

WOMEN VETERANS HISTORICAL PROJECT
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

INTERVIEWEE: June Swearengin

INTERVIEWER: Therese Strohmer

DATE: June 6, 2014

[Begin Interview]

TS: Today is June 6, 2014. It's the seventieth anniversary of D-Day today.

JS: Yes.

TS: My name is Therese Strohmer. I'm at the home of June Swearengin.

JS: That's correct.

TS: In Raleigh, North Carolina, to conduct an oral history interview for the Women Veterans Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. June, would you please state your name the way that you'd like it to read on your collection.

JS: June Thomas Swearengin.

TS: Okay. Okay, June, why don't you start off by having you tell me a little bit about when and where you were born.

JS: I was born in Cleveland, Ohio, on June 3, 1931.

TS: So you just had a birthday.

JS: Yes, just a few days ago.

TS: Well, Happy Birthday to you.

JS: Thank you.

TS: Well, can you tell me what—a little bit about what it was like growing up? Were you—Were you—Did you have any brothers or sisters?

JS: Yes, I had—we were—I'll say it this way, we were a family of seven children. I had three brothers and four sisters—three sisters, because I make the fourth female.

TS: Okay.

JS: [chuckles]

TS: So you had three brothers and three sisters and you were the—okay.

JS: Right.

TS: And what did your parents do?

JS: Oh, I have no idea. You see, my mother died when I was two years old.

TS: Okay.

JS: And I was placed in foster care—

TS: Okay.

JS: —at two years old.

TS: At two?

JS: Yes.

TS: Was it your fath—Was your father still alive at that point?

JS: My father was still alive—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Your biological father.

JS: —but we did not live with him.

TS: I see. Okay.

JS: And I—Turn it off.

TS: Oh, okay.

[Recording Paused]

TS: You ready?

JS: Right.

TS: Okay, June. Well, you—We talked for a little bit; you were telling me how you grew up in foster care.

JS: Yes.

TS: You want to talk about that a little bit?

JS: Well, I lived in three foster homes.

TS: Okay.

JS: The first one I went to when I was two years old.

TS: Okay.

JS: And I had my ups and downs which were somewhat tragic. However, the good thing about it is I continued to move on to better days, and I thank God right now because today I'm a different person. My third foster parent, Gertrude Johnson Cobbs, who I dedicated my book—Question—*The Question*:—

TS: Yeah.

JS: *Give Up or Get up?*—

TS: That's the name of your book?

JS: —*Balancing the Scales*—

TS: Right.

JS: —*Between Life and Death*.

TS: Okay, and that's the name of your book.

JS: That's the name of my book—

TS: Okay.

JS: —in which—I dedicated that book to her because she made the—made the difference in my life, and I know there's a lot of people in foster care that really go downhill and never come up. And I am so thankful that I went downhill but I came up.

TS: Right.

JS: So I would really like to encourage anyone that has gone through these types of things to read that book and be encouraged not to give up.

TS: Right. Well, you're talking about a time, too—So when you grew up, as a young girl, they were war years, right? And you grew up during a depression era.

JS: Oh, yes.

TS: And the war years. Can you talk a little bit about what that was like?

JS: Oh, yes. In my second book. [both laugh] It's called—

TS: Let's get a sneak preview on—

JS: My second book is named *The American Legion and Me*.

TS: Okay.

JS: And you can't be a part of the American Legion if you are not a veteran of a war time.

TS: Right.

JS: So, therefore, I talk about how when I was a child and World War II ended, and I remember the parades, and the—the soldiers coming home, and that day, with helmets on their head, marching in the parade, how it affected me. And as I grew up, throughout my life, VJ [Victory Over Japan] Day, VE [Victory In Europe] Day—VJ Day—all of these wars were ahead of me. World War II. I can't really express except through that book how I felt. It really was a big part of my body, my soul, my mind. I was engrossed in that

throughout my life. That from a child watching a veteran's parade to the time that I joined the United States Air Force.

TS: When you were a child and you—and you were having these experiences that—some of them were not very good at all.

JS: Right.

TS: Did you—Were you aware of things that were happening outside of your own circle of life as far as, like, what was happening with the war in Europe or the war in Japan? Did you do any reading or newspapers or listen to the FDR [U.S. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt] talks?

JS: Well—

TS: Fireside Chats [evening radio addresses given by U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt between 1933 and 1944] or anything?

JS: In those days, if you went to the movies—

TS: Okay.

JS: —you automatically got a picture of what was going on in the war.

TS: Okay.

JS: I mean, it was—that was the only way we were actually able to connect with the wars—

TS: I see.

JS: —is through—you know, the *Sands of Iwo Jima*. Then they showed—After they showed the—a movie they would have all of the news.

[*Sands of Iwo Jima* is a 1949 war film starring John Wayne that follows a group of United States Marines from training to the Battle of Iwo Jima during World War II]

TS: News reel clips?

JS: Yes, the news reel clips.

TS: Okay.

JS: And this was—because I really wasn't old enough then.

TS: Right, you were very young still.

JS: Right, to read articles and all about it but it was always there with me.

TS: Yes.

JS: That sorrow and that hurt for those war-torn men marching down the street.

TS: Did you know anybody in your life that was in the service?

JS: Oh, all of my family.

TS: All of your family, yeah?

JS: Both my—My oldest brother was in the army, my next to oldest brother was in the navy. Of course, my youngest brother died when he was six months old, so.

TS: Oh.

JS: And I was in the air force. One nephew was in the air force. And my son—my youngest son, Russell, was in the army.

TS: Oh, a lot of branches of the service covered there.

JS: Yes, yes. [both chuckle] Army, navy, air force.

TS: No Marines?

JS: No Marines.

TS: No Marines. Or Coast Guard, at all?

JS: No.

TS: Okay.

JS: I didn't have enough brothers. [both chuckle]

TS: Well, do you remember anything of the depravations of the [Great] Depression times? Not having enough food, or anything like that?

JS: Well, I didn't realize it was depression. All I knew was I lived in a foster care home and had very little to eat and never had milk until I was an adult.

TS: Is that right?

JS: That's correct. And I imagine—I know we had food stamps and—let's see—but it was a very depressing time. I know I ate outside because I didn't want any—anyone to see my bologna sandwich; that was it.

TS: When was that? At school or something or—

JS: Yeah, that's—

TS: At school?

JS: —when I went to school.

TS: Yeah. How was school for you?

JS: School was—School was not—Really, like, it was just a habit—

TS: Okay.

JS: —rather than a happening. And until I went to an all-girls school at the ninth grade called Jane Addams High School [now named Jane Addams Business Careers Center]—all girls—that's when I loved school.

TS: Oh, what happened? Why—Now, why did that make you want to love school then?

JS: Because there was no competition of the boys.

TS: Okay.

JS: They were not there to be the captain of this, the captain of that. I was the captain of the—of the basketball team.

TS: Did you play basketball?

JS: Oh, well, they called it a different kind of ball.

TS: Right.

JS: Captain ball [a game similar to basketball].

TS: Okay.

JS: But it was the same thing.

TS: Right.

JS: And I had—I could take part in the sports and I took foods; you could take foods or clothing or—

TS: For classes?

JS: Yeah.

TS: Okay.

JS: A—No, the whole agenda.

TS: I see.

JS: So I took foods. I had foods science, foods math[?], all different subjects of foods, and did actual cooking.

TS: Okay.

JS: Yes, and I got to eat. [both chuckle]

TS: That was probably—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

JS: Smart.

TS: —a good thing. Yes, I can see why you'd take that class

JS: Smart. Right, those sewing things wasn't going to help me much. [both chuckle]

TS: But the food, you got immediate gratification.

JS: Right.

TS: Now, was it a segregated school or was it—

JS: Oh, no, none of the schools in Cleveland were segregated.

TS: Okay; okay.

JS: I didn't even know they had segregated schools—

TS: Okay.

JS: —growing up. I didn't know. We lived in areas—In fact, our area was mostly Jewish.

TS: Okay.

JS: So I didn't know.

TS: What kind of things did you do for fun?

JS: Fun? What was fun? I think that school was fun.

TS: Yeah. Once you got to the Jane Addams School?

JS: Right. Actually, I didn't really have fun in school, but as I grew up I grew into politics and I just really loved going to the—oh, what do they call them when—

TS: Like a convention?

JS: Well, yeah, but I wasn't quite at the convention.

TS: Okay.

JS: They had these—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Like a rally?

JS: —rallies.

TS: Okay.

JS: Rallies and things.

TS: There we go.

JS: Oh, I loved that; I loved that.

TS: Do you remember who you went to see?

JS: Oh, the first time I voted. Of course, you had to wait till you were twenty-one at that time.

TS: Right.

JS: I voted for—What was his name? He was from Chicago, Illinois, and he ran against Eisenhower—[U.S. President] Dwight D. Eisenhower. I can't think of his name right now.

TS: Was that [Adlai Ewing] Stevenson [II]? Did he run against—

JS: Yes.

TS: Stevenson.

JS: Stevenson.

TS: Adlai Stevenson.

JS: Adlai Stevenson.

TS: Okay.

JS: That's who I voted for.

TS: Oh, your first vote—

JS: My—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: National election.

JS: I voted before I went into the air force on—I voted absentee ballot.

TS: Okay.

JS: Right.

TS: Well, why don't we talk a little bit, then, about when you—so you're a young girl and you're—this Jane Addams High School. Did you go there for more than one year or—

JS: I went there in the ninth and the tenth, and then I went to my third foster home.

TS: Okay.

JS: So she asked me—Mrs. Cobbs, she was a social worker.

TS: Okay.

JS: And that's why she was such a good foster mother too. [chuckles] And she asked me would I like to go to a school in the neighborhood, because I had to go—I had to catch two streetcars to get to Jane Addams.

TS: I see, okay.

JS: So I went to Glenville High School [now named Glenville Academic Campus], which was in the neighborhood.

TS: How was that?

JS: It was fine. And by then I was coming out of my shell.

TS: Okay.

JS: I was begi—becoming a real person.

TS: Right.

JS: Able to think for myself; able to have a mind of my own. That's what Gertrude gave me.

TS: How did she do that?

JS: She sat up nights talking with me. I could talk about anything and everything and she would talk with me and encourage me and just make me feel good about myself, and tell me, "You don't have to do that anymore; you don't have to do this anymore."

TS: Did she help you when you were talking—I'm not sure if we talked about this on tape—about making good choices in your life?

JS: Yes.

TS: Did she help you with that?

JS: Yes.

TS: Okay.

JS: And you asked me about what I did for fun.

TS: Right; yes.

JS: I didn't remember then, but what I did for fun was I'd go to the playhouse.

TS: Oh.

JS: I loved—I loved plays, musical plays, and—well, we were taught in school, in Cleveland, you had to learn all of [Frédéric François] Chopin and all of the different musicians, and then we were taken—the whole class was taken to the Cleveland Symphony—

TS: Oh, nice.

JS: —Orchestra.

TS: Very nice.

JS: And we'd listen, and we'd have to write down, from hearing the music, who it was, the name of the per—

TS: The conductor? The—

JS: No, the song.

TS: Right, gotcha.

JS: And who it was by.

TS: Gotcha.

JS: And Cleveland schools had so much to offer in those days. In fact, when I left Cleveland I left the—I finished the eleventh grade and I went to Des Moines, Iowa. That's where—I went to Ottumwa, O-T-T-U-M-W-A—Ottumwa, Iowa—and I went to the twelfth grade for a time. Then I had another problem, and in the meantime Mrs. Cobbs' husband had died and that's why we moved to Iowa.

TS: You moved with her to Iowa?

JS: Yes.

TS: Okay.

JS: She had to go to court and get me released—

TS: I see.

JS: —from my father; parental.

TS: To be able to move out of state?

JS: Yes.

TS: Okay.

JS: And so it was—I'm getting ahead of myself.

TS: That's okay.

JS: But anyway—

TS: So that was the last year of schooling, was in Ottumwa, Iowa?

JS: Ottumwa, yes.

TS: Okay.

JS: And, actually—

TS: Want me to put that up here? Here we go.

JS: Actually, a lot of things happened then.

TS: Anything you want to talk about?

JS: Well, she—she and Jane were only there—

TS: Jane is your sister; sis—your foster sister?

JS: Foster sister, right; she gave me that sister.

TS: Okay.

JS: She and Jane left and went back to Cleveland after, maybe, three to four months. And I had my eighteenth birthday, which made me emancipated.

TS: Right.

JS: Right. So she was unable—Mrs. Cobbs was unable to get the rate—the amount of pay in Iowa that she got in Ohio.

TS: I see.

JS: And so, after she left, we—before she left we moved to Des Moines, Iowa, just she and Jane and I. And I was out of school again, so after—I mean, I was eight hundred miles from home.

TS: Right.

JS: With—Knowing not one soul.

TS: Right.

JS: [chuckles] But, praise God, he took care of me and I managed to get a job and find lodging. And so, then I went back to school to finish—complete my last year. Well, I went to Des Moines Technical High School.

TS: Okay.

JS: And they told me, "Well, you have more points than you need because of the State of Ohio."

TS: Okay.

JS: "So you really don't need to go back to school."
And I says, "Well, I need a degree."

TS: Right. You need to get your—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

JS: Yes, so—

TS: —high school diploma.

JS: I think I was the first one to get a GED [General Educational Development test].

TS: Yeah.

JS: [chuckles] I mean, they weren't heard of in those days.

TS: Right.

JS: So that's what they gave—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: That would have been—what?—in the late forties? Somewhere around there.

JS: So I—I just say high school diploma.

TS: Okay.

JS: Yeah.

TS: So then—So when you're all alone in Des Moines, were you—were you scared?

JS: Well, I was everything. [chuckles]

TS: Okay.

JS: But I—Mrs. Cobbs had trained me to stand on my two feet; to be able to go out in the world. And she—she taught me to have stamina.

TS: Yes.

JS: And poise. I mean, all these good things she'd taught me. So I had to—I just walked. I walked and I walked and this—Des Moines is nothing but hills, up and down and up and down hills—till I found a place to lay up[?], till I found a job. And my first job was Bishop-Stoddard Cafeteria.

TS: What did you do there?

JS: They had a sign in the window.

TS: Help wanted?

JS: Help wanted.

TS: [chuckles]

JS: And Des Moines was a very small town at that time.

TS: Was it like a waitress job, or—

JS: It said to—Cafeterias, they—

TS: Okay.

JS: You're counter people. You dip up the food, like K&W [Cafeteria].

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Like, serving.

JS: Yes, serving.

TS: Okay.

JS: Serving.

TS: I see.

JS: Yeah. Okay. So the gentleman, he said, "Oh, did you come about the job?"

I said, "Yes."

He says, "Well, come right in, I'm so glad you're here." And, so, I came right in. He took me to his office, he gave me a application, [unclear] signed the application. He says, "Oh, you're going to love the job," and told me all about what was needed to do the job, and—and my hours of the job, and that I got one free dinner each day I worked of whatever they had there. They had lots of stuff. And he was just—He says, "Well, you're hired. Just hand me your application. Don't worry about anything." He says, "We're just glad to have you." Took my application and stood up, and he looked up from my application, like—

TS: He was, like, startled at something that he saw?

JS: Yeah.

TS: What did he see?

JS: "You're not—" he said, "You're not a—a colored. You're not colored, are you?"

I said, "Yes, I'm a Negro."

"Oh, I'm so sorry. It's not me, it's the management of our company. We can't hire coloreds unless they do dishwashing and you're much too small to do dishwashing." He says, "I tell you what we'll do. I'll give you another application. You fill it out and say 'White.' And nobody'll know but you and I."

TS: Did you do that?

JS: I said, "No." I said, "I do not need another application." I says, "I am a Negro, I will stay a Negro, I know I am a Negro, and did you know Negroes are Americans too." I mean, I was bold after Gertrude Cobbs got through with me. [both laugh]

TS: I guess so, yeah.

JS: I mean, I'm out here, don't know if I can pay my rent or eat my food.

TS: Right, right.

JS: But I would not come down off that garbage.

TS: So what happened?

JS: So, I says, "Well, thank you anyway. Maybe your next person will be white." And I started out the room.

He said, "Wait, wait." He came after me, grabbed my arm. "Have you ever made a salad?"

I said, "Yes." My stomach said [makes growling noise].

TS: Getting kind of hungry?

JS: [chuckles] Been hungry for days.

TS: Right.

JS: He says, "Well, come with me."

I thought, "Oh, Lord, what next?" I went with him. He took me in this big kitchen, huge doors; took me through there.

And he says—introduced me to this lady; this Swedish lady; big, strong. And he says, "Could you teach this young lady to make salads?" And she showed me their big refrigerators; how you walked in them and had the salads and all.

TS: Wasn't that great? Yeah.

JS: And she said, "Would you like to work here in the salad department?"

I said, "Yes." [both chuckle] "Oh, yes. Thank you." And so, I became a salad girl.

TS: There you go.

JS: I owe all this to God. You see how my life has been? All through my life it's been that intervention of the Lord that took me from one step to the next.

TS: Now, how long did you work here?

JS: I worked there until I met some black people; there were very few black people.

TS: In Des Moines?

JS: In Des Moines, yes.

TS: At that time?

JS: Yes, and they had a little club-like place. They didn't serve alcohol or anything but it was just a gathering place, and I met this girl and she—she was a black girl and she worked at the telephone company, Iowa Bell—

TS: Okay.

JS: —Telephone Company.

TS: Yes.

JS: So she ran a elevator but she got promoted to a desk job. So she says, "June, why don't you come get my job?"

TS: To run the elevator?

JS: To run the elevator.

TS: Okay.

JS: Because they paid more.

TS: Oh, right.

JS: You know, Bell Telephone Company would pay more.

TS: Right.

JS: So I did. I went there to work and I enjoyed it; I loved the people. I always loved people. [chuckles] And they loved me. We just—And I remembered what floor they got off so I would say, "Good morning," and I just punched their number; I didn't ask. And they—That made them feel good that I remembered them.

TS: Right.

JS: I was remembering all of them, and they felt special. And so, there's always the enemy around. So this guy, he was a real big white guy—big tall and big wide—and he didn't like it because I was so friendly with people.

TS: Was he a employer or—

JS: Yeah, he was a—

TS: Like a supervisor or something?

JS: Right, superintendent.

TS: Okay.

JS: Yeah, he was a superintendent. So one day he asked me—he says, "Why don't you just quit?"
I said, "What? Beg your pardon?"

"Why don't you just quit?" He says, "You don't belong here."
I just—knocked me out. I mean, I never thought somebody'd say that to me.

TS: Right.

JS: I was getting along fine; I was doing a good job. Okay. So being the woman that I am—the warrior—I call myself the warrior. Being the warrior that I am, I go straight to the union, find out what's going on. Can this man fire me for nothing or get rid of me? What's he about to do to me? And they told me, no, the only way he could fire me, he'd have to write a—a letter stating what I was doing wrong and everything and reason for termination.

TS: Right.

JS: Okay. So I said, "All right." So I decided, "Well, if he thinks he can fire me he's just going to have to do that," because I worked a whole year more after that.

TS: After that conversation?

JS: After that conversation.

TS: Okay.

JS: And then I left.

TS: On your own.

JS: I left on my lunch hour.

TS: Oh.

JS: [laughs]

TS: Now, why did you leave then?

JS: Because I kept seeing this plane—these airplanes—taking me to a better place. My dream; that was like my dream, to be able to fly.

TS: How long had you had that dream?

JS: Oh, early in life. I describe it better in the book.

TS: Yeah.

JS: But.

TS: So as a young—young girl in Cleveland?

JS: What young girl in Cleveland?

TS: No, when you were a young girl in Cleveland—

JS: Oh, yeah.

TS: —you had that dream to be flying in planes?

JS: Oh, yeah.

TS: Okay.

JS: Yeah, yes, yes. [both chuckle] I went on—I went on in—I went home, and I went down—Well, somebody's always using me because I'll get out there and do it; I'll try anything once, I say. And this man, he was in charge of one of these agencies, like—not the Red Feather agency [charitable organization that later became The United Way] but one of these agencies, and he was trying to get black people to integrate white collar jobs.

TS: Okay.

JS: I mean, seems like the black people could—they could—they could have their own little businesses and do things, but—and they could clean the street cleaners and all these things in Cleveland but they didn't have white collar jobs. So he told me he wanted me to go down to Higbee['s] Department Store, which, I don't know that you've heard of it, but it was the biggest, tallest building in Cleveland, Ohio, at that time, where the terminal tower was real [unclear].

TS: Okay.

JS: And the train station was also connected to it. So anyway, I went there and I got a job as a—it was a stock—stock girl.

TS: Okay.

JS: And it was like assistant to the buyer. Everything I did—I did all the paperwork, and calls, and put the—It was in the foundation department, so I put all the foundation garments and all on the shelves, and that's the job I had until I went into the air force; they called me to the air force. Well, when I got out of the air force they had this big deal

going on, hire the veterans, so give them their jobs they had when they left. So they gave me my job that I had when I left.

TS: Oh.

JS: Only they wanted me to take any job I wanted in the whole store. They said, "Would you like to be in the typing department because you've done that all your time you were in there."

And I said, "No."

They said, "Well, where would you like to work?"

I said, "Sportswear; I love sportswear." Till today I love sportswear. [both chuckle] And I just enjoyed it so much, and I worked there until—I was married by then and my husband was sent to Albuquerque, New Mexico, and so then I worked there until I went there.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: To Albuquerque.

JS: Albuquerque, yeah.

TS: Sounds like you enjoyed it. Well, let me ask you just a couple questions. Now, when you—Why did you choose to leave Des Moines at the time you left Des Moines and go back to Cleveland?

JS: Because there was no future there. I think I talk about that through my book. All through my book I'm saying, "Where's life going? Where's my life going next?" There was nothing ahead of me; there had to be something ahead of me. It may have been because of my having committed suicide—

TS: Or tried to—

JS: —tried—attempted suicide so many times and my life had only been looking forward to ending it before.

TS: Yes; okay.

JS: And now I was, "Okay, I'm here. What's going to be in my life; where is my life? Where's it begin; where's it start? What's next?" I had to see something ahead of me.

TS: Did you have a sense at that time of what you hoped it would be?

JS: I—Well, like I told you, I always wanted to fly.

TS: Okay.

JS: That was a dream. That was—I look up in the sky and see an airplane and I dream all kinds of things. I have this mind that can make up all kinds of stories—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Well, did—

JS: —by looking at something. [chuckles]

TS: Did you want to, like, be a pilot or a stewardess?

JS: I wanted to be a stewardess.

TS: A stewardess, okay.

JS: Right.

TS: Okay.

JS: But at that time there were no black stewardesses.

TS: Yes. Well, you talked a little bit—I—about how you're light colored.

JS: Yes.

TS: And when—So when you were working for the cafeteria and you were in the—

JS: Yes.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: —salad lady; salad girl.

JS: Yes, right.

TS: Now, did—was that—Did everybody else know about—like, he said, "I can't hire you because you're a black woman."

JS: Yes.

TS: Did everybody else know once you stayed?

JS: I don't know.

TS: It just—It was never talked about?

[Speaking Simultaneously]

JS: See, I don't know. I don't think about it—

TS: Right.

JS: —one way or another. I'm just a human being.

TS: Yeah.

JS: And I used to really have a problem with walking into a room and people looking at me. It really—

TS: Why would they be looking at you?

JS: Well, I don't know.

TS: [chuckles]

JS: I don't know if it was because they didn't know whether I was white or black, or whether something was smeared on my cheek, or—

TS: Right.

JS: —what, but it always gave me an uncomfortable feeling. Well, I finally got over that.

TS: Okay.

JS: I said, "Whatever. This is me. I'll tell anybody I am black." I don't mind being black. You see, when they were—they started off with the colored thing, then they told me, "No, you're not colored anymore, you're a Negro." Then they says, "No, you're not a Negro anymore, you're black."

"Well, okay. They have the yellow race, they have the red race, they have the black race, they have the white race—Caucasian or whatever. That I can live with." So I said, "I'll be black, so you can just call me black."

But, as someone told me, they said they don't tell them anything. I mean, because they just don't answer that because they don't figure they have to; they're Americans. So I said, "That's good because I'm an American."

TS: That's why when we were doing the little—

JS: Right.

TS: —biography that's why you said—

JS: That's why I said I'm an American.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: You filled out for the ethnicity, right?

JS: Right.

TS: Yeah.

JS: I mean, because I'd have to go into my lineage. My father was Irish. My mother, I didn't really know her but I found her name when I went to North Carolina up in the—the Cherokee National Museum [Museum of the Cherokee Indian, Cherokee, NC?].

TS: Okay.

JS: Her maiden name is in the book.

TS: So she's Cherokee?

JS: So she must have been Cherokee.

TS: Yes.

JS: I don't know how much Cherokee; full-blood—what—

TS: Right.

JS: But—So I never—I didn't have anybody to tell me what I was.

TS: Right.

JS: I mean, how many children—My oldest daughter, when she was in third grade, she went to school and came home crying. She says, "Ma, they said I'm a nigger."
I says, "What?"
"They said I'm a nigger. I'm not a nigger am I, Momma?"
I says, "No, you're not a nigger. A nigger is a ignorant person." In the dictionary that's what it said anyway. And I said—But I said, "How many people, when their children are born—" You, you have children?

TS: I do not.

JS: Okay, if you were to have a child, would you say, "Now, Sally, you are white." No, we don't do that. We're people. We just have children, they grow up, they get married, they have children. They grow up, they get married. We all fall into our own sectional thing. But nobody tells you what color you are.

TS: Interesting.

JS: Yeah. I never thought about it until my daughter came home crying. But anyway, I don't know where I was. [chuckles]

TS: Oh, that's okay. Well, let's talk a little bit—Now, we're kind of getting to when you went in the air force.

JS: Yes.

TS: Tell me how that came about. I mean, you said you always wanted to fly.

JS: Yeah.

TS: But you said now stewardesses—they couldn't—they wouldn't accept black stewardesses at that time.

JS: No.

TS: Okay, so how did—how did you end up in the air force? What happened?

JS: How did I end up—Well, when I was still in Iowa they had a army base there and, of course, you had to be twenty-one at that time to join anything.

TS: Yes.

JS: So I wrote a letter to Gertrude, and I says, "Would you write a letter and tell them I could join the army?" And she did. But then I kept seeing this plane, [chuckles] and one day I was sitting on a park bench and I saw a plane in the sky. I says, "I don't want to join the army, I want to join the air force; I want to fly." And so, that's why I went home and joined the—I said, "It's time for me to go home; time for me to go home." So I went home and joined the air force.

TS: Now, did you go and talk to a recruiter then?

JS: Yes, I did.

TS: Okay.

JS: And they were so nice.

TS: Yeah.

JS: And they gave me my tests and everything; I passed everything.

TS: And they—And did they give you an idea of what kind of jobs you might have?

JS: Well, they kind of asked me what I would like to do, and I guess I always liked to—wanted to be a secretary, and the reason was because I always saw in the movies these pretty secretaries sitting on their boss's lap. [laughs]

TS: You thought that was a good thing?

JS: I thought—Yeah, I thought—Well, in my day I wasn't thinking about anything sexual. That wasn't in the day; that's in this day.

TS: Right.

JS: So—

TS: What did you think when you saw a woman sitting in the boss's lap?

JS: I just thought that she was taking her minutes; that that was nice. She was special, that she got to sit on the—the boss's lap.

TS: Did you get to do that in the air force?

JS: No.

TS: [chuckles] Okay.

JS: But I did get to do it—

TS: You did?

JS: —before I—before I retired—

TS: Oh, okay.

JS: [chuckles]—from my job.

TS: Yeah.

JS: Yeah. I told my boss, I says, "You know, I've never sat on a boss's lap." I says, "Can I sit on your lap?" [both chuckle] He's younger than I was.

TS: Oh, there we go.

JS: We loved him, but he got to be our boss.

TS: Yeah.

JS: So.

TS: Well, tell me a little bit, then, about—so you decide to go in the air force.

JS: Yes.

TS: You signed up and—Now, you're still in contact with Gertrude and—

JS: Yes.

TS: At that time?

JS: Yes.

TS: Okay. What did she think about that? Did she think that was okay?

JS: Oh, she thought it was wonderful.

TS: Okay.

JS: Yes, I came home on leave. Where did I go? To Gertrude's.

TS: Right.

JS: I had—Let's see. I had—I have my sister—oldest sister—I didn't want to stay with her because of her husband. And my sister Margaret, she just didn't have room for me to stay with her; she was staying with her mother-in-law in her house. And so, I stayed with Gertrude; I always stayed with her.

TS: Okay.

JS: Any time I came home that's where I'd be.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: That's where you went?

JS: Wherever they lived. However big or how small, I lived there; they made room for me.

TS: Well, do you want to take a little break? Do you need to take a drink or anything?

JS: Yeah.

TS: Okay, let me pause for a second here.

JS: Oh, yeah.

TS: Okay.

[Recording Paused]

TS: Okay. Well, we're back. You got a little bit of water there?

JS: I do.

TS: Well, tell me now, when you—you joined up and you had to go to, probably, San Antonio, Texas?

JS: Correct.

TS: Tell me what that was like, what you remember from it.

JS: Basic training.

TS: Okay, what was basic training like?

JS: Basic training is something, as you probably know, that everybody laughs about after it's over.

TS: Yeah.

JS: [chuckles] Oh, I was—I was not the most settled airman, and I think it was because I had lived by myself for three years prior—

TS: Right.

JS: —to going into the air force.

TS: You were a little older than probably some of them.

JS: Probably. I wasn't much older.

TS: So you were twenty-one?

JS: Because they had to be twenty-one. I had to be twenty-one.

TS: Oh, okay, that's true.

JS: I was twenty-one when I went in.

TS: That's true. Okay.

JS: Yes. So when I was—I was there, the first thing that I noticed when I got to the—the barracks, the women's barracks, was this big plaque on the wall with all these names on it, and some of them had little asterisks by them. And they said, "Now, you read this so

you'll know what's going on." You have to get up and have reveille at a certain time.
[unclear] another time you fall out for—

TS: Right.

JS: —for inspection at this time, and we'd go to—we marched to chow line at this time. And so, I was reading it, and I says, "Well, what are the little asterisks for?" And they—I was told that denotes the black girls.

TS: What—what—what—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

JS: I said, "Okay."

TS: What was it—What kind of list was it on? Was it, like, a list of [unclear] the barracks?

JS: It was like a procedure. They had the people who were listed in that barracks.

TS: Everybody in that squadron?

JS: Yes.

TS: Okay.

JS: Yeah.

TS: Did you have an asterisk by your name?

JS: I wasn't—I was just coming in.

TS: Oh, okay.

JS: They never—

TS: What did you think about that?

JS: They never put an asterisk by my name.

TS: No? Well, what did—How did that make you feel when you saw that and they explained it?

JS: I didn't like it.

TS: Right.

JS: Right off I felt, "Don't play that stuff with me." I really—See, I—I was a fighter. I grew up in Cleveland, Ohio, seeing a black newspaper called the *Call & Post* showing Negroes being hung in the South.

TS: Yes.

JS: So mentally, I've got this thing. I'm never going to go to the South because I'm not taking that stuff off nobody. [chuckles]

TS: And here you are living in North Carolina, that's right.

JS: I'll tell you—Yes. [laughs] Yes. And I—I just—I've learned to deal with things but I don't take down; I don't take down to anybody for anything; I really don't.

TS: Yes.

JS: And that's why I can freely tell my story in a book.

TS: Right; right.

JS: Because I know—

TS: All the warts and everything, right?

JS: Yes.

TS: Yes.

JS: Because I know God brought me through those things and is still with me today to take me on; I do know that. So they have to overcome me, I don't overcome them. [both chuckle]

TS: Well, now—I guess, when you joined, the Korean War was going on. Was that an inspiration for you at all?

JS: No, I really wasn't thinking about the war.

TS: No?

JS: I was just thinking about flying in those planes.

TS: So when—When you talked to your recruiter, did the recruiter mention that you might not actually be flying on any planes?

JS: No.

TS: No?

JS: They just told me I was going to fly on the plane to—

TS: San Antonio?

JS: —San Antonio, Texas, and that was enough excitement for me.

TS: [chuckles] That was good enough for you, right?

JS: Yes.

TS: Okay.

JS: Because in those planes—Pardon me. In those days they had planes they—that were not separated by first class, second class people or anything; it's just the ship. And everybody sat in a seat, and Roy Rogers and Dale Evans sat in front of me.

TS: Oh, is that right?

JS: And I got their autograph.

TS: On the—going to San Antonio?

JS: Yes.

TS: Oh.

JS: [chuckles]

TS: How about that.

JS: Yes, I told you all these good things happen to me.

TS: Oh, yeah. Well, tell me more about basic training.

JS: Okay, basic training. I'll tell you one of my highlights—

TS: Okay.

JS: —of basic training. Well, I was kind of—Well, I'll let you describe me. We would go to this place called Arnold Hall [Community Center at Lackland Air Force Base] which was for the no-strippers; [chuckles] the lowest airmen. And—And we met some—two—I met a girl—a black girl from Kentucky and a black girl from Louisiana, and the three of us became buds. So of course, I was the leader.

TS: Okay.

JS: And they—so we would go together to Arnold Hall. I'm saying Arnold Hall and that wasn't the—that's the name of the air force academy in—

TS: Okay.

JS: I forgot—

TS: You went to some hall—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

JS: Yeah, it was named after—

TS: Was it a dining hall or—

JS: —a general or somebody.

TS: Was it a dining hall or—

JS: It was a hall for you—recreation.

TS: Okay.

JS: Yes.

TS: That's okay. That's something, too, in the transcript you might be able to write down what it was called.

JS: Okay. And at that time we met these sergeants. A sergeant, three striper—Let's see. Airman—A staff sergeant, tech [technical] sergeant, and a master sergeant. Okay.

TS: And you're all no-stripers. You and your friends had no stripes.

JS: No stripes.

TS: Okay.

JS: Okay. And so, we kept running into them, and so one day they asked us, "Why don't you all come to the NCO [non-commissioned officer] club?" Well, they knew we couldn't come to the NCO club, but warrior that I am, we went to the NCO club. [chuckles]

TS: Oh, you got in?

JS: Oh, yeah. I told them—I said, "Here's the plan. After bed check, you creep out of the window; I'll creep out of my window," because they weren't on the same wing, "and we're going to go." So we went. We just had on those dresses that they gave us.

TS: They weren't uniforms, necessarily.

JS: Well, they were called our fatigues.

TS: Okay.

JS: But they didn't have any stripes—

TS: Right.

JS: —or anything. We could just put that thing—

TS: No.

JS: —down here.

TS: It's okay.

JS: It wouldn't—

TS: Fall?

JS: [both chuckle] [unclear].

TS: That's all right.

JS: So anyway—

TS: You snuck out of your room.

JS: We snuck out of our room, ran down the road, went to the NCO club. They said they would be there so we went in, and the guy at the door, he says—asks for our passes. And we says, "We're the guests of these sergeants." So we went in, and they—These military person that ran the barracks was called the TI, Tactical Instructor.

TS: Okay.

JS: Okay. Well, they were having fun; I was having fun; I was on the floor dancing. Guy twirls me around and who did I look in the face of?

TS: [chuckles]

JS: My TI. Oh, oh.

TS: Then what happened?

JS: Then I stepped on the guy's foot, [both chuckle] because I was shocked. Oh, my Lord. Here's my TI and I'm supposed to be in bed. And she looked at me, she gave me this look.

TS: Oh, female TI, okay.

JS: Yeah, she didn't say anything.

TS: Okay.

JS: Just gave me this look. I got off that floor and told those girls, "Let's go. We're going now." And went back.

TS: All right.

JS: Well, from then on she knew—For some reason she knew I was the leader.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Ringleader.

JS: Yes. So she didn't say anything to them or bother them; she didn't say anything to me; she didn't write a report on us; she gave me the business every single chance she got.

TS: What kind of things would she do?

JS: Oh, well, she'd come in and she'd kick my—I tie string from one end of the bed to the other. Line my shoes against that string.

TS: Oh, okay.

JS: Know they're in line. She'd come along, "Shoes out of alignment." Next time she'd come—Oh, what else did she do? Oh, she did some of everything; it's in my book.

TS: She kept messing with you.

JS: Yes, she messed with me all the time.

TS: She tried—

JS: And every time I—that I got a gig [a demerit given in the military]—

TS: Right.

JS: And all the gigs kept me from going to town, like all the other girls did.

TS: Okay.

JS: Well, I finally got to go to town just before I left.

TS: Graduated.

JS: Yeah, and I says, "This isn't worth going to anyway."

TS: [chuckles]

JS: I mean, in those days San Antonio looked like nothing. I mean, the buildings were rundown; signs everywhere: "No N-I-G-G-E-R-S".

TS: Oh, okay.

JS: And stuff like that. That we couldn't go in the restaurants. We couldn't go—

TS: So it was totally segregated?

JS: Yeah, totally segregated.

TS: Okay.

JS: And rundown. And the Alamo didn't look like anything. And this [San Antonio] River Walk, you would never have believed it to see it today, because I've seen it since then.

TS: Oh yeah?

JS: And it's beautiful.

TS: Yeah.

JS: It was just like dirty water.

TS: Coming through—

JS: Yes.

TS: —like a canal or something.

JS: And no—no cafes or things like they have now.

TS: Right.

JS: And I wrote all that in my book. [both laugh] I just tell it like it is.

TS: So you got to go but there was nothing to it.

JS: Right; I hadn't missed anything, in other words.

TS: Well, in basic training was there anything physical that you had to do that was difficult?

JS: They would tease me because my last name is B-I-L-E-S; that's why I never mention it. And this army sergeant was visiting our class. We had classes, training classes where we learned all about the air force, and how to salute, and what to do, and one funny thing is,

one time I was on the—going down the street and an officer saluted me. And I didn't realize he was saluting me, I waved—

TS: Oh, no.

JS: — at him like that.

TS: How did that go?

JS: I guess it didn't bother him, he kept on going. [chuckles] But it—it was—I—I don't remember your question.

TS: Well, I was just wondering if anything was either, like, physically or emotionally difficult for you.

JS: No, no, nothing at all. They teased me about my name.

TS: Right.

JS: You stand up and say last name first, "Army Third Class Biles."
"Locked or loose?" They'd throw that at me. Biles, it's like bowels; Bile, B-I-L-E.

TS: Oh, playing on your name.

JS: Yeah.

TS: I see.

JS: But that was the—I loved being in the air force because we were stationed—we—we had quarters at Bolling Air Force Base [renamed Joint Base Anacostia-Bolling], in Washington—

TS: Oh, at—

JS: —D.C.

TS: Okay, your new assignment?

JS: That's—yeah—No, that wasn't a new assignment.

TS: Oh.

JS: That's where we had our food and sh—shelter, so to speak.

TS: Okay.

JS: Okay, and we were right next door to the drum and bugle corps, [unclear] [chuckles] so we'd have a lot of fun with them. And right across the street from our barracks they had the track and field and the football games and everything.

TS: Right.

JS: And so, I—I joy—I enjoyed the military 100% because they—they offered things that I had not had before.

TS: Like what?

JS: Like going to football games. I mean, I went to baseball games with the—the Cobbs took me there, and to “Ladies Day” and all that, but I'd never been to anything before that.

TS: Yeah.

JS: In these foster homes I didn't go anyplace.

TS: So you had new experiences.

JS: Yes.

TS: Now, what was it like to meet people from all over?

JS: Wonderful.

TS: Yeah.

JS: Yeah, wonderful. I was surprised because I—like I said, I was going down here—“Well, these other girls better not say anything to me,” and they were the sweetest things I ever met. [chuckles]

TS: Yeah. Did you have—Did you face any kind of discrimination?

JS: Oh, just really, really—I did throughout my life, but—And like I said, we couldn't go to Orlando, Florida, because of it.

TS: Yes. Oh, well, I think you said that off—off-tape when we were going through the things.

JS: Oh, did I say it?

TS: I think so. So when you were—After basic training you went to Washington, D.C.

JS: Yes.

TS: And you worked—Where did you work?

JS: I worked for headquarters, [United States Air Force] Air Rescue Service.

TS: Okay.

JS: ARS.

TS: Okay. What kind of things did you do?

JS: I did secretarial work. That's the only way I could say it because after I got my degree and I had secretarial jobs it was pretty much the same thing.

TS: You did a lot of that for, like—Were they pilots that you worked [unclear]—

JS: Yes, all the officers.

TS: Okay.

JS: All the officers' records, and when they would—plane would go down or something I'd have to record these things and send the—type the letters to go out to the families, and take their folders and see their little children's pictures, and their wives' pictures. And I tell you, I may not have gone over there—

TS: To Korea?

JS: —but it was in my heart and I hurt just as bad.

TS: You were doing the paperwork for the men that were serving in Korea?

JS: Yeah.

TS: The ones that lost their lives and things like that?

JS: Yeah.

TS: Oh, okay.

JS: I was recording the activities.

TS: Yes.

JS: Yeah.

TS: That did have to be quite traumatic.

JS: Yeah, it was. It was traumatic. And my daughter's job as a caregiver is very traumatic; very much the same.

TS: Same kind of emotions that you had to deal with.

JS: Yes, she has people dying almost weekly, or sooner.

TS: Well, when we were first talking before I turned the tape on you said you worked for headquarters, Air Rescue Services, in Washington, DC.

JS: Yes.

TS: And—

JS: —And they went to—their headquarters moved—

TS: Okay.

JS: —to Orlando, Florida, which they didn't have Disney World there then. [both chuckle]
And it was a segregated area.

TS: I see.

JS: So we were—All of the black people were moved to Andrews Air Force Base, which is still Washington, DC, and—at Andrews Air Force Base.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: And it was at—

JS: Military [Air] Transport Service.

TS: Right. MATS, you said.

JS: Yes.

TS: Right.

JS: MATS.

TS: Did you spend, like, about the same amount of time in those two jobs, or were you at one longer than the other?

JS: I spent most of my time at headquarters Air Rescue Service.

TS: Okay.

JS: Yes. I wasn't at Andrews very long.

TS: Oh, okay. Well, describe a typical day. If you can think of—if anything is typical.

JS: In the military? Well, again, I'll tell you one of my bad things.

TS: Okay.

JS: [chuckles] I would not allow segregation; I just would not. Throughout my life I would not. And when I was at Air Rescue Service, we were in a office and this girl who I loved very dearly—blonde, blue-eyed, real pretty girl—she was allowed to take the afternoon off. So I said, "Hey, that's nice. I think I'll ask for a day—half day afternoon off."
Which I did, and I was told, "No."
I says, "Well, now, Shirley got the afternoon off. Why can't I?"
"Well, but—but—but—but she—she—she—she—she finished all her work."
I said, "Oh, that's what it takes." So the next time I finished all my work. I says, "Hey, Captain, I finished all my work. Can I take the afternoon off?"
"Well, no, you can't take the afternoon off."
I says, "Why not?" I says, "Shirley got to take the afternoon off when she finished all her work."
"Well, you just can't. I mean, you know military's twenty-four hours. You can't take the afternoon off."
I said, "Oh, okay," and I closed up my desk; I took the afternoon off.

TS: You just went about it anyhow.

JS: [chuckles] I wasn't going to [unclear].

TS: Did anything—Did you get in trouble?

JS: Well, I got in trouble for a hot minute but they knew they were wrong.

TS: Yeah.

JS: See? And I knew they were wrong so I wasn't afraid to do it. [chuckles]

TS: Well, did—Now, your supervisors that you worked for, were they men or women or both, or who did you—What kind of environment was it that you were in?

JS: The ones I worked around were male.

TS: Okay.

JS: But the headquarter person, I did have a female who was really wonderful; there was male and female. Best thing, Air Rescue Service, they were so wonderful. I liked them.

TS: What kind of treatment do you—How did you feel you were treated, like, for promotions and things like that?

JS: I didn't get any.

TS: No?

JS: No. I mean, just after getting out of basic you get promoted but—Another thing I did, I got an Article 15.

[Article 15 authorizes non-judicial punishment, which allows commanders to administratively discipline troops without a court-martial]

TS: How'd you do that?

JS: [chuckles] Well, what happened, when I went to Andrews, my oldest sister was very ill, and her doctor got hold of the chaplain at Andrews and had them send me home because she was, like, dying.

TS: Yes.

JS: And so, I was going back and forth every time that they felt I should be there.

TS: Right.

JS: And so, the last time they told me to come, well, what I did—All of my money went to my bank in Cleveland, Ohio; Society for Savings Bank. I didn't have a checkbook, and so I had to borrow money to go back to Cleveland for my sister. And so, all the weekends we were off anyway, so I knew I was off on the weekend and I—I borrowed money, I went to Cleveland, and I says, "Well, when I get in Cleveland I'll go to the bank and get some money out and come back home."

Well, when I got there I went to the bank but the bank was not open on Saturday, which caused me a problem. So I called the base just like a good airman should and told them the story and asked them to allow me to come home on Monday. I said, "Right after I—the bank opens, I'll get the money, I'll get a ticket, come back home—I mean back to the base."

"No," he says.

I says, "Well, my sister's ill. I've only been coming here because of the doctor's—"

"No, you come back now."

I says, "Thank you very much." I came back on Monday after I got the money to pay the person back. That didn't make sense to me.

TS: Right.

JS: So anyway, there was my Article 15. But after I was called in and we talked about it then they took that away.

TS: Oh, they did?

JS: Yeah, so I had a very exciting life. [chuckles]

TS: It sounds like you had a very, let's see, strong-willed personality.

JS: I got that, but I didn't have—Well, I guess I did as a child. That's the way I survived—

TS: Yes.

JS: —my first two houses; first two homes.

TS: Right.

JS: Because I was strong. I didn't realize I was strong because I'd break down.

TS: Right.

JS: — and [think I'd go hang?] myself, but—but after Mrs. Cobbs, she built up what was already there—

TS: Right.

JS: —in me, and made me into a human being.

TS: Yeah.

JS: And I say that because that's what she made me into. One that could think for herself.

TS: Yes.

JS: And that could do and not give up. I don't give up.

TS: No, I can see that; I can see that. Now, Washington, DC, is different than Des Moines, Iowa, and different from San Antonio at that time.

JS: Yes.

TS: What kind of things did you do when you were stationed there in Washington, DC?

JS: Oh—

TS: On your off-time.

JS: On my off-time. Oh, we went to a club, my boyfriend and I, who—who later became my husband. He was—I liked him. I'll tell you why I liked him. Because when we'd go in the chow hall the guys would mess with the female airmen, and so this guy, he was messing with me when he's serving my food. And so, Russ—is my first husband—Russ told him—he called—called him over to him; chewed him out. He came back, apologized, and I thought, "Well, how nice. That's the way it should be." And so, then he started asking me for dates and I started going on dates at—myself, my roommate, and he and his friend.

TS: Yes.

JS: The four of us. And we went everywhere, we would—we visited Aunt Gertrude in—in Cleveland, and their parents in Pennsylvania and in Virginia, and we just got to know all of our families and all. And he had an aunt that lived there in Washington, D.C. We went to her house and play games on the floor. And—I mean, I didn't like nightclubs too much. We went a couple times but they were—they just weren't me.

TS: Right.

JS: Guess I lived in Iowa too long. Three years. [both chuckle]

TS: Did you like to do dancing or anything?

JS: Oh, yeah.

TS: Now, your—Russ, was he a—

JS: Russ wasn't a dancer.

TS: But was he an officer or enlisted?

JS: He was enlisted.

TS: Enlisted, okay.

JS: He was a tech sergeant.

TS: Okay.

JS: Yeah. And—Oh, when I was telling you about the three girls and I going with the NCO guys? I—I got them to go with the three-striper, the four-striper—I mean the four-striper, the tech—

TS: Right.

JS: —the staff, the tech, and I took the master sergeant—

TS: Okay.

JS: —for me. [laughs]

TS: Got the highest ranking one.

JS: Oh, yeah; oh, yeah.

TS: Oh, okay.

JS: I had fun doing that. I mean, [both chuckle] I made fun with everything, you know.

TS: Now, would—How was your job? Did you enjoy your job [unclear]?

JS: I did.

TS: Yeah.

JS: I did; I enjoyed my job.

TS: And how were—How were your supervisors on the job?

JS: They were good.

TS: Yeah.

JS: Yeah, I got along with everybody.

TS: Yeah, and the same with the ladies that you worked with?

JS: Yeah. I think people, when they met me they figured it was easier to get along with me. [chuckles] Because I wasn't hard to get along, but don't cross me.

TS: Yes.

JS: So.

TS: Did you—

JS: And that was because I'd lived by myself so long.

TS: Right. Now, did you ever—did you see—We talked a little bit about the attitudes toward women. Did you see that very much, negative attitudes or [unclear]—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

JS: Oh, yeah. I saw that but I wouldn't accept it for myself. In fact, what they did when I had the Article 15, they put me on restriction to the base for, let's see, one week or two weeks or something like that, and I went off base every day except the last day. [laughs] I—I was—I don't know, I just say, "warrior that I am."

TS: You didn't get in trouble for that?

JS: They didn't catch me.

TS: Ah, there we go. Now, did—How about the idea of things like sexual—We didn't have the word for sexual harassment back then.

JS: Yes.

TS: But certainly things like that did happen. Did you ever experience it or know of it happening to anyone?

JS: In the military?

TS: Yes.

JS: Well, I did have some problems like that. But I—I guess I was kind of—I acted different than most people. I had one guy, I says, "Okay, now, I'll have sex with you, and you have a girlfriend. Okay? Because I'm not going to have sex with all these guys, and you protect me." So he was, like, my protector. So I didn't have to—

TS: So by being able to say you had a boyfriend—

JS: Yes.

TS: —everybody else kind of left you alone.

JS: They left me alone; right.

TS: So it was like a survival strategy.

JS: Yeah, yeah.

TS: Yeah. She's pointing to her head again.

JS: Yeah.

TS: Yeah.

JS: And how did I learn this?

TS: How did you?

JS: Through survival. That's where you have to read the book.

TS: Okay. Well, I have my task for this evening, for sure. [both chuckle] Now, what are you thinking about the air force? Are you thinking, "This is really great, I'm glad I joined it," or—

JS: Oh, yeah.

TS: Yeah?

JS: I'm glad I joined it.

TS: Yes.

JS: I learned a lot, and it—and with everything I've done throughout my life I've learned a lot. Even taking my own life—trying to take my own life—I've learned.

TS: What did the air force teach you?

JS: The air force taught me—Let's see—how to get along with people. I think that's the greatest thing it taught me. They used to tell me—I loved to go to the movies; I'd go to the movie every day on base and it would cost a quarter. And, like I said, my money was going to the bank so I didn't keep much money, and so somebody asked me, "June, you going to the movie today?"

I said, "I don't have a quarter."

They said, "Oh, just go down to the theater, stand there, somebody will hand you a quarter."

TS: Is that what you did?

JS: And I did. [both chuckle] I went in. I mean, we were—To me, in the military we were all like brothers or sisters.

TS: Yes.

JS: It didn't matter; white, black, blue, whatever; we were all brothers and sisters.

TS: Yes.

JS: And I didn't feel—I didn't feel threatened by any of them and I—I hung out with the guys most of the time, and I've done that most of my life, because I—I wasn't a prissy girl. And nothing wrong with prissy girls, they're beautiful, but I was half tomboy; climb trees, whatever.

TS: That's why you wanted to work in the sports section, right?

JS: Yeah, yeah. That's the real me. [both chuckle] I don't know, I enjoyed meeting, learning. When you meet people you learn something about it. That's why I love cruises. I've been on four cruises and every time I met so many different people; I've learned so much about them and their way of life. I've gone to different places, I've seen different things, I—I'm [unclear]. I've just had a wonderful life.

TS: When you—When you were in the air force and you—When you were in Washington, DC, did you live in the barracks then?

JS: Yes.

TS: How—What was the—What were the rooms like? Were they—do you have more than one girl in a room?

[Speaking Simultaneously]

JS: They were just big—

TS: Big open bays?

JS: —bare open bay rooms.

TS: Okay.

JS: And I was in the room—there was, like, stacked beds—

TS: Yes.

JS: —on each side of the room. And the other girls in my room were Hawaiian, so.

TS: Was that okay? That [unclear]—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

JS: Sure, it was okay.

TS: Yeah.

JS: I mean, I didn't know what they were talking about half the time.

TS: [chuckles] But I mean having to share all that space with other girls, was that—were you not uncomfortable with that at all?

JS: No, I—I didn't have a problem. I think it's because when you're on the welfare, from the time you're little, you're sent to the—I was sent to the Cleveland Clinic—I mean, not the Cleveland Clinic, to the Cleveland hospital. I can't think of the right name for it. It's got another name now anyway. But all—all welfare children are sent to have their teeth examined, cleaned, taken care of. You go to the doctor—In my day you took off everything before you saw the doctor and then the doctor examined you. So I was used to a routine check-up like that.

TS: I see, okay.

JS: So being in the military, you went in, you stood in lines, you went through this. They gave you coffee and little-bitty packs of cigarettes; that's when I learned to smoke. I smoked for ten years; I stopped smoking. And it was just part of living and part of life. I took life like that. Whatever came before me I had to deal with it. When I was eight hundred miles from home in Des Moines, Iowa, not knowing a soul, by myself, I learned to go to the movie theater, buy popcorn, put lots of salt on it, eat my popcorn, drink water, fill my body up, take a nap[?] in the movie, watch the movie over and over and over. [*The*] *Song of Bernadette*. You ever heard of that?

TS: I have.

JS: You have?

TS: I have.

JS: I watched that movie over and over; took my nap[?]. You take care of what's before you, whatever it happens to be, and you keep going.

TS: Yes.

JS: You keep going; keep getting up. Keep getting up, because that's how life is. You either get up or you don't get up. And if you don't get up, you've given up. And there's nowhere to go when you've given up but down. Right?

TS: Yeah, I can't disagree with that.

JS: That's my philosophy. So—

TS: Tell me what—why you decided to get out of the air force. Had you planned to stay very long?

JS: I got married. Because when they shipped me—sent me to Andrews Air Force Base, my husband was still the chef—

TS: Oh, you had already gotten married?

[Speaking Simultaneously]

JS: —at Bolling Air Force Base.

TS: You'd already gotten married by then?

JS: No.

TS: Oh.

JS: I did—That's when I got out, I got married.

TS: Okay.

JS: Yeah.

TS: Was that okay? Had you—Had you thought about staying in longer?

JS: Oh, no. I mean, I was just in there and I was just living each day.

TS: Yes.

JS: I hadn't thought about getting out, but when they separated us—and we had been dating for, oh, over a year. Like I said, we met—met all his parents, he met all my par—

TS: Right.

JS: —parents [unclear], and—and my girlfriends and her boyfriend. We went to all four places. We were the four; we drove all over the United States.

TS: Yes. Did you decide to get out bef—before or after you got married? I mean—

JS: I got out before.

TS: Okay, and then you got married.

JS: Then I got married.

TS: I see.

JS: Right.

TS: Okay.

JS: Right.

TS: And so, what—How was that transition back into the civilian world? Well, you said he was still in the military.

JS: Yeah.

TS: Okay, how long did he stay in?

[Speaking Simultaneously]

JS: He was still in the military eight years after that.

TS: Okay.

JS: So I was a military wife.

TS: How was that?

JS: It was good.

TS: Yeah.

JS: Because I was used to military. [both chuckle] I was already a military woman.

TS: Did you organize all the wives, spouses, things like that?

JS: No, because married life was different for me and—but I organized the base.

TS: I bet you did.

JS: [chuckles]

TS: What did you do? How did you organize it?

JS: That's terrible. Well—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: No, I'm not surprised at all, June.

JS: Well, all these dogs were running all over the base, loose.

TS: Is this at Andrews or Bolling?

JS: This was at—

TS: Someplace—

JS: —Sandia.

TS: Sandia?

JS: Sandia Army Base [Sandia Base].

TS: Okay.

JS: In Albuquerque, New Mexico.

TS: Okay.

JS: And my husband worked at a—a secret area called Manzano Base and it—nobody could go up there, so you lived on Sandia Base. So I got tired of those dogs. I read—I picked up the manual that says about the base rules and saw where those dogs weren't supposed to be running loose. So I wrote a letter to the commandant. [chuckles]

TS: Straight up.

JS: Yes, to the top.

TS: All the way to the top.

JS: To the top. Don't mess with nobody below them.

TS: [chuckles]

JS: Because you won't get anything done.

TS: Okay.

JS: And I wrote to him, and, boy, I'll tell you this. I don't know if I should tell you. [chuckles]

TS: Yes, you absolutely should.

JS: My husband and his friend were making home brew—You know what that is?—in our kitchen when the military police came to my door about the dogs. [both laugh]

TS: And so, how did that go?

JS: They were scared to death. Here they were—and it smells. Oh, Lord, I'd never heard of home brew till I married a South—Southern boy.

TS: So what happened when they came to the door?

JS: Well, they didn't—they just told me that—

TS: They just stayed outside?

JS: Yeah.

TS: Okay.

JS: And they gave me a letter from the commandant and apologized from the commandant for the dogs running and all, and they would see that that was curtailed.

TS: And was it?

JS: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

TS: [chuckles]

JS: Oh, yes.

TS: And then did your husband say, "No more letters to the commandant?" [both laugh]

JS: Right.

TS: Which I'm sure wouldn't have stopped you anyhow.

JS: Oh, I'm telling you, I—I was something. [unclear]

TS: Now, did you ever use any of your military benefits?

JS: I told you. Oh, I wasn't on tape yet.

TS: Yeah, we weren't on tape yet.

JS: I used all I could and I—I'm sure if I needed them today I could still—not my education; I used all of my education.

TS: Yes.

JS: I used most of it when I got my executive secretarial degree in Albuquerque, New Mexico. And the buying homes—four homes. Well, the last one was—wasn't just a house, it was a townhouse.

TS: Yes.

JS: Just for me.

TS: Okay. [unclear]—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

JS: Upstairs and downstairs.

TS: Four times you said you used the—

JS: Yes, I—

TS: —housing benefit.

JS: Right.

TS: Okay.

JS: I got other houses.

TS: Okay.

JS: I got one on Polk[?] Street and—well, I got this real big house when we had our last two children. See, I had my two children two years apart and then it was nine and a half, almost ten years before I had my daughter Joy.

TS: Yes.

JS: That's her.

TS: Yes.

JS: And then two years after her I had another child. And I said, "Lord, why did you do this to me?" [both chuckle] I said that at church. I stood up and said it at church.

TS: Oh.

JS: Yes. I said, "Here I am, trying to be a good Christian and you let me have another child." [chuckles]

TS: And what was the answer to that question?

JS: Well, it was a visiting preacher. He got up and preached me out, called it the joy of salvation. I come out of that church, I was carrying her. I named her right then before she was born.

TS: There you go.

JS: Yeah.

TS: Well, now, did you ever consider yourself as a trailblazer in the military? As in the air force?

JS: Oh, I spoke many places.

TS: Yes.

JS: I've had so many awards. I left most of them at my husb—my second husband's house because I was just getting out of there. I was going to [unclear]. My son came and got me

because the doctor said I could not live alone again. That was when I was living in the townhouse—

TS: Okay.

JS: —in Colorado Springs.

TS: Yes.

JS: You know I was living in Colorado all this time?

TS: Yeah.

JS: Did I say that?

TS: I guess we hadn't said it on tape but that was—but, yeah.

JS: Yeah, okay.

TS: After New—after New Mexico or—

JS: Well, after—Well, when I was married in the military we went to—Well, we were stationed in Washington, and then we went to Albuquerque and we were there four years. Everything's four years in the air force. And then we went to New Jersey. There's a army camp.

TS: Fort Dix?

JS: Fort Dix, and right next to it's the air force. [Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst?]

TS: Okay. I can't think of the name of that one.

JS: I can't think of it now; it's in my book. [both chuckle] Everything is in my book.

TS: Oh, that's okay. You don't have to [unclear].

JS: I recorded everything.

TS: That's fine.

JS: Okay.

TS: So, well—

JS: So then when we left there we came to the Air Force Academy [Colorado Springs, Colorado]; my husband was stationed at the Air Force Academy.

TS: What did he do there?

JS: He was—He was a chef to just the—the officers who taught and trained the cadets.

TS: Oh, okay.

JS: Yes, not—not the cadets.

TS: Did he make really good food?

JS: Oh, yeah.

TS: Yeah?

JS: Oh, yeah. He went to two schools while he was in the air force. Two of those kinds of—

TS: Culinary schools.

JS: Culinary Arts school.

TS: Oh, nice.

JS: Yes.

TS: Now, today's women in the air force, they have dif—they can do a lot of different jobs than the type that you had.

JS: Yes.

TS: Do you think there is any jobs that women should not be able to have in the military?

JS: I'll tell you one thing, and this may not go over with the women, but I love them dearly and I respect each one who went up there and said, "I do," I really do, but when that went to Congress I really thought, "This is not good."

TS: When what went to Congress?

JS: I was going to say it.

TS: Oh, okay.

JS: For them to put women in battlefields. I don't believe that was the right thing to do.

TS: Okay.

JS: In combat. We are not made like them, we do not need them handing us our Kotex [feminine hygiene products] and stuff. Really, women are the breeders of the world. God put us here to breed the next person in and we can't do it on the battlefield. Really. I—I thought that was just truly out of context and unfair to the women. Now, there are so many jobs there now, they're—they're flying planes and they never get caught.

TS: Captured, you mean, like—

JS: Right.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: —if they get shot down or something.

JS: Captured—

TS: Yes.

JS: —and brought into a situation.

TS: But they have—That has happened to women.

JS: Yes, it has.

TS: Yes.

JS: And they've made it. But I'm saying how I was thinking.

TS: Right.

JS: And I know they have been through—I mean, all you have to do is turn on the television and see the generals get away with raping the women. See them get away with it. That gets me.

TS: Yes. What do you think they could do differently for that?

JS: I could kick their butts.

TS: Well, I don't know if you could reach every single one of them, June, but okay.

JS: [chuckles]

TS: But I mean, do you think that there's something they should—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

JS: I think it's wrong.

TS: Sure.

JS: I think it's wrong, and I knew just because of how the whole world is. God made Adam and then he got Eve and put one of Adam's bones in her.

TS: Yes.

JS: I knew then [laughs] that this was going to be an unfair world. I mean, true.

TS: Yes.

JS: That's just the—And it's been that way all our lives. Men beat up on women because they're bigger or stronger. You take a baby child, male child, is strong enough to punch you out. I have a scar on me that my baby put on me when he was just a little toddler sitting between my husband and I watching a boxing match.

TS: Oh. Popped you right in the face?

JS: Yeah.

TS: Yes.

JS: He took a beer can—my—We had beer; we were drinking beer. He took the beer can and did like that. Got me right—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Hit you between the eyes?

JS: Yes.

TS: Yes, okay. On the nose.

JS: Still there.

TS: Oh.

JS: 'Till today. And he's—what is he?

TS: He's the younger—

JS: He's almost sixty now.

TS: Okay.

JS: But I—I hated to see women put in that position because I knew it was going to be unfair. And we are just aggressive. I'm aggressive, so I understand us wanting to go further and further and further, and I don't blame the women. Not all of them had a bad time. I don't know how many. And—But one being raped—one—is wrong. And that person should suffer for it.

TS: The person who did the rape?

JS: Yes.

TS: Yes.

JS: And that's how I feel about it.

TS: Yes. Well, having said that, how would—if, like, your daughter, granddaughter said that they were going to go join the service, what would you say to them?

JS: I don't know. I'd say, "Don't go overseas."

TS: Yeah, because you think that's where—

JS: Because I think—

TS: —the problems happen?

JS: Yes, and one of the girls that went on the stage with us—

TS: Okay, with the—

JS: My dear friend.

TS: —North Carolina Expo [2014 North Carolina 2014 Veterans Summit & Expo].

JS: Yes.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: [unclear]

JS: Yeah, what is her—[unclear].

TS: It's okay. We can add it to the transcript.

JS: Okay. Well, she's the—She's the American Legion first female commander for North Carolina [Patricia Harris]. She says they treated her—the men, the e—the—the people that were on her side treated her like she wasn't an American. The men.

TS: Yes.

JS: Now, that wasn't even the enemy. So what we're saying is the enemy's all around you when you get overseas. I mean, they're having troubles themselves adapting properly to their situation.

TS: Yes.

JS: And so, who knows what they're going to do.

TS: Well, let me ask you about the—another controversial issue. When you were in, basically there was a—

JS: They didn't use women.

TS: Well, I wasn't—I'm—I'm going at—

JS: Okay.

TS: —on a different strain. Actually, like with homosexuals in the military, they weren't allowed and then they had this thing called "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," where you could be in but you couldn't say anything and then they repealed that. So now you can have open gays and lesbians in the military.

JS: Yes.

TS: What do you think about that trajectory in the military?

JS: Well, I think whatever rules they have you have to go by when you're in the military, like I did. [chuckles] But—

TS: Or pay the consequences.

JS: Yeah, or pay the consequences like I did. But as far as gays and lesbians, I don't feel like anybody but God has rule over that because he says for us not to divide—to separate the wheat from the tare[s] unless we separate it unaware.
So we can make a mistake. Leave them alone. They might be doing more good than you and I. So who are we to say? I mean, I can see where if a person had a bad marriage with a—a man where she would say, "No more men," and go to her sister—friend—and maybe that's what happens before they realize it, and they're so devoted to each other that maybe that's what they—they feel for each other. I mean, I can't judge them. I can only walk in June's line, what's ahead of her.

TS: Yes.

JS: And try to ask God to help her go to the next level. I believe that. I—I have no remorse or—or nothing against any person, even a man who chokes his wife to death, kills her, I can't judge him because God told me not to. I've got to love him because he's still a human being. Now, I'm glad if he goes to jail. [both chuckle] I'll let the jury do that. And by the grace of God I've never been on a jury. I've [never] been called to jury duty.

TS: Yeah.

JS: But I had—When we get through I'm going to lift that seat up—

TS: Okay.

JS: —[unclear] my walker, and show you all the illnesses, and that's not all.

TS: Okay.

JS: I've had so many illnesses that I have not been able to go on jury duty.

TS: Oh, I see.

JS: My doctors won't allow it.

TS: Oh, because of the time commitment.

JS: I can't sit.

TS: Yes, well, you're doing great sitting here so we'll get—

JS: Yeah.

TS: Well, do you think your life has been different because you spent time in the military?

JS: Oh, yes.

TS: How so?

JS: I think I'm a stronger person. I think Gertrude set me off in the right direction. The military picked me up and taught me how to live and give and be a part of; those three things. I love marching; oh, I love to march. In fact, the American Legion convention is—national convention is here in North Carolina, in Charlotte, in August, and hopefully I'll get a ride up there. Patricia Harris, that's who—

TS: The lady you were talking about earlier?

JS: Yes.

TS: Okay.

JS: Yes, and I tried to get a—tried to get a ride with Pat to go and be with the Colorado delegation.

TS: Why don't you talk about that a little? Now, how did you get involved with the—

JS: With the American Legion?

TS: —the American Legion?

JS: Okay, all that I've talked to you so far was my first husband. Russell Reed[?], Joy's father. Okay, that's where my second husband came in. I met him, I was working for the

Chamber of Commerce—and I worked there three years—and they found out I was black. [chuckles] I'd been black the whole three years.

TS: This is in Colorado?

JS: Yeah, Colorado, Chamber of Commerce. But they found out I—I was black. I didn't know they didn't know I was black. And one of the guys was saying how this black lady had died and I said, "Oh, yes, I loved her; she was in my church."

And so, "She was in a black church; she was a black lady."

I said, "Yeah, I'm black; I was in the same church."

"Oh, I didn't know you were black."

So then he passed the word around the office. So then here comes in—I just got a new boss at the Chamber—you know how the Chamber changes bosses, like, every year or so—and so then he calls me in. And he didn't like me in the first place, this new boss, because I'm not your "Yes, sir," and "Yes, ma'am," type person. So he calls me in his office. I go in there. He says, "June, have a seat. June, would you like to quit your job?"

I said, "What?"

"Well, now, don't get upset. I know you have two children and you're a lone woman, and I'll help you get another job."

I said, "I don't need another job. I have a job."

"Well, now, don't—just don't start that. I'll give you—help you. I said I'll help you get another job."

I says, "Why would I quit my job?" I loved my job at the Chamber. Oh, that's a great job. You go to all the parties. You get into all the events in town free. I mean—I mean, I had it made. [chuckles] But they—only thing about the Chamber, they did not have a benefit for you. I mean, what you got you got.

TS: For like health and—

JS: Yeah, you—

TS: Okay.

JS: —go to the hospital you're in trouble.

TS: Okay.

JS: So, actually. So, anyway—Actually, I'm trying to think now.

TS: He wanted you to quit your job and you didn't want to. Did you end up having to quit it, or did they get rid of you, or what happened?

JS: Oh, I went back. I took minutes for all the boards and committees, and my boss from working in Colorado Springs where the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] and a couple other—one of the guys was those black Tuskegee Airmen.

TS: Okay.

JS: And another guy. Well, the three of them took me to the mayor of Colorado Springs and says, "We want to know why you can't—you haven't hired a white [black?] collar worker?" That's another one, white collar worker.

TS: Okay.

JS: See that—that kept going on through my life.

TS: Okay.

JS: And so, I was there a couple hours, [unclear], all the explanations, and looked at my resume, looked at my credentials, everything of where I had worked before. So I was experienced and had degrees.

TS: You had all the qualifications.

JS: I had all the qualifications.

TS: What—Is this, like, in the 1960's?

JS: Yeah, it's like sixty—I think I started working there in '61.

TS: So it's, like, the civil rights era.

JS: Yes.

TS: Okay.

JS: Yes, because [Dr.] Martin Luther King [Jr.] was out there at that time. Everybody was on the bandwagon.

TS: Okay.

JS: So, anyway. So that's how I got my job with the city of Colorado Springs.

TS: Okay.

JS: Okay. Well, after that when I got pregnant I had to—In those days you didn't walk around on the job with your belly out, you had to leave. So I left and my husband and I started our own company with the GI Bill.

TS: Oh.

JS: See, we used everything.

TS: Okay.

JS: Of course, he was retired.

TS: Okay.

JS: I wasn't retire—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Was he your first husband?

JS: Yeah.

TS: Okay.

JS: Between the both—he and I, we—we opened Consolidated Construction Company, Incorporated. Okay. And that little girl was working; took care of our dry cleaning business. We had three businesses under our corporation, and she was ten years old. She was putting the money in the cash register, handing out the—lot.

TS: Right.

JS: That young.

TS: Yes.

JS: But—And our company grew, so we had a company in Colorado Springs, Denver, Colorado, Albuquerque. Oh, and Gal—what's that other place in Colorado? There's another town there.

TS: Okay.

JS: I can't think of the name. And Albuquerque and Gallup, New Mexico. So we just were growing, growing, growing. We did good. [chuckles] And I got tired of my husband beating on me and mistreating me and I just walked off the job. I just walked off the job and went to the movies. Yes. Yeah, I had to hide money from him in order to pay bills.

TS: Yes.

JS: He was giving it to his friends, playing big shot and all. We got the award—the Colorado Springs—Colorado Springs—What was it called?

TS: Some kind of award through the city for that?

JS: No, Chamber of Commerce. Chamber of Commerce. Colorado Springs Chamber of Commerce Best Company of the Year.

TS: Okay.

JS: Yeah, award. First black people to ever get it there even though they had little black companies.

TS: Right.

JS: Shoe shine places and shoe repair.

TS: Right.

JS: Different little places. But we—we had—we just grew—we just—We went to California to get the rights to Sunstop, which that's was what it was called before. Now you see the—the coating on the windows of cars and buildings. It wasn't there before. We went—We were the beginning of that thing—

TS: Oh.

JS: —where we had to put it on there.

TS: So you—So you left your first husband.

JS: Yeah.

TS: Okay.

JS: I left him and went to a female attorney; [chuckles] she told me what to do.

TS: Okay.

JS: And she says to get out of that house, get you a job. I was hiding with my children in a friend's basement.

TS: Okay.

JS: And my husband came to the door looking for me.

TS: Oh.

JS: She told him she didn't know where I was. So it was—because he beat me to death. He—every time he thought I was going to leave, because I had tried to leave many times.

TS: I see.

JS: But anyway. So I had gone to the Chamber of Commerce because they had a job fair, and so I chose the one that paid the most, which was the Chamber.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Oh, so that's how you got that job.

JS: Yes.

TS: Okay.

JS: Anyway, after they found out I was black they were trying to get rid me, and so I says, "Well, I'm not going to quit." Well, they asked me would I—would I leave—leave.

TS: Right.

JS: And I said, "No."

"Well, you know, we can fire you."

I says, "Well, you'll just have to do that because I'm not quitting."

And so, I went first to my attorney, then I went to the NAACP, then I met with the board, then I got my job back. But I lost pay, for two months' pay, and I had two little children I was taking care of.

So anyway, we got through that and—Oh, so I went back to Pikes Peak Regional Building Department and—who was the city before but they had changed and gotten

bigger and taken in all these other counties—and I worked there licensing contractors, doing everything. To replace me, it took two years and two—and two permanent people to do the job.

TS: Right.

JS: Because I worked Sunday after church. I worked because I was going to the American Legion too.

TS: Well, so that's what I was going to ask you.

JS: Yes.

TS: How did you get—When did you get connected with the American Legion?

JS: Well, while I was at the Chamber of Commerce a friend that was on the board—one of the black guys that was on the chamber board—brought my second husband in, introduced him to me. Then I saw him again at a rally and—a political rally that I went to. And so, then he asked me for a date and we started dating. And he says, "Did you ever think about joining the American Legion?"

I said, "American Legion?" I said, "That's for men, isn't it?"

He says, "No." He just started laughing. He says, "No, American Legion's for anyone," and he gave me all the qualifications—

TS: Yes.

JS: —and I says, "Well, you know, I—I don't know. Yes, yes, I have been in the military. Yes, I have a honorable discharge. Yes"; "yes" to everything. And so, he took me to his post home and I checked them out and it wasn't anything but guys and me, so first thing I become is a secretary. [chuckles] So that was okay, I was glad I could do it. And so, I became necessary.

So anyway, I started there, and then after a year or so with the American Legion post, they asked me to start an auxiliary. So I did that and I was with the women for, oh, about six months. Anyway, we made all the—maybe it was longer. Yeah, I might—might have been a year with the women. And we got all the awards. [chuckles] You don't[?] have to do that; we have to do that. And our post today—let me tell you about our post today—is now number one in—in the nation—in the nation—and the nation includes Greece—I mean, not Greece—Italy, Germany, the U.S.—the United Kingdom.

TS: Right.

JS: All of these other countries. Of course, Canada.

TS: Right.

JS: And I belong to all the top organizations in the American Legion.

TS: When did you become president of that?

JS: I was president of the auxiliary—

TS: Yes.

JS: —after I—after I got it organized.

TS: Yes.

JS: Then I tried—We got another girl because I want—didn't want to be president, and this other girl said she'd be president then she—she got—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: Changed her mind.

JS: —frustrated and—

TS: Yeah.

JS: —got out. So I didn't have any choice but to go on and be president and get it going and started.

TS: Right.

JS: Yeah, so I was president of that one. Then later in life in the American Legion I went to—Where was I? When I went to Missouri to live with my son after I was—had been ill—

TS: Yes.

JS: —and had to live—couldn't live alone.

TS: Right.

JS: Then I became president of the largest white—and they have separate posts—black posts wouldn't have me. I went to their post, they says, "Oh, we're sorry, you're too light. We can't have you in our post."

TS: That was in Missouri?

JS: Yes. I says, "Why?"
 They says, "Well, you'd get a job quicker than our people would."
 I said, "I am 'our people.'"
 "Well, I'm sorry. We have to ask you to leave." [unclear]
 Here, I had the same problem in North Carolina. Same thing everywhere I go, only here, the men wouldn't let me in either. I told them I didn't want to join, I just wanted to visit. And—But in Missouri, the commander of the white post—Springfield, Missouri—he came to my house when he heard about how people had treated me and told me they would love to have me come to their post. And so, we came; my son took me to their post. And their post is just outside of Springfield, and there's a sign there, says "No niggers allowed after 6:00 pm." So that became a problem.
 And so, this commander, he says, "That's all right. I will come and pick you up. Me and my wife, we'll pick you up and bring you home." And they did that the whole time I lived there.

TS: Did the sign stay there?

JS: And made me the—the president of their auxiliary.

TS: Yes. Did they get rid of that sign while you were there?

JS: I don't know.

TS: That's interesting.

JS: I don't know, because I lived out.

TS: Well, it's interesting, June, that you've been on—like, in this—How do you put it? Like, you've been on both sides of this fence that people see—

JS: Oh, yeah.

TS: —you from. So you're too—you're too white, you're not—

JS: Too black.

TS: —you're too black. You're—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

JS: [both chuckle] I'm either too white or too black.

TS: Make a song.

JS: That's a song, not the words.

TS: So that's been—How do you—I mean, I think we might have talked about that a little bit off-tape, but how do you really feel about those kind of labels of race and color?

JS: I'm me. I'm June.

TS: Yes.

JS: You can take me; you can leave me. You can call me any name you want to. It's not going to bother me because I'm a child of God.

TS: Yes.

JS: And that's me. Anybody in my church will tell you that's me.

TS: Well, how do you feel about the fact that people who were in the military were treating you that way though; that served?

JS: I don't think people in the military—Well, they are people—they are military people, aren't they? Yeah, because they have to be in the military to be in the American Legion. I don't know. I wrote a—I wrote a thing—Did you know it? What I—And I'm not going to look for it unless I know where it is.

TS: That's all right. You wrote something about—

JS: When I was at—at that panel discussion.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

TS: At the NC—North Carolina Expo?

JS: Yeah. I can't take my—

TS: Well, that's all right.

JS: I have to show it to you later.

TS: That's okay. We're almost done.

JS: Oh.

TS: I just got a couple more questions.

JS: Okay. But I wrote this thing and I've been dying to give it to somebody.

TS: Okay.

JS: At some speech.

TS: [chuckles]

JS: At some time or other.

TS: All right.

JS: Why is it that we can fight together; we can die together in the battlefield; we can help each other's in the dugouts; we could cry together; we could care about each other's families at home; but then we come home and it's "You go here and you go there;" Separatism. I do not like separatism, and I've fought it all my life. But I can't go to their post. Fine. I'm not going to worry about it. I'll do something else. My life will be fulfilled as long as I live on this earth. And when I die I'll be trucking my way. [both laugh]

TS: Well—

JS: Yes.

TS: Well, that leads me to a question about patriotism. What do—What do you think? Patriotism; what does it mean to you?

JS: Patriotism means everything to me. It is me. It began when I saw those World War II veterans—World War I, I guess, veterans.

TS: World—yeah.

JS: World War I.

TS: Right, in the parade.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

JS: Come home in the parade. That's when my patriotism came. It came when I was at the baseball game at Cleveland Stadium on the Fourth of July and they turned out all the lights and we lit candles. We lit matches, not candles—matches. Everybody lit—lit a match and they put the flares in the sky because it was the Fourth of July. Independence Day, hallelujah. Thank you.

TS: Well, do you think—

JS: My patriotism has continued. It's been my strength to keep on living. It's why I fight when you tell me I can't do this or I can't do that. I am an American. I'll tell you who I am. I may not be white enough, I may not be black enough, but I am an American.

TS: I need a video of you right now with your arms moving. [both laugh]

JS: I've got one right there.

TS: That's right, that's right. You have that.

JS: I—I am very emotional.

TS: Well, do you think there's anything in particular that you would want a civilian to know or understand about what it's like to be and serve in the military that they may not understand or appreciate.

JS: Well, when you go to Texas they say, "Remember the Alamo." I say to all veterans, "Remember we're all Americans. All; all of us; each one has fought and died. Each one regardless of the color of their skin. Whether they're a female or a male. Our blood is all red, and we all have the same goal. America is June, and June is America.

TS: Well, I think that's a great spot to end it on, June. What do you think? I don't have any more formal questions.

JS: Okay.

TS: Is there anything you'd like to add or you think that's a good way to end it?

JS: I think that's great. [chuckles]

TS: All right. Well, thank you so much for inviting me into your home.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

JS: I'm sorry I'm so emotional

TS: No, quite all right. Thank you again.

JS: You're welcome, my namesake. [laughs]

TS: Oh, that's right. We share the same middle name.

JS: Yes.

TS: [unclear] Therese, yeah.

[End of Interview]