, and the interviewer is Molly Graham. Could you tell me when and where you were born?

Patricia Graham: Okay, where I was born, [I was] born in Saluda, S-A-L-U-D-A, South Carolina, March 9th, 1949.

MG: Was your family from Saluda?

PG: Yes, my father was born there. My mother was born in Brooklyn, Georgia and grew up, [was] raised in Saluda also.

MG: What do you know about your family's history, starting on your father's side?

PG: My family, we know a little bit about our history, because on my father's side we have family reunions every five or six years. We know that there was a plantation, a grand plantation, there, and obviously my father's family came from the plantation. We traced our routes back to my grandmother's father basically. That's my great grandfather, and he eventually migrated to Chicago during I guess it was part of the industrial revolution. My father was in World War II. After the war, he married and married my mother. When I was three years old, they decided, because farming was going down, they decided we were going to move to a city, and we moved to Philadelphia. I attended elementary and middle school in Philadelphia and then later high school and college in New Jersey.

MG: What about the family history on your mother's side?

PG: I know a little less because when I was born both grandparents were deceased on my mother's side. They're buried in Saluda. I know where they're buried and where the family church was. We were told that my maternal grandfather, his parents came from Haiti, and we know that his mother was from Haiti. They had a German last name, Wertz, W-E-R-T-Z, as I'm told, because of the history of Haiti being settled by Americans, Germans, so many people raped that country, so you could take that part out if you want. [laughter] That's about all I know. I have lots of cousins on that side of the family, too.

MG: Are a lot of them still in South Carolina?

PG: Yes. Some of my mother's relatives are in South Carolina, in Saluda, and so are my father's.

MG: What do you know about your father's World War II experience?

PG: I know that he was in the cleanup crew for Pearl Harbor. I know that. I didn't know that until much later in life, because he didn't talk a lot about his experience. I remember seeing these pictures of him with Hawaiian girls, because he had this old scrapbook, but I just thought maybe he was deployed there. He was in the Marines. I didn't know until maybe twenty years ago that

he was in Hawaii, because he was part of the cleanup crew for Pearl Harbor. He was stationed in Oklahoma I know for a while, and I'm not sure where else. I'd like to know more about his history during the war. I have a photo of him in his uniform as a young man.

MG: Do you know how he met your mother?

PG: It's interesting that you ask me, because I was going to tell you. [laughter] The reason why both sides of my family are so close, my mother's family, the Wertz, lived out in the country in Saluda, and my father's family lived in town. My mother, in order to go to school, she had to come to town and live with an aunt during the weekdays, and her friends, her best friends, were a family that had sisters. These sisters were my mother's best friends, and these sisters said, "Well, we have a brother in the service, and when he comes home, I want you to meet my brother." She met their brother, and then of course that's who she married, her best friend's brother. [laughter] I think my cousins, the cousins from that side of the family, we're so very close. We're almost like siblings, because our parents were best friends. Their mother's brother married my mom, and it's just really very connected that way because it's a small town.

MG: For the record, what were your parents' names?

PG: Lillian Wertz. Leo was her middle name, because they thought she was going to be a boy. [laughter] My father's name was Eddie Roy Graham, and he came from a large family of seven. My mother came from a family, I think there were twelve kids, because her father married twice and his second wife had also been married before. People died early, so people remarried a lot I think because of death. My grandmother brought three or four children to the marriage from her first marriage, so my mother was the youngest girl and then she had a brother younger than her in the family.

MG: In what year were your parents married?

PG: 1948.

MG: Can you talk a little bit about what they did for a living?

PG: Yes. My father, on my birth certificate, it says "Father, farmer; mother, housewife." [laughter] When they moved to Philadelphia, my father got a job, because he was a veteran, he probably had more opportunities, and he got a job with the company ITT Nesbitt it was called, and they made air conditioning units. My father drove a forklift. He was a forklift operator for over thirty-something years with a company in Philadelphia. My mother went to nursing school in Philadelphia, the Philadelphia School of Nursing, and she became an LPN [licensed practical nurse]. She was a nurse until she died.

MG: Patricia, are you an only child?

PG: Yeah. [laughter] I'm an only child from my parent's marriage. My father has two other children. I have a sister, she's older, and a brother who's younger that are my father's children.

My parents divorced when I was about thirteen, and so my mother and I moved to New Jersey. When my father remarried, he was seventy-five, and my stepmother was sixty-five. My father retired and moved back to our hometown in South Carolina in Saluda. Anyway, at age seventy-five, he remarried and my stepmother was sixty-five. She had like eight children of her own. [laughter] They were all adults, her children. I have these incredibly large Christmases with my stepmother, it's wonderful, with all the children and the grands and the great grands.

MG: Can you tell me again why you moved from Saluda to Philadelphia?

PG: When I was three years old, my parents moved to Philadelphia, because farming was on the decline for small farms. They were a young married couple, and they wanted to establish a different life. It gave my mother an opportunity to go to nursing school and everything. Gradually, my father's, all of his siblings moved and my grandmother, except one of my father's sisters moved to Washington, D.C., but eventually six of his siblings migrated to Philadelphia.

MG: What part of Philadelphia did you move to?

PG: We moved when I was three, we moved to North Philadelphia in a neighborhood [where] the people were of Swedish ethnicity. There were maybe three black families on the block, and there were maybe some Jewish people in the neighborhood. You could tell that because the businesses that were in the ten-mile area were Swedish and Jewish, and I think there were some Irish people. The elementary school was the same. You could walk to school. The people had interesting last names, so you learned how to pronounce [laughter] a lot of different names.

MG: Did the black families stick together and the other ethnicities group together, or was it more of a melting pot?

PG: Well, when I first moved there, that was in the early '50s, I don't know that there were as many black families in black neighborhoods at that time. I think black families were integrating the neighborhoods. If there were black neighborhoods at that time, I don't know about it. I think that happened over time, as the white families eventually moved to the suburbs, moved to New Jersey, or moved to the other small towns outside of the city. No, it was a melting pot in '51- '52, which was reflected in the schools, at least in the elementary schools. We went to school with a lot of different ethnic groups, even your teachers were. I remember three black teachers in my elementary school, a counselor, the gym teacher, and one English teacher. The others were Italian and Irish. [laughter]

MG: Tell me a little about your early memories from when you moved to Philadelphia.

PG: I remember our house was a corner house on this block, and it's an area in Philadelphia now that has been relabeled. It's called Brewerytown. I guess there used to be a brewery there. I remember that I couldn't leave the porch. I had to stay on the porch. There were other little children that would come across the street, and we'd all play on my porch because my mother didn't let me leave the porch. [laughter] I remember playing on the porch a lot. One interesting thing when I was in elementary school, I guess age nine or so, my parents sent me to an away

summer camp. I loved to visit other people because growing up as an only child that's the way you made friends, so visiting was fun. My parents would send me to summer camp here in the Poconos, which is so ironic to me because later when I got married and moved to the Poconos, my husband and I were driving around and there was this sign for my camp, Camp (Tekawitha?). We lived five miles from (Tekawitha?), and that sort of blew my mind. It was still an operating camp when I moved here in '77. I remember elementary school and always enjoying going away to camp in the Poconos. I was the only black kid in the camp, in the girls' camp, and then there was a connecting boys' camp. These were camps connected to some church, some religious [denomination], because they all had a chapel. We always had to go to chapel first before you did anything else. There was a boys' camp, and there was one black boy in the camp, in the boys' camp. They'd bring us together on weekends, and he was from my elementary school. His parents sent him on purpose, because I was going to the Poconos and his mom thought that would be [good for him] because our parents were friends. Joseph [was his name]. On Sadie Hawkins Day, we had to catch the boys and dress them in our clothes, and so Joseph would always slow down so I could catch him. [laughter] I guess he thought I'm supposed to catch him, because he was the black boy from my elementary school. [laughter] We dressed them in our pajamas, stuff like that. Those are the fun memories.

MG: Did he feel like an ally there?

PG: I guess so, because we didn't see each other every day, only when they brought the boys and girls together. They say that children are taught racism. I can honestly tell you all those summers that I went to camp, which was probably about three or four, all I remember is having fun and playing with other children. Also, another ironic thing is that the camp counselors, we were told, "Well, they're college students." Lo and behold, they're from, as I learned later, they're from the local college, which was East Stroudsburg University, which some day, twenty-something years later, I was going to be a professor there. It blows my mind sometimes when I think about that camp experience and who the camp counselors were.

MG: It sounds like you planted some seeds there.

PG: Yeah, it really does. It's ironic. Life is weird. [laughter]

MG: Were there any experiences of discrimination there from counselors or other campers?

PG: No, I don't ever remember. I remember my parents used to send me for two weeks, and I even remember what it cost because they would talk about it. It was like sixty dollars a week. My mother would always buy me a suitcase of new clothes, which my father would complain about, "Well, why does she need new clothes? They're only kids going to play." I remember the sixty dollars a week. I don't know why, because I guess it was expensive for them and they talked about it. I remember one summer, when you had to call you parents. You could talk to your parents a few days a week on the telephone. I asked my mom if I could stay for the whole summer, and that would have been like two months. My parents had to physically drive up from Philadelphia and bring the money, so that they could add more weeks to my stay. I loved it so much because I was always playing, and at night, I'd go to sleep in a room with other kids. I'd

wake up and the kids are still there, and I'm playing all day. That's what I remember, what a wonderful experience going to summer camp was for me.

MG: What ages were you going to the summer camp?

PG: I must have been like nine, ten, eleven, twelve, elementary school ages. It was elementary school, not middle school. I didn't go in middle school.

MG: Did your friend from your school go with you all four years or whatever it was?

PG: I think so. [laughter] Yeah, I remember him, yes. I think he did, Joseph. [laughter]

MG: With your mom going to school for nursing, did you have other caretakers or relatives looking after you?

PG: Yes. My grandmother eventually came from the South. My father's mother lived a pretty long life. They bought Granny a house in the neighborhood, and then Granny and my father's younger brother lived with Granny. Granny would take care of me at night or during the day, I don't know, maybe it was at night, because my father worked at night. His shift was a night shift, an evening shift. He was home with me during the mornings, and when I'd come home [for] lunch, Dad was there. I remember he said working night shifts you earn more money, so he worked the night shift. My mother was in the nursing school during the day, and one aunt, one of my father's sisters, took care of me. Then, eventually, my father, one of his sisters bought the neighborhood grocery store from the Swedish family, and there was a house attached to it. It was just like half a block [away] or something, so I would go there after school also to my aunt's, to their grocery store.

MG: What stories about growing up did your grandmother tell you?

PG: My grandmother told me that she learned to cook at age twelve. She would stand on a foot stool at the stove and cook. Her mother died in childbirth, and her father remarried twice, once in Saluda and then he left Saluda and moved to Chicago. My grandmother would visit him in Chicago. She was raised by her maternal family; her mother's family raised her. I don't think she had an easy life. She was a sharecropper, and actually she was not allowed to marry. The sharecroppers told her if she ever married, then she would lose her home. She had children. When she became pregnant and had a first child, she wasn't married. That was a story that one of my uncles used to talk about. That really upset him to hear that Granny was never encouraged to marry, because she could lose her home and her way of life. She had been raised by her mother's family, and she had to become an adult pretty quick. I think her seven children she had, you know, the fathers of the children, they could live with her, it's not a nice story to tell, they could live with her, but if she ever married, she would lose her home. You can see why her children, when they became adults, they were eager to move away and start a different life, and they took care of their mother. They took care of Granny very well. When she moved to Philly, I think she lived a luxurious life.

MG: Maybe talk to me a little bit about your experience at school.

PG: In which?

MG: We can start with grammar school and then go up to middle and high school.

PG: Okay, at grammar school.

MG: Maybe some teachers that stand out to you.

PG: Okay. My guidance counselor stood out, because she was one of the three black teachers in the school. She was my third grade teacher, and she became the first guidance counselor that the elementary school ever had. I had to go to her office, because I used to make the letter o look like a letter a, and they sent me to the guidance counselor because my teacher failed my spelling test. I remember my mother and father coming up to school saying, "She can spell. I know that she's a good speller," because they would always test me orally at home and I could spell anything, but they weren't testing my writing. I'd make the o's look like a's, and I failed the spelling test. [laughter] They sent me to the counselor to see if I had a problem. [laughter] The counselor was so nice to me, because she had been my third grade teacher. She made me practice writing one hundred o's and one hundred a's until I got it right. Still to this day, sometimes I'm really cautious about it. That teacher who became the counselor always stood out, because I felt she was very special in helping me because then my grades improved once I learned how to write better. She eventually became the superintendent of schools in Philadelphia. On occasion, I would see her at professional conferences in Philadelphia, because she was a big deal in the Philadelphia school system, like the head person. I have to tell you, maybe less than five years ago, I was at West Chester University at an event, and there she was, just looking as beautiful and striking as she was in elementary school. I went over to see her to say hello. This was the dedication at West Chester University in Pennsylvania. Are you familiar with our [state university system]? We have in Pennsylvania, the state universities, we have fourteen, and they're each named after the city in which they're located. West Chester University is in the Pennsylvania system, and it's located in West Chester, Pennsylvania, which is outside of Philadelphia, like a suburban area of Philadelphia. It was a dedication of a Frederick Douglass statue, which I'll tell you later about the Frederick Douglass Institutes in the fourteen state universities. There was this dedication and an unveiling of the statue. There she was, Mrs. (Sprigs?), because she lives in that community, and I was so overwhelmed to see her. I learned that she and I have mutual friends, and I never knew that these people knew her. She always made a great impact on my life, because my first career out of grad school was a counselor. I wanted to be a counselor and helping others because of the help that I received. I always admired her. She was a role model.

MG: Getting into middle and high school, what became your extracurricular interests and activities?

PG: In middle school, I was always acting, and I founded a club. [laughter] We called it Stagecrafters because we loved to act. I was not a good singer, so they could only tailor some of the plays that we did that involved no singing. [laughter]

MG: This was John Sartain high school or middle school.

PG: Elementary school was John Sartain. [At Robert] Vaux Junior High in Philadelphia, we played chess and we learned to speak Russian in middle school, because one of our teachers, the chess club teacher, had lived in Russia. He was a black teacher, I don't know why he was in Russia, I don't really know, [laughter] but to this day, students at that Vaux Middle School, they have [an] outstanding chess record. They've always had this fabulous chess club. They've traveled around the world. If you Google them, you'll find out. [laughter]

MG: In high school, were you discovering what subjects you were interested in and what you were excelling in?

PG: High school, I went in New Jersey, West Side High School. I don't know, I guess I thought I wanted to be an English teacher, but I was wrong. [laughter]

MG: You said earlier that your parents divorced when you were thirteen.

PG: Yeah.

MG: I am wondering what that was like for you.

PG: Sad, because I never knew that they had any problems. When they had disagreements, they'd go upstairs to their bedroom and have their disagreement. I never saw them fight or disagree, so it was like a shock. It was a shock that they were going to separate. That was a shock, because I didn't think parents separated, at that age, I might have been twelve. They let me stay on and go to middle school in Philadelphia, because I had started already. I stayed with my father to finish middle school. They didn't want to disrupt my school friends, which I appreciate to this day that they did something like that. They made their own separation agreement. Later in life, of course, I know why they separated and got divorced. They allowed me to finish middle school before moving to New Jersey. I was able to start high school fresh with a new class. There was one fun thing about them being separated. Once a month, whoever I was living with, if I was living with my dad in middle school or my mom in high school, I would travel on the train once a month [laughter] back to Philly or to New Jersey, wherever. I never had my own luggage. I used my dad's luggage when I was with my dad or my mom's luggage, and they always used to make jokes about me wearing out their luggage. I don't know, it was common sense, they should have bought me my own luggage. Probably today that's why I have like three sets of luggage. [laughter] So, I never had my own luggage, but I was traveling once a month. The train ride was always interesting, because I was traveling holidays when school was out, Easter, summer vacation. The trains were always crowded, because I'm going back and forth during holiday times a lot. Because I was petite, I was little, I was able to get away with paying the child's fair, because they never knew that I was twelve. The conductor



never knew. I'm traveling by myself at that age. Sometimes, when the trains were very crowded, when the train arrived in Philly or New Jersey, whichever way I was going, they would be full. Instead of letting me stand up, people would say, because they had to get me out of the aisles, some people, it's amazing how nice people were, would say, "Oh, little girl, come squeeze in here with us." I did that. I sat with other people, or I sat close to someone's seat on my luggage a lot during those holiday times. I would meet the most fascinating people. I remember meeting people who were college professors going [to] New Jersey, and they were going home for Christmas or going back and forth. I met soldiers. I met college students. I often thought about writing a children's book about riding on the train because of all of the different people and how people would talk to me. My mother would dress me up like a girlie girl, everything was perfect, and people would comment on my outfits. People were always very kind when I was traveling on the train like that once a month, so I always loved to travel.

MG: How did your mother come to settle in the Newark area?

PG: One of her sisters was living there, one sister in Brooklyn and one in East Orange, New Jersey, so that's how she came to settle there.

MG: I am curious how life was different for you when you moved to New Jersey.

PG: I was in high school, and I had fewer cousins, maybe one cousin in my age group to play with. He was a boy. He spent time with me because he was forced to, [laughter] so he acted like a big brother. I had fewer cousins, so sometimes it was very lonely until I learned to make friends in high school. I played piano most of my life, so I joined the band and they made me play the clarinet. That was an activity. Because I had to come home for a few hours and be alone before my mother came home from the hospital, I think she talked to my guidance counselor and for some reason they got me this little [job]. I was a helper, a teacher's helper, and the teacher had me typing labels. I learned how to type in Philadelphia in middle school. Typing, no matter what your major was, typing was something we learned. This one teacher, I believe he was a science teacher or something, he was always putting labels on the experiments and things. I would have to stay after school for like an hour or so, closer to the time that my mother would be coming home, and I'm in this science lab typing labels. Of course, I didn't know until later that this is why I was picked. It was like they made me think that, "Oh, you know how to type, Patricia. We need help." [laughter] But it was all my mother's doing. [laughter] That was what high school was like. High school was mostly Italian. It was like ninety percent Italian children and some blacks, some Asians. The Asians were Japanese. Yeah, they were Japanese. I was involved in some of the plays. The one thing that I liked about our high school, whenever you were in a play, it wasn't a segregated kind of play. If someone was the mother or the father or the children, they could have been any ethnic group or race. They didn't discriminate that way, which was a good experience for us as young people. I learned how to cook from my Italian friends Italian dishes, so I love Italian food. That was a good cultural experience, too.

MG: You were in high school when the world was starting to change quite a bit.

PG: [Yes]. I graduated in '66, yeah.

MG: It was the beginning of the civil rights movement and all the protests. I am wondering if you witnessed any of the protests or participated in the civil rights movement at all.

PG: Well, I was too young to participate in the civil rights movement during that time. When President Kennedy was assassinated and Martin Luther King, those were sad times. I remember sitting in my classrooms and the teachers announcing "President Kennedy is [dead]." We all felt like a family member, that we lost someone, and Martin Luther King, we lost someone. It was later in college that I was more exposed to Malcolm X and that movement and had the opportunity to study and learn more about the movements, and it affected us as college students. Now, I started at a community college before transferring to Rutgers. At the community college, we had some black history courses, and we were involved in social movements about relevant courses at Rutgers also during that time. Rutgers, when I was there, Rutgers College was all male and Douglass was female and Livingston was the coed campus. We were marching for what they called relevant courses. We wanted to learn about our own culture and ethnicity. We wanted courses that addressed issues like that, and we were not high on joining fraternities and sororities. We tended to see that as very silly kind of behavior back then. In my hometown in East Orange, I was involved with mayoral elections. They would have the college students from your community, we would canvas the neighborhoods and pass out leaflets and sign people up to vote. Because of the period, during the civil rights period and right after that period, I think young people, college students, we became very civic-minded. We were interested in volunteering and helping people. During that time that I was in my sophomore year I think at Rutgers or junior year, Maria Shriver's father developed, not the Peace Corps, VISTA. Have you heard of VISTA? [Editor's Note: During the presidency of Lyndon B. Johnson, Sargent Shriver served as director of the Office of Economic Opportunity and initiated many programs as part of the administration's War on Poverty. One such program was the Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA), which was established in 1965 as a domestic counterpart to the Peace Corps. It is now called AmeriCorps VISTA.] Maria Shriver's father, Sargent Shriver, developed what he called the Community VISTAS, and you would be assigned to working in a community. I was a Rutgers student. In order to be a VISTA, you had to get like twenty signatures of the legislators in your community. People had to vouch that you were a good kid and that you were a decent person. I knew politicians because I had done all this volunteering and stuff. About five or six of us, we had been students at Essex County Community College. Then, we went on to other colleges. Some of us went to Rutgers, some went to Newark State, that's now called something else [Kean University], and other colleges, Williams College in Massachusetts. During that, we were all still friends, and so about ten of us became VISTA volunteers. We had to go away and live in New York for a week or two and get our training with the young people that were going to become Peace Corps, only they were going to work in foreign countries and we were going to be assigned to nearby communities. A Community VISTA meant that you were a college student, an upperclassman, a junior or a senior, and you were assigned to a neighborhood center. In my case, and a few of my friends, we were assigned to a program that offered a tutoring program. It was in Orange, New Jersey. It was for high school dropouts, and we tutored them in the GED [general equivalency diploma] program. We worked a certain number of hours a week. In my case, I had to have a car, because I was commuting back from New Brunswick to Orange

maybe three days a week to do my VISTA volunteer work. We were paid five thousand dollars a year, so we were rich. [laughter] That's what we thought. [laughter] We could pay for our own apartments, and we didn't have to live on campus. [We could] buy our own gas, and your parents didn't have to send you money. They stopped sending me an allowance, because as a VISTA, I was earning money while I was a junior and a senior.

MG: It was shaping your outlook on community involvement and things like that.

PG: Absolutely, yes, on the value of being involved and the value of helping people.

MG: Do you want to take a break before we talk more about Livingston and college?

PG: Okay, yeah.

[RECORDING PAUSED]

MG: It is interesting to hear about that work you were doing with the VISTA volunteers. I am curious how it brought you from the community college you were attending to Livingston.

PG: Well, I was a VISTA volunteer. My first year I was at Livingston, [I was] a junior. It's just that the connections that I made at the community college remain with me for life, the professors and the friends. One of the college professors from Essex County Community recommended me for the VISTA program, as soon as Sargent Shriver decided New Jersey's going to have the VISTAs. Does that answer your question?

MG: You had also received a scholarship. Was it to go to the community college and to Livingston?

PG: I was only enrolled at the community college one year, and then I transferred to Rutgers in Newark, which I hated. I didn't like it. It was cold and impersonal back then. It's probably a lot nicer now. My one year at Essex, I received, they had Martin Luther King scholarships, so I received a Martin Luther King Scholarship maybe one semester. That was the only time I was on the dean's list at community college. [laughter] Yeah, that's when I received that scholarship.

MG: What did you know about Livingston before you went there?

PG: I'll tell you, I knew it was Rutgers. I would always come back to the community college every summer to take summer courses because then I could have a work-study job at the community college, so I was always in touch with my professors. When I transferred to Rutgers in Newark, one of the professors, who just died a few months ago, Dr. Clem Price, you've heard of him, so he was a professor of ours at Essex, and at Rutgers-Newark I would go to him for advice because I was not happy at Rutgers in Newark. [Editor's Note: In 1969, Dr. Clement A. Price (1945-2014) began teaching history at Rutgers-Newark, and in 2002, he became a Board of Governors Distinguished Service Professor.] The classes were so large, and it felt very impersonal, after coming from Essex for a year and a summer, which was a very warm

environment and everybody made you feel like they were on your side. I talked to Dr. Price often, and he said, "Well, Patricia, I suggest maybe why don't you transfer to this brand new campus, Livingston? Rutgers has a new campus, and it's co-ed. Maybe you'll enjoy it." Lo and behold, I went there, and I loved it. Whenever I'd see Dr. Price, I'd always thank him for advising me to go to Livingston. All I knew was that I had heard, "Well, it's an experiment." It was labeled as a social experiment. They're bringing together famous artists and writers, and they're going to be the professors. They're going to have all these cultural events tied to the academics and new courses, a few black history courses, women's studies courses, courses about your community, environment and health care and things like that. I was excited to go there. I had a car, so my parents made me commute from East Orange, because they weren't ready for me to go away and live on campus. I maintained my good grades, and then they said, "Okay, you can live on campus." [laughter]

MG: What do you think about that term "experiment?"

PG: Well, the term experiment to me meant they were experimenting with the basic education and the lifestyle that the students would receive. They had coed dorms. Who had co-ed dorms in 1970? Not only were they coed dorms, the guys lived on one side of the hall and the girls were on the other side and we had a kitchen that we could share, which we did on weekends, we shared. I thought that was an experiment, the lifestyle, the living. Every student had a counselor, not only an academic advisor from your major, you also had a counselor, which was wonderful, like someone was guiding you socially and emotionally, and you had an academic advisor. I saw those things as an experimental way of educating students. The student union was the hub of the campus, like a community center, and because it was a small campus, you got to know all of the students. You got to know people from different ethnicities and interact with people. There were different dormitories. Latino students had a dorm, all of the Latino students, and they would have cultural activities and programs. The level of speakers, scholars and musicians that they would bring to that campus, we would have paid big money to go to New York to see. That's what I thought was meant by experiment, the whole cultural, educational environment. I didn't see it as negative. I saw it as an exciting thing. Douglass College was still all girls. Rutgers was all men. We would dress up and wear dresses if we wanted to go to dinner at Douglass Campus, because you had to sit in a dining room with tablecloths. When we went to have dinner, sometimes we'd go to Rutgers College with the men, and we'd wear tight jeans because we're going to see the men. It was all men, [laughter] so we dressed sexy. I shouldn't say that on tape, but we did. Livingston Campus was, "Oh, well, you can wear your jeans." It was very relaxed. The other kids from the other campuses would like to come, they would come to our campus and have dinner with us, too. It was an interesting time.

MG: You mentioned the speakers that would come to campus. Do any come to mind, or any that stand out to you?

PG: [Editor's Note: Dr. Graham makes the noise, "Whoo."] Oh, my gosh, there were some that I didn't even know how significant they were until later I became an adult. Let's see, I remember some jazz pianist. Oh, I can't remember. Jazz pianists, they might have been in the early phases of their career. Then, they became giant recording artists, that level of jazz. I remember Charlie

Mingus, I think he played the bass and piano, who came to our campus, and a political figure, when they were younger, the Muslim leader who's very ill right now, [Louis Farrakhan]. He was on his way to becoming a spokesperson for the black Muslims, and I remember him. He was a very young man, and he came to speak. I remember Vertamae Grosvenor. Before she became a professor, she came to speak, and she had her cookbook. We learned a lot from her. Then, there were painters and artists, I can't remember many of the names, I'm sorry, but these were people that were on the cutting edge of whatever their artistic area was. [Editor's Note: Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor (1937-2016) was a chef, writer and actress who was born in South Carolina, grew up in Philadelphia, and moved to Paris by herself at age nineteen. In 1970, Grosvenor wrote the autobiographical cookbook *Vibration Cooking, or The Travel Notes of a Geechee Girl*, in which she explores Gullah cooking and culture. For three decades, Grosvenor appeared as a commentator on National Public Radio.]

MG: How would you describe the student body of Livingston during the time that you went?

PG: Culturally diverse, very racially and culturally diverse. From all that I remember, students got along very well. I remember many of the activities were driven by some themes, like Women's History Month. We had the big conference, probably the first women's history conference, I think, on any of the Rutgers campuses back then, and people from other colleges came to attend. When we celebrated black history, there were always wonderful programs and speakers, and Latino History Month, in the fall. I think there was a big emphasis on ethnicity and cultural events, and that was part of educating us about different cultures. I think you got that, educating us about different cultures, was done in many forms, in the classroom and in the programming that was done through the student activities and then the professors that you had.

MG: Yes, I was going to ask about your professors. It seemed like a lot of them were leaders in the Black Arts movement, and that seems to have influenced you.

PG: Oh, my goodness, yeah. Well, those were just my favorite classes that I wrote about, but my major was urban studies. It was a brand new major at that time. Urban planning was a more technical major, so the urban studies and urban planning was in the same department. We had to take some of those technical courses that the urban planners had to take, which I was not happy about, so I was always getting tutoring from the professors. There was no such thing as a tutoring program. You either did it or you didn't know how to do it or you got help from your professors. I had another interesting class that was taught by an attorney, a lawyer, and it had to do with community issues. He focused on urban community [affairs]. This was a practicing attorney from New Jersey, and he was Latino, I believe. I wanted my research paper to be something significant, because I wanted to get an A. I asked a family friend, who was an attorney, "What's a good issue to do?" because it had to be active research. He said, "Well, you know, right now [Ted] Kennedy is concerned about health care." This was in 1971, and Kennedy, he was a young man. "He's trying to get health care for all Americans, so maybe you ought to do something on health care." He said that's a good legal issue. I thought, "Well, this professor is a lawyer. I need to get an A, so I'm going to do something about community and the law." I approached the professor, and I said, "I'm concerned about health care for Americans, and I want my active research to reflect around health care." He said, "Well, okay, I'm going to

help you design your project, and what you have to do is go to an urban area. He said, "Well, you have a car. You can drive to Newark and also go here in New Brunswick. You have to go to emergency rooms and sit so many hours and observe the people that are coming into the emergency rooms," because what he was trying to show me, emergency rooms, that was somebody's primary doctor. They didn't have family doctors. People would come to the emergency rooms for a headache, a broken finger. It just wasn't some catastrophe where they were driven in with an ambulance. They'd walk in, because they have blurred vision or because "somebody hit me in the eye" or something that someone with health care would go to a family doctor to see. It was the most eye-opening experience to go to an emergency room in Newark. I think I might have also gone to the hospital where my mother worked [laughter] in New Jersey in Newark and sat in the emergency room for several hours, and I went to one in New Brunswick. You saw people, many poor people, coming to the emergency room for routine kinds of things, and that was a really good active research project. We had to give an oral presentation and write a paper, and that was probably one of the most challenging courses that I had I think, stimulating and challenging, to actively go out and observe people.

MG: How did you do on that assignment?

PG: Oh, I got an A. [laughter]

MG: Can you talk a little bit about your impressions of Sonia Sanchez and her classes?

PG: Oh, I'd love to. She was very motherly, and she was your friend and your teacher and a mentor. She was a fantastic professor. We always felt that we were learning. Her course was probably the first women's studies course I'd ever taken, and it just opened my eyes. This one course, "The Black Woman, Part One" and "The Black Woman, Part Two," we all wanted to take that course. She held the course, I believe, it was in a dorm apartment or something, because there was a kitchen actually in the room. She would bring speakers to class, and they would cook for us, like Vertamae Grosvenor. She brought her to class, before I think she became a professor eventually there. Vertamae cooked something, and we all bought Vertamae's cookbook and got autographs. I still have it upstairs in my study. Sonia was a young mother. She had twins, twin boys, and she used to tell the twin boys bedtime stories. One day, she decided, she said, "I'm going to write this into a book," so that the children would always have it. We all bought her book, oh, we bought books, she autographed the books. I still have those upstairs. I admired her because she was a writer. She knew how to take her life experiences and make them forever experiences for other people, and as a professor, she always made you feel that you were learning. In the women's studies course, you were learning about great women, and then in her writing courses, you were learning to write. She would bring in poets. We would act out plays, and sometimes the playwright was present. She'd bring the playwright. We just read a play, and now we're going to act it out in front of the person. That was like mind-blowing. Once you graduated, if you wanted to keep in touch with her, you could. I kept in touch with her over the years. She was just a most fascinating person. I learned so much. [Editor's Note: Poet, playwright and activist Sonia Sanchez wrote several children's books, including *It's a New Day: Poems for Young Brothas and Sistuhz* (1971) and *The Adventures of Fathead, Squarehead and Smallhead* (1973).]

MG: You took a “Black Revolutionary Drama” class with her, too.

PG: Yes.

MG: What was that like?

PG: Well, that was the course that you were learning to write and to critique plays. [In] “Revolutionary Drama,” we were reading plays by maybe LeRoi Jones, before he became, well, he had become Amiri Baraka by then. Do you know that he just passed? We were reading plays and learning about theater that some people would have said, “Well, this is not traditional theater,” because they wouldn’t classify this kind of creativity. It was exciting theater to me at that time. We would go into New York to see theater [at the National Black Theatre in Harlem]. I’m trying to think of the one; I can’t remember the name. Well, the [New] Freedom Theatre in Philadelphia is an equivalent to the one I can’t remember from New York. That class was very exciting, because it was reading poetry and theater, and also meeting the artists was very exciting.

MG: Yes, you mentioned Ed Bullins came to one of your classes.

PG: Yes, oh, my gosh, Ed Bullins. The one play I remember that I always liked was *In the Wine Time*. I think it was about an alcoholic. [laughter] To see it performed was really exciting. He wrote some short plays, and we loved his plays. He’s the one that stands out, but there were other playwrights that came to class.

MG: He was a part of the Black Nationalism movement and a member of the Black Panthers, and I was curious if they had any presence on campus while you attended.

PG: The Black Panthers had a presence when I was at Essex County College. They had a big presence, because they came to organize students in getting involved in community activities. The Black Panthers to me, although they were a revolutionary kind of group, they did community outreach. When I was a student, I believe, at Rutgers, but the connection for me to attend this Black Panther conference came through a professor from Essex County College because he lived in my family’s neighborhood, the Black Panthers hosted a conference in New Haven, Connecticut. They hosted a conference at Yale. This is going to sound incredible. You’re going to say, “What? How did they do that?” [There was] this conference, and college students from the East Coast, from the West Coast came to Yale University. It was a weekend conference. It was a how-to-become-a-community-organizer kind of a conference that the Black Panthers hosted. I think it was 1970, and they housed us. The students at Yale, because you know it was men, all men at that time, all of these students, mostly white male students at Yale in the ’70s, there were a few blacks there of course, gave up their dorm rooms. It was very organized. Their dorm rooms were like two-room apartments, because they had a bedroom and a living room. Now, at Rutgers, we didn’t have a dorm like that. We had nice dorms, but [not like Yale’s]. You checked in for the conference on a Friday, and you were assigned to someone’s room. Whoever the two students [were that] gave up their rooms, you met them, and they introduced themselves to us. They assigned four of us to a room by gender. Four girls shared a

room, because it was like an apartment but it was a dorm room. The guys met us and introduced themselves, and they showed us around their little apartment, their dorm room. One guy had this greatest music collection. He said, I'll never forget, he said, "This is my music collection, and feel free to play my albums." Laura Nyro, do you know that singer? You've got to listen to Laura Nyro. He said, "This is my favorite album. Feel free to play it, but be very careful." That was when I was introduced to Laura Nyro, that weekend at Yale University. I had never heard her before. Later on, Laura Nyro and Patti LaBelle made a CD together. Then, they left us until time to check out and the guys came back to their room to make sure we left everything in order, and we did. That conference was an exciting thing to meet college students from various states, a weekend of workshops led by members of the Black Panthers, and our college professors came with us to this conference. The focus was how to become a community leader, find out what the needs are of the people in your community and get involved. Volunteerism was sort of the theme, and that was like an exciting thing. We had a bus. I think the bus emanated from Essex County College. I was a student at Livingston, but I was able to go with this group to New Haven for the weekend for that awesome conference.

MG: That sounds incredible.

PG: It was.

MG: I am always impressed by the large-scale mobilization that took place without all the methods of communication we have now. It seems like people could really gather together without cell phones and computers and text messaging. I love hearing about how that happened.

PG: Yeah, it was oral, like what you're doing, the oral history. Someone would make a flyer and let you know, "Oh, there's a meeting on this or that," so we paid attention. Now, when you go on a college campus and you see a billboard full of posters, nobody reads them. [laughter] We did, because those were our cell phones back then, [laughter] posters and flyers and leaflets that people would hand you and word of mouth or your professor would write on the blackboard things that are happening. Our social media was different back then. We read. [laughter]

MG: Was there ever any pushback or opposition to these organizations when you would get together for a conference?

PG: Maybe when I was at Rutgers. I remember on Rutgers College Campus there were protests about various things, but I was at Livingston. [laughter] At Essex County College, there were protests about different things. There was a student organization that was formed called the People's Council, and we would protest certain things about [them] wanting to raise tuition. It was really inexpensive. I remember Essex County wanted to move from Newark downtown to out in the suburbs, and people were saying that the college wasn't designed to be that. Yeah, there were protests, because there was always some protest about some social movement.

MG: I was wondering when the Black Panthers gathered in New Haven if anyone in New Haven had an objection to that.



PG: You know, that, I don't know, because you would think if Yale University sanctioned it that the community must have thought, "Okay." The Panthers, at that time, remember, they were in New Haven, they were established. That was their headquarters, actually, of the Panthers on the East Coast, that was New Haven, the city of New Haven. They had a breakfast program, where they would feed the children, give them breakfast, because many of the poor children didn't have breakfast. They were established as community outreach. What was amazing to me is that Yale University would have this convergence of all of these college kids from all races coming from as far away as California up to New Haven and that the college students at Yale would give up their dorm rooms for a weekend so that we could have a Black Panther conference. I'm sure the Yale students came to the lectures because I remember every workshop we went to was in some large hall, where there were hundreds of students in one big room, rooms with stages. It was an amazing thing.

MG: I want to ask you more about Livingston, but I am also conscious of time. We can save that for next time.

PG: Okay.

MG: Well, this has given me a lot to go on, and it is really exciting to hear about. I wish I could travel back in time and be there with you.

PG: Me, too. [laughter]

MG: We would have a good time. We will pick up here next time.

PG: Okay.

MG: We will talk more about your Livingston experience and classes and all those kinds of things.

PG: Okay.

MG: Thank you so much for all your time and for all the food.

PG: Oh, you're welcome. Oh, you're so welcome.

MG: I will go back full of stories and quiche. [laughter]

PG: Yes, because you have to take some home.

MG: Well, thank you so much. I will look forward to next time.

-----END OF INTERVIEW-----

Transcribed by Saskia Kusnekov

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