Voices of Feminism Oral History Project

Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College
Northampton, MA

FRANCES BEAL

Interviewed by

LORETTA J. ROSS

March 18, 2005
Oakland, CA

This interview was made possible
with generous support from the Ford Foundation

Narrator

Frances Beal was born in Binghamton, NY, January 13, 1940, the daughter of Ernest Yates, who was of African American and Native American ancestry, and Charlotte Berman Yates, of radical Russian Jewish immigrant roots. When Fran's father died, her mother moved the family to St. Albans, an integrated neighborhood in Queens. In addition to observing her mother's participation in left politics, Fran was profoundly affected by the murder of Emmett Till. After graduating from Andrew Jackson High School in 1958, she became involved in civil rights activities and socialist politics while attending the University of Wisconsin.

She married James Beal, and from 1959 to 1966, they lived in France, where they had two children and Fran became attuned to the internationalist/anti-imperialist politics of post-colonial African liberation struggles. During summers in the US in those years, she maintained connections with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). When her marriage ended and she returned to the United States in 1966, Beal took a job with the National Council of Negro Women, where she worked for a decade.

In 1968 Beal co-founded the Black Women's Liberation of Committee of SNCC and wrote one of the defining documents of black feminism, "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female" (*Sisterhood is Powerful*, ed. Robin Morgan, 1970). The Committee quickly evolved into the Black Women's Alliance and soon, in order to include Puerto Rican women, into the Third World Women's Alliance (TWWA). TWWA rejected a feminism that posits sexism as the primary source of women's subordination and developed an analysis predicated on the interaction of race, class, and sex oppression and on an international perspective. As a member of the New York chapter of TWWA, Beal's organizing in the 1970s centered on abortion rights and sterilization abuse.

In the 1980s Beal moved to California where she served as associate editor of *The Black Scholar* and wrote a weekly column in the *San Francisco Bay View*. In recent years she has worked with the National Anti-Racist Organizing Committee (NAROC) and with the Racial Justice Project of the ACLU of Northern California. She is the National Secretary of the Black Radical Congress. Beal lives in Oakland, where she continues to write.

Note: There is a small set of Frances Beal Papers at the Bethune-Cookman Collections.

Interviewer

Loretta Ross (b. 1953) became involved in black nationalist politics while attending Howard University, 1970-73. A leader in the anti-rape and anti-racism movements in the 1970s and 1980s, she co-founded the International Council of African Women and served as Director of Women of Color Programs for the National Organization for Women and Program Director for the National Black Women's Health Project. After managing the research and program departments for the Center for Democratic Renewal, an anti-Klan organization, Ross established the National Center for Human Rights Education in 1996, which she directed through 2004. Also in 2004, she was the Co-Director of the March for Women's Lives. In 2005 she became national coordinator of the SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Health Collective. The Loretta Ross papers are at the Sophia Smith Collection; the Voices of Feminism Project also includes an oral history with Ross.

Abstract

In this oral history, Frances Beal describes her unique childhood as the daughter of parents of refugee Jewish, African American, and Native American descent. The interview focuses on her activism in the United States and in France, including founding the Women's Committee of SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee). Beal's story captures the challenges of anti-racist, anti-fascist and anti-imperialist organizing with a gender perspective.

Restrictions

None

Format

Interview recorded on miniDV using Sony Digital Camcorder DSF-ODX10. Three 60-minutes tapes.

Transcript

Transcribed by Tape Transcription Center. Audited for accuracy and edited for clarity by Revan Schendler. Transcript reviewed and approved by Fran Beal.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: Beal, Frances. Interview by Loretta Ross. Video recording March 18, 2005. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote example**: Frances Beal, interview by Loretta Ross, video recording, March 18, 2005, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, tape 2.

Transcript

Bibliography: Beal, Frances. Interview by Loretta Ross, Transcript of video recording, March 18, 2005. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote example:** Frances Beal, interview by Loretta Ross, transcript of video recording, March 18, 2005, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, 23.

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Transcript of interview conducted March 18, 2005, with:

FRANCES BEAL
Oakland, California

by: LORETTA ROSS

ROSS: Hello. My name is Loretta Ross. Today is March 18, 2005. I'm doing an oral history interview with Fran Beal in Oakland, California. Thank you, Fran, for agreeing to this interview.

BEAL: Thank you.

ROSS: This is part of the Voices of Feminism Project for Smith College, the Sophia Smith Collection. And it is an honor that you agreed to do this interview as a last-minute gift to our collection, Fran. First I want to start with questions about your early years. Tell me when you were born and a little bit about your parents.

BEAL: OK. I was born in a relatively small city, upstate New York, called Binghamton, New York. In school they used to tell us, Bing bought a ham and it weighed a ton: that's how to spell Binghamton. So that's how they taught us, you know, to spell Binghamton. In any case, my father was African American. Also he had quite a mixed background. There was some white background, some Native Indian, Native American background.

My mother was the daughter of immigrants — Jewish family, although they were not religious, the family, nor [was] my mother. In any case, they — my father and my mother — met because my father had been a wonderful baseball player and then he had gotten an offer to go to Cuba and come back and say he was a Cuban, so that he could play baseball. He was also offered a four-year scholarship to Syracuse University. Well, the story that always went around our family was, he said, "No, if you can't take me as an American Negro, then forget it." And of course we were very proud of that.

But, you know, my mother died just this past year, about a year ago, and shortly before she did die, I was relating this story to my own grandchild. And she said, "You know that's not the real story." (laughs). I said, "Well, what's the real story?" She said, "Well, you didn't know your grandmother, but she was a very rigid woman. And she ran that family like no one else ever could. Her children had to listen to her. And she said to your father, 'Go play baseball when you can get a college education? No. Never, never, never.' And so he went off to get it."

Now unfortunately, in the town of Binghamton blacks, or Negroes as they were called at the time, had very limited access to the types of jobs that could support a family. And my father, even though he had a college education, he was not able to get a job commensurate with that education. He majored — I understand he was a civil engineer. That was his field. So when he got out of college, his brother, who had never even finished high school, got him a job driving a truck. And my father essentially was a truck driver for the rest of his life.

ROSS: Would you continue telling us the story about your parents?

BEAL: OK. So my father's name was Ernest Archer Yates. And our family on that side of the family, as I mentioned before, [was] part Negro, part Native American. As a matter of fact, when my father was going to Syracuse University, a lot of things were segregated up there, and there were very few places where my father could go on the weekends, so he used to tell us stories about hanging out with his cousins on the Mohawk reservation and playing lacrosse to quote "keep in shape." Although how much out of shape he was going to get — he was just not playing on the weekend, I don't know. But in any case, I had told you the story about how his mother had interfered and made him go to college and not to go off and play baseball.

5:00

But what was interesting, I thought, about that story as it kind of came down, was that even though we believed this kind of great picture of our father standing up to racism and doing that — in my heart, after my mother told me this story, I really believed that that's exactly what happened, and that it was (laughs) his mother, because my father was a 17-year-old guy, a very good baseball player. He used to change his religion every week or every season to play on the different baseball teams around Binghamton, New York. So, in any case, like I said, he ended up as a truck driver, and that's how he came to meet my mother.

My mother's family had emigrated from Russia. And it was part of the days where there were pogroms and things like that going on there. And my grandfather was a radical. Oh, I don't know if he was a Bolshevik or a Menshevik, but he was in some kind of, you know, radical, we-need-to-get-rid-of-the-Czar movement, type of thing. And he used to work in a print shop, and he got arrested because he was stealing paper from the print shop for this underground newspaper. So I thought — in my later years when I sort of really began to be a journalist, I thought, Oh, well, there is that seed in my background. And as a matter of fact, he had to get out of Russia because the Czar's police were looking for him and coming after him.

So he and my grandmother left and went to Denmark, because at that time — which was in what, like, 1904, something like that — and that was the time when Denmark sort of had its arms open for, you know, Jewish immigrants to come there. And it was from there — my mother had an older brother and a sister who were born in Denmark. And then my grandmother had a brother, or a sister, who lived in Binghamton. And so they were able to come over because of that relationship. But my grandmother — her name is Sarah Berman, and my grandfather's name was Isaac Berman — was pregnant with my mother on the boat. And then my mother was born in New Haven, so she was the first child born in the United States, the first one who had automatic citizenship.

ROSS: And your mother's name was?

BEAL: Charlotte Berman. And she had eight brothers and sisters, and she was like the third oldest of the eight brothers and sisters. And then they went to Binghamton and — interesting story I heard is that my grandfather was working then for Sarah's brother in some kind of a shop that he had. And at a certain point, maybe it was a year later, Isaac just said to him, "I'm not working for you any more, because I've worked enough to more than pay for the passage, and you're exploiting me." And therefore he sort of rounded up his wife, rounded up his children, and then moved out and went to get himself a job where he didn't have to — because essentially this happened to a lot of immigrant families, where they would come and work for the family for nothing, for room and board, essentially. And some of them, this went on for years and years and years. But my grandfather was more or less wise enough and a revolutionary to figure out he was being exploited and he wasn't going to stand for it anymore.

ROSS: So you were getting ready to tell us how your mother and father met. 9:41

BEAL: Right. So my grandfather became an egg man. He bought a little cart and he went around, and he would be selling eggs and all the kids would, like, help with the chickens and things like that. So then from the eggs he went into buying another truck, and another truck. So he ended up going into a trucking business. And another interesting aspect, I think, of the immigrant life is, my mother's older sister and she herself worked in the office of this trucking company, for nothing. If my mother wanted a coat, she would have to go to her father and ask for money. She would have to ask for money for car fare, she would have to ask for money. She didn't even get a small allowance. Everything she had to kind of, you know, beg for. The boys who also went into the business, the older the boys in the family, they on the other hand were given money, you know, for their labor. So right from that story itself, it, it just didn't seem right to me, and I began to see the different treatment of men and women in that immigrant type of situation.

So that's how my parents met, actually, because my mother was working in the office of Berman's Motor Express. My father was working for Canny's. I remember the name of that. And they actually did a lot of shipping between Binghamton and New York City, whereas Berman's used to be between Boston and Binghamton, or the triple cities, Binghamton, Endicott, and Johnson City, three cities that abutted one up against the other. And one day Ernie came into the office and started making a pass at Charlotte. And then he said — it was just about time for her to go home, so she left the office, she was on her way to the bus, and here comes this guy whistling out the window, "Hey, babe," you know (laughs). So that's how they met.

ROSS: Was there resistance from either family, them getting together and getting married?

BEAL: Well, they got married and then presented the family with the facts. And I think that happened basically because they knew. Now my father was 12 years older than my mom, so when my older brother was born, she was 24 and I think he was 36, you know. So there was, like, a fairly big difference between their ages. And my brother was one of those seven-month babies, right? (laughs). And I'll tell you a funny story about that at another point, because I found the birth certificate and the marriage certificate when I was a teenager. And I stood there (gasp) [and said] "Mommy, what were you doing?" My mother was so embarrassed. The next time I saw the marriage [certificate], she had tried to (laughs) wipe it out and make herself a moral woman again. And we were giggling and laughing about that. So anyway, I thought that was kind of funny. But you know, it wasn't a funny thing, because they had to go all the way to Maryland to get married.

ROSS: What year was this that they got married?

BEAL: I think it was in 1936, just about 1936, because my brother was born in 1937. So it was either — it was early in 1937. That's when they got married. And then my brother, as I said, my brother was born in November 1937. And then I came along in January of 1940. And I had two other brothers, approximately three years apart: Donald, who was born in 1943; and my brother Robert, who's just six years younger than I am, was born in 1946.

ROSS: And so your date of birth is?

BEAL: January 13, 1940. And born in Binghamton General Hospital.

ROSS: OK. Well, you were going to talk about the resistance of the family, and you said, once they got married, they had no choice. Are you sure that was all there was to this story?

BEAL: Well, there was –

ROSS: How did your father get accepted by his Jewish in-laws? 15:00

BEAL: Well, because my grandfather had this — he was a more visionary person than most — he wasn't just a white person, he was someone who had a political background and came here to get away from pogroms and anti-Semitism in Russia, and he espoused a revolutionary outlook while he was there. When he came here, you know, he tried to become a businessman. He did become a businessman. But some of the progressive ideas that pertain to being a revolutionary still stuck with him. So there was some embarrassment, and some of the family then moved to Boston, you know, the homestead had moved from Binghamton to Boston, but my grandfather didn't say we're going to sit Shiva and that she was dead or anything like that. But they were already assimilating American traditions and values, and so there was a little feeling of discomfort about it.

So it's not like other Jewish families where they're so religious. My grandfather and grandmother didn't like it all that much, but so what, you know. And think about the kids, what's going to happen with the kids. But it wasn't that kind of virulent anti-black type of thing, and I think that's basically because my grandparents had a revolutionary background. Many of my mother's, including my mother, generation were Communists, you know, they joined the Communist Party in the — so my mother got married in 1937, so this was in a time when there was a lot of ferment in this country around the emergence of fascism that was going on abroad. And many of my mother's brothers and sisters were very left leaning. Some of them, I think, were members of the Communist Youth group, and were going to college and things like that, and were involved in kind of radical movements, so they were very open also, on one level.

But as my brother said, you always felt — my brother said this, that he felt [it], I didn't feel it so much, but I want to give some legitimacy to his feelings about it — that while everyone seemed to be, like, open and friendly, there was this feeling about, you were different, type of a thing. It's not something that a child can exactly point their finger at, but they knew that they were different from the rest of the family. I mean, part of that difference was also economic, because my father was, you know, a truck driver. And that's what he earned. Whereas my mother's family, the older ones were working in the trucking company, you know, they were officers of the company. And they brought home, you know, a substantial amount of money, and lived at a better standard of living than we had. And on my father's side, they were extremely poor, my father's side of the family. On my dad's side of the family there was Gertrude Yates [Williams], she was the oldest. Then came Edward Yates, my Uncle Ed. Then came my father, Ernest Yates, and then Deena Yates, my father's younger sister. 18:20

And they lived — there again is an interesting story. My grandmother's mother was part Indian, and when the white persons came to the Susquehanna Valley — that's where the Susquehanna River and the Chenango River come together — and obviously, you know, it's just like in Europe and in the United States: cities grow up on rivers, and the Indians knew that, too, because that's what they used as their mode of transportation. So the whites essentially pushed the native population out up into the hills. And they gave like a plot of land to the Indians, right? Now what's interesting culturally here is that the Mohawk, or Iroquois Indian Confederacy, was matrilineal, so that meant that property and family was passed through the woman, the female, and not through the man. And that was a very, very powerful cultural tradition, that even though the whites, when they gave out the property, they gave it to my grandmother's brother, because he was the male. He turned around and gave it to Lillian, my grandmother, because that's how you do things, in terms of being an Indian.

And that thing was so powerful, that that's exactly what happened all down through when we sold the property. When my grandmother died, she died intestate, meaning no will. Therefore, all four of her children and these — there were about 16 people, really, that could have some say in this lot with a house, really more like a cabin, on it. And so they all got together. They decided they should give all of this property to Gert, so again, [in] the second generation, it's going to a female. And then my cousin Gertie, who's the oldest female, she gets the property. And when she gives it up — even though she has a son and two daughters, her son is the oldest and two daughters — she turns that property over to my female cousin, Leslie Ellen Green. So I just thought that it's a very powerful holding on to certain customs of how you do things. 22:13 And I've always been sort of very interested then in the Iroquois Confederacy and the Mohawks, because the status of women there was extremely high. And if someone got married, the man would join the woman's clan, not she the other way around. So anyway, that's a little [story] on my father's side.

A more funny story is that, we used to go up and stay with my Aunt Gert on the hill, and down the street there was another family and they [had] about four kids. And my Aunt always said to us, "You should not play with them because they are bad people and their mother is immoral." Turns out — we didn't know anything else like this, but when my Aunt Deena died, one of those kids came to the funeral and was talking to my mother. It turns out these are cousins of ours, that our Uncle Frederick had all these children with this Indian woman, but they never got married. So they were considered, you know –

ROSS: Out of wedlock.

BEAL: – shameful. Yes. It was shameful. Now I have to say, my family on my father's side was very much impacted by the racial notion of the time, so they liked it that my father married my mother, because she was white. That was, you know, really acceptable. When my cousin Gertie — Trudie, they call her now — started to date the man who eventually became her husband, he was deemed too dark for the family. And I think my father and my Uncle Ed had to intervene and say, Listen, I'm not going to be able to ever speak to you again unless you stop this nonsense. But then the two of them, also — my Uncle Ed didn't marry a white woman, but a woman who was very light skinned, and she had quote "good hair," you know, flowing hair. And so there was a lot of racial confusion in that family, from which, you know, my dad came. So I think because my dad was educated, it didn't come across as the same thing, but still, the objective reality is, is that he chose to marry a white woman, you know? And I could see there was a lot of racial problems with my family on that side.

ROSS: Did your parents ever go together down to the South as a couple? Or – 25:19

BEAL: No, never, never. They went to, I think it was Baltimore, because Maryland had more lenient marriage laws, and then came back. But one of the things, my family was big storytellers on that side. Also a little bit on the other side, but very much on the black side. And my Uncle Ed in particular used to tell us these stories, and he told us a story about this Indian woman coming with a tomahawk, banging on the door, looking for Uncle Fred (laughs), because he wasn't acting right or something like that. So I sort of liked that.

But just to give you an idea of how this racial thing also worked, there's many women who — I mean, I had gotten married and I had a couple kids, and like many, I didn't know what I could do with the kids in the summertime. So I had my Aunt Gert take them for three weeks to, you know, partly look after the kids. And this was during the '60s, right? And I was already heavily into an Afro and not putting a curling iron [in my hair]. And my kids had never even seen one. So I was at work and they were staying with their Aunt Gert, and I get this frantic phone call from my Aunt Gert, "Please, you have to speak to Anne. She's out in the street and she says she's going to run away and she's going to New York City, and I can't get her to come back."

So I had my Aunt Gert go into the back of the cabin, you know, the other room that was like a two-down, two-up cabin, type of thing. Anne came in and she started crying. She was five. And Lisa was four. They had never seen a curling iron in their life. And in this house, the heat, there was this big, big cast-iron stove that covered one whole length of the kitchen. And in it you had the wood-burning and coal-burning stove. So Gert had started the fire and put [in] these coal-burning things, and flames are leaping up when she takes the burner off. She sticks the comb in there. Anne's watching all of this, getting more horrified by the minute. And so then she takes it out, wipes it on the dish towel, right? And she says to Anne, "Come here." So Anne says, "What are you going to do with that?" She said, "I'm going to straighten your hair. You look like the wild woman from Borneo." And I was laughing, because that's what my same Aunt Gert used to call me when my hair would get it: "You look like the wild woman from Borneo." (laughs). Anne grabs her sister's hand, runs out to the sidewalk, and bursts into tears. And she told me later, "I didn't know which way to go!" (laughs). So this is, you know, three hundred miles [away], so of course, I'm in New York City, I have to jump into my car, drive madly three and a half hours up to Binghamton to kind of try to save the situation.

ROSS: This is such a precious story. I'm so glad we are capturing it. Now obviously as a child who is biracial — there's a lot of talk today about biracial children and their search for identity, and not wanting to be either defined as black, or Asian, or black or white, or whichever the admixture is. Somehow it's always black and something else. Did that search for identity become part of your identity formation as you were growing up? 29:04

BEAL: In a sense it was, but we were very much identified as black, even though, as you can see, from a purely scientific point of view, we're not black at all [Beal looks white]. However, my mother was very conscious of raising us to be proud of our background. And what that meant to her, essentially, was the African American part of the background. So, for example, we had no religious training insofar as being Jews was concerned, only in terms of stories about resisting oppression and so on, but insofar as religious ritual or rites or beliefs, none, not at all. I've never been, to this day, in a temple or a synagogue in my entire life.

ROSS: Not even for non-worship activities?

BEAL: No. I once went, in college, went with a friend of mine to Hillel, which is sort of like the — I was just interested, kind of curious about what they do or did there, you know, type of thing.

ROSS: But you never had any curiosity about claiming your Jewish identity? 31:00

BEAL: No, none. (laughs).

ROSS: That's interesting.

BEAL: Well, what's interesting about it is — I'm trying to make a distinction here between religious Jews and lay Jews — my family were lay Jews, they were not religious Jews. So to the extent that Jews were treated as a national minority, you know, in the Soviet Union, were treated as an oppressed grouping, they very much identified with that. What's interesting about that is that there's been so much of a takeover of the propaganda machines of the Zionists from Israel, that you don't even know the real background history. So for example, I have an uncle who — all of my uncles and aunts were essentially young people in their 20s when World War II broke out. And they all went into the service and they were very much in favor of fighting anti-Semitism through serving in the United States Army. I had one who was a merchant marine, one who was a navy person, but all of them, my mother's whole family.

On my father's side, my father was — because he had children already and was older, he was in his late 30s — he was exempt from the draft. My Uncle Ed, on the other hand, on that side, was drafted into the army. He became a paratrooper, a black paratrooper, and they were sent to the Eastern front, they were sent to Okinawa to fight against the Japanese. Because there was a lot of debate about whether you should put guns in black men's hands and have them shoot white people, even if those white people were Nazis.

There was a lot of Southern concern about arming of blacks. So in our case, Ed was sent to the East. And then you hear these stories that come down. My Uncle Ed was a fabulous storyteller, and he used to tell this story about how, when they were there in the woods, or the jungle, they had built a very nice recreation center for the whites, and they hadn't built anything for the blacks. So they very nicely did all the protocol that they were supposed to and went to the officers and said, Since we don't have anything, we should be able to use the other one. See, because remember, half of them were from the North, so they already didn't have the same sense of segregation that some of the other blacks in the country had. And he asked them very nicely to — he was part of the team essentially that goes — and they said no. He says, "Well then, will you give us material so we could build our own recreation center?" And they said no, they can't do that. So they went away from that, and then at this point in the story, my Uncle Ed would start laughing, and he said, "You know what happened? About two nights later, that recreation center for the whites just went up in flames. All by itself! And let me tell you something. God don't like ugly!" (laughs). And he would just laugh and laugh and laugh. "God don't like ugly." We used to laugh just because he was laughing. But you know, I had to be an adult before I understood he was saying, you know, we have our ways of fighting against racism, too. It's putting a match to the all-white recreation center.

ROSS: Oh, I love that story.

BEAL: But he used to laugh and laugh and laugh. And I tell you, we were giggling, too, just because Uncle Ed looked so funny laughing. Not understanding the story. Maybe God don't like ugly. OK, yeah, God don't like ugly. (laughter). I just say that because it's a way of passing down to you what comes in your family, that you don't even realize until you're older about what was being passed to you in a way you could understand it.

ROSS: Well, I'm here to tell you, Fran, that in case I ever doubted that you had Native blood in you, the way you tell a story affirms it (laughter), because you are a natural-born storyteller, and that is a cultural heritage there. 35:54

BEAL: Yeah, it sure is.

ROSS: Very much so.

BEAL: Let me just say that on that side, on the religious side, it was really kind of left up to us. My mother was kind of blasé about it. Every now and then, my father would get up on Sunday after his nap — he used to take a nap in the afternoon on every Sunday. And he'd be coming downstairs yelling and looking around, "Why are you making all this noise on Sunday? How come people's not going to church? You kids are going to go to hell." You know, they're growing up like heathens.

Does he go to church? Absolutely not. But, you know, we're going to grow up as heathens. I, on the other hand, was in a very religious stage at that particular time. And I really believed every drop of dogma that was kind of being put out. And I sat there in horror, saying, "Daddy, you're going to go to hell because you're swearing." Because that's what they tell us: if you swear, you're going to go to hell, right? So he said, "Well, that's where I want to go, that's where all my friends are going!" (laughs). So on the one hand he's yelling about, we're heathens, and on the other hand, he's making jokes about that's where he wants to go too, because that's where his friends are going to be.

So I think I was the one who decided I was interested in being a Christian. And you know, those were the days when you had religious training in school, and I was really good at it. I mean, I knew the answers to all the questions, and then I decided, OK, but I wasn't sure which denomination. It was almost like my father, going around changing with the baseball teams: I would go one week to one church, and one week to another church, and one week to another church, trying to figure out, you know, which one I want. My mother finally hooked me up with the black church in town, the AME Zion. She said, "If you want to go to church, you might as well go to the black church." So I sang in the choir, the junior choir, and everyone around me used to be making jokes that I used to sing a little bit off key, but loudly (laughs). I loved it, you know. And I loved the black church. I mean, in many ways, they taught resistance and things. You know, they would have these big easels, like we use, and they would have the felt-backed people with the shepherds or the person telling the stories about whatever they were telling about. And I was just completely fascinated. I loved, I loved it. 37:45

Unfortunately, when my dad died of cancer in 1954 I was 14 years old. And I remember my brother came to get me and I was at, like, a girl's club thing, and he drove me home. And I was crying, crying, crying, and I went in, and there was all my mother's relatives around and I ran in the back, in the closet. And there I was sort of talking with God, you know. And I'm saying, "How could you do this?" You know, Mr. Sikita — he's some eastern European guy that came over after the war, all of whom were probably pro-fascist, and he was racist to the core — and I said to God, "This is a very serious thing. Why did you take my father? He's such a good person. Mr. Sikita is so bad. How could you do this?"

And I had this epiphany. Because to me, the god that I loved and, you know, admired and was talking to wouldn't have done that. So I said, "Oh, so therefore he doesn't exist." And that was — 14 years old. Six months before, we had lost our dog of ten years. He had been ten years old, and he got hit by a car, chasing a car, you know. And my grandfather had died a few years — it was [all in] the three-year period. And then my dad died. And it was, like, too much, you know, for me to take at the time. But like I said, that's when I lost my religiosity. And I don't think I ever went back to church after that, because I felt I had been lied to. And in the service, my older brother and I went, but not my younger brothers. My mother didn't want them to go to the service. And there was a minister and he was saying, "We don't know why Ernie was taken so young — you know, he was only 50 years old — but He must have his plan." And I jump up and start screaming at him, "No! No plan, give him back!" You know? (laughs).

ROSS: Well at 14, your father's passing wasn't the only thing significant that happened when you were 14. There was a major incident in the deep South that happened –

BEAL: That's right.

ROSS: – that also affected you. Why don't you tell us about that.

BEAL: Yeah, that was actually after — I realized that happened after we moved to New York [City]. Because after my dad died, my mother wanted to move us to New York, because it was extremely racist, anti-Semitic, and backwards there [in Binghamton]. My mother had been sort of named in the local newspaper for having "secret meetings." Later I asked her what kind of meetings. They were studying Marxism Leninism (laughs), so, you know, a study group type of a thing. But those kinds of things in a town where they considered Democrats pinkos, you know, at the height of the McCarthy period, was pretty horrible. So my mom also wanted to move where there would be more blacks in the city and more acceptance for an interracial family. I'll tell you, the day I found out that Jesus was a Jew and went back — because they used to say, Christ killer, you know, all those things. My Uncle

Sammy told me when I was a kid — I guess I must have been six or seven years old when they were kind of coming back from the army — that when he went into the army and went through basic training, some of the southern boys asked him to pull his pants down so they could see his tail, because they had learned that Jews have horns and a tail. And they actually believed that, you know. It's like, amazing, the level of ignorance that existed in this country. So –

ROSS: So you moved to New York. 43:45

BEAL: Yep.

ROSS: And then there was all kinds of racial incidents happening in the deep South.

BEAL: Yeah.

ROSS: How did they affect you?

BEAL: Well, one thing that really impacted me tremendously was the murder of Emmett Till. I thought it was in '54, but it's not. It's in '55, because we didn't move to the city, New York City, until I was 15, and that would be 1955. Because I remember I was on the lawn, in the front yard, and thinking about this young boy. I can see it. My mother had this car — I can see the whole picture: me in the front yard, leaning on the car, thinking about Emmett Till. Because he was exactly the same age as I was. And it was a, I don't know, some sort of an awakening of some — that I was so impacted, like, that could happen to me. Because if you recall, Emmett Till was murdered in Mississippi, but he came from Chicago, I believe it was Chicago he came from. So I identified a lot with him. And I know, later on, I spoke to a number of people [and] they also said the same thing, people that were like 15, 16, even 14 years old. Very much had an impact on us and our consciousness. So –

ROSS: He was 14 when he was killed.

BEAL: That's right, 14 or 15, I'm not exactly sure. I know it was 1955 that he was killed. I remember thinking that he was exactly my same age and everything, you know, so it had an enormous impact, like I said, thinking about it. And also, it created in you a feeling that something needed to be done about this.

The other thing I think that impacted my life, at least, was, like the story about my Uncle Ed going off to fight the Japanese, going off to fight fascism and evil things and deeds and others in Europe, on the European front, fighting Nazis. I had two aunts. My uncle who was in the merchant marines married a Hungarian Jewish woman who had survived Auschwitz. And they were kind of left-leaning people. And my Uncle Arnold also married a woman who lived out the war disguised as a Polish girl. And there was some horror stories, talking about how she was 14 or 15, and her sister was two years older. They had to have her appendix taken out, and they just had to get up off of the couch and get out right then. And how they used to work in the kitchen for the Nazi occupiers of Poland, and how they used to give them beef steaks to give to the dogs to eat, you know, whereas they were literally starving to death. So then, they also told how they would sneak the meat and give the dogs the garbage, and they would eat the meat whenever they could. But they knew that they could be killed if they were found. 48:00

In any case, they eventually found [their way] from Poland all the way across Europe to Italy, because apparently Italy, at that time, at least on the Jewish question, was not cooperating with the Nazis. I mean, they were Fascists and all that, but they were different on this question. And she and her sister essentially survived the war by living as Polish refugees, you know. That's how they survived.

What was interesting was to hear them all talking sometimes about the politics of it. I was quite fascinated by it. It was kind of scary, too. There was one discussion I heard, it had to do with the Zionists. And my uncle was yelling about how he felt that they were traitors. I didn't know what a Zionist was at that time, you know. A Zionist was [someone] who thought that you would solve the Jewish problem by building a Jewish state in Africa — on somebody else's land, no less. I remember him saying that, you know. And they used to have big fights in Europe that went on, around what's the best way to deal with rise in anti-Semitism that was happening, not only in Germany, but throughout Europe. And there were several voices that said, We need to fight anti-Semitism wherever we find it. And the Zionists used to say, There'll always be anti-Semitism. What you need to do is move to Palestine so that we can have our own state. Then there won't be prejudice there. So you can see there's a political clash between those things. But if you look at the TV today, [who] talks about the European situation? They never talk about these different opinions that existed in the Jewish community about how to deal with anti-Semitism. Zionism was not only one of many solutions, it was a minor voice. It didn't, you know — but it took the Holocaust for it to become a major voice in terms of dealing with anti-Semitism. So, anyway.

ROSS: Well, not only the Holocaust, but the anti-Semitism in the rest of Europe before the Holocaust, that really refused to welcome the presence of Jews in other parts of Europe, as well as the United States. 50:35

BEAL: And it was quite dramatic. I went to France after my second year of college, and that was in 1960. And there were many, now that I think about it, 1960 — at the time I didn't think about it the way — that was only 15 years after the end of World War II. France, Paris, the city I was living in, had been occupied by Germans, you know, just 15 years before. But you could see a lot of the suffering in a lot ways that was not visible in the United States. So they have this national lottery. And then, the people who sold them were often without an arm, without a leg, so they were war veterans who had been disabled in the war. You used to see a lot of people like that in the streets, you know, walk with prostheses and things like that.

And I met someone. I was, at that time, 19 years old when I went. He was about 23 or 4. And he told me that he had been — his father was a big person in the Resistance in the southern part of France, and that he was a messenger boy. He used to ride his bicycle and — so it really brought the history kind of home. And I also met another girl who was going to the law school in Paris, and her family was Jewish. And she told about how they had this little property in the south of France. Not a big thing, it was more like a summer cabin. It had — I can never remember — it had running water and no electricity, or electricity and no running water, I can't remember which one. But they had turned it over to a neighbor, you know. And they were lucky, because this was a very honorable person, because after the war, they gave the property back to them. But there were many Jews who tried to turn their property over to people and people just opportunistically grabbed it.

The other thing that was really surprising was when I went there — because here I am, 19 years old — was the high level of participation of the Communists in the political life of France. Because the first day I got there, you looked up and you saw all of these posters, seven or eight different people running, you know, parties running. And in our country, we always sneered at that, but in fact, people with 10 or 20 percent of the vote, all of them could elect representatives there, so it was much more democratic, actually, than what we had here. But it was shocking to a 19-year-old.

ROSS: But I want to back up for just a little bit as we're getting to the conclusion of this first tape and talk to you about your educational experiences. What was it like going to school for you? How did a woman from New York, say, decide to go to the Sorbonne — this is not an everyday thing.

BEAL: What happened with me is — first of all, Binghamton is a smallish town, right, and very backwards. And we actually lived in Johnson City, which is the next town over. Johnson City was a big hub of the shoe industry at that time. All across that part of the southern tier of New York, on through Vermont and over through Massachusetts, were like, the shoe industry in this country. And the whole town of Johnson City — except for Dad — was like people who worked for the shoe factory. My dad was the only person on our block who didn't work for the Endicott Johnson Shoe Company. And he drove a truck. There was one other person in the town [who didn't work for the shoe company], who worked for IBM — everybody else worked at E.J.

So this is what a company town, you know, looks like. There's a huge factory whistle that goes off at six o'clock in the morning, wakes the whole town up. And at four o'clock it goes off. And then the mothers would tell their kids that that was the signal that they had to come home. So the whole town ran on the rhythm of the factory schedule. And they were the big, important people in the town, you know, the Johnson family.

So it was hard coming up in that end because they were racist. My brothers were in fights all the time because, you know, they used, used the N word. And here there was a little tension between my mother and father, because my father's position was, You beat them up so bad that they can't even get up, they'll think twice next time about hitting you, you know. Of course, this is a northern Negro's response (laughs), you know. And my mother was more a negotiating type. I remember an incident where a young boy, a press boy, came to the house to collect the money for the newspaper, and he was wearing a Confederate hat. And my mother engages him in this whole discussion about why — you know, this poor 12-year-old kid — about why wearing the Confederate hat is not a good thing. 57:00

But then, you know, it's a small town. So when my mother was demonstrating outside *Birth of a Nation*, I was ashamed. I was saying, Why can't she be normal, just like other people, you know, why do you have to do this to us — that kind of a thing. And it was extremely anti-Semitic. That's the reason why I, to this day, I stand up for — whether it's racist thing, whether it's a anti-Semitic thing, I'm too close to the Holocaust, in that sense, not to understand. And as a child, to have suffered, you know, like I said, the arrows of pain about, you know, You killed Christ. I mean, those people were angry about this thing. And then I said to you, when I found out that Christ was a Jew when I came back, I said, Christ is [a Jew] — they were horrified. Said, He was not. I said, “He is, too!”

So there were, like, three levels there. There was the level of race, there was the level of religion, even though we weren't religious, and there was the level of the political temper of the place where we lived, which was extremely reactionary. It was interesting because, you know, different people respond in different ways. My own response was try to be good at everything so that people would like me, you know, to try to deal with the rejection by becoming a shiny new nickel, type of thing. So I was good in school, and in sports, and music. And whatever I did, I tried to be really good at. But I never realized even that I was a good student because in the seventh grade we had a teacher — I'll never forget her, Mrs. Loftus — who said she was going to pick two people to play this game, all right? And she said, OK, she would pick the two who had the highest scores, one female and one male. And I remember, Oh, no, you know, like that. And then when she picked me, I was so surprised. I had no idea. So when I took that home, that story, to my mother, she was really angry. She said, What do they do at that school to make someone who has always done well in school not even conscious of the fact that she's an accomplished, you know, person. So that's –

ROSS: That was part of the idea of moving her family to New York so that –

BEAL: That's right.

1:00:00

ROSS: – she could change the conditions under which you received an education.

BEAL: Right. Right.

ROSS: So how was it being in New York?

BEAL: It was wild, man. I went from, you know, a school of one thousand to a school of five thousand. Triple sessions, you know? All these really hip, cool New Yorkers, and I was a country bumpkin, you know? (laughs). It's like, you talk funny and everything, you know. I did OK in school, in terms of the classes, but I in many ways was overwhelmed, particularly the first couple of years. Until I'd found the beatniks, you know, and then I would be running down to Greenwich Village all the time. I said that was my niche, to be a little beatnik, you know. Wearing my little leather sandals and my leather, you know. The way people dressed in the school is very different. You had your collegiates, who dressed in a certain way with their saddle shoes and their turned-down collars and the two-piece sweater sets, like that. You had the beatniks, who were like beatniks, you know, it's like the hippies of the '60s, but this was happening in –

ROSS: The '50s.

BEAL: – in the '50s, in the latter part, yeah. I graduate in '58, so it was beginning a little bit, particularly in Greenwich Village. And then we sort of — there was a little grouping of us, and we all kind of slouched around being beatniks, you know. Black stockings and sandals. That was part of the dress. Then there were the kids that were like the Irish Americans, the Catholic kids from Irish background, you know. And they would wear their hair with those bobby pins there, the black shoes with no heel, you know what I'm saying? You just slide them on and –

ROSS: Mules.

BEAL: Yes. Like those. But they, they didn't necessarily have heels, you know. And they would wear this little scarf tied around their neck. They looked like, to me, very slutty, you know? (laughs).

ROSS: OK. We're going to take a break right now.

BEAL: Yes. Good.

END DVD 1

DVD 2

ROSS: So how was going to school in New York? You had just started telling us about the different cultures.

BEAL: It was a shock. It really was a cultural shock for me, because I came from a place where people talked slowly, walked slowly, reacted slowly, to a place where people were like, bopping around and big city, you know. People were so sophisticated, I really did feel like a country bumpkin. I went to Andrew Jackson High School, so I went in there in ’55. It was my first year. And the thing that saved me — because this was a school of five thousand students and we were on triple sessions. You know, the early session, I think it began at like 7 o’clock or 7:30. Then another one started an hour later, and another one, you know, an hour later. And then some people started getting out at 3:00, 4:00, and 5:00.

And at the time I went there, the school was about 25 percent black, which was a big difference for me, just the racial mix, you know, because where I was going to school, there were no other blacks. We were the only ones in Johnson City, in that place. So this was a big, big change, and there were people that were moving in from the South. On the block that we moved in, there was a lady who had a daughter just about my age. Her name was Mildred. And a cousin had come to town. So I went over there and I wanted to go down — let’s go shopping, you know. It wasn’t a mall, but it was like, you know, a shopping center, where you could do that. And Verna Mae Johnson, her name was. You want to go shopping? You know what she said? “That don’t make me no never mind.” (laughs) I said, “Oh my god.” I said, “What did you say?” “That don’t make me no never mind.” Which I learned meant, “Yeah, sure, why not?” (laughs) But that was like a whole — she came from Alabama, so she was the first person I had ever met from the Deep South, you know, really. And that was interesting, though.

Where we moved in was St. Albans, and the reason my mother moved there is because it was an integrated neighborhood. But really the section of Queens, New York, where we moved into was a place that was in the process of change. So there were a number of people that my mother had gotten contacts through her political work, and a number of them had children that needed babysitters, so I ended up getting a whole slew of babysitting jobs when I was 15 and 16 years old.

And the first time I went to one of the women’s house, it said, We love our community. We love our neighbors. This house is not for sale. So I asked her what was going on there. So apparently they had been targeted, the community had been targeted, by a lot of real estate people to scare them into kind of moving out — whites — moving out because blacks were moving in. And that had actually happened in my mother’s case in the house.

My father died of cancer, and then finally six months later we moved to New York City, into Queens. But it was into a house because my mother thought that with us kids coming from a town where there were big back yards and big houses — and you know, when we would get too noisy she would just put us in the back yard to run around — that we would be too much to move into an apartment. She just could not imagine living in an apartment. So we moved into St. Albans, a three-bedroom house and then she re-did the upstairs for me, so that I could have a bedroom up there. But slowly but surely, white people were moving out. The thing about one of her friends, though, which turns out to be — her name was Gerda Lerner, and Gerda Lerner, then about 20 years later, wrote the book *Black Women in White America*. So I used to baby-sit for her, when I was a kid. And in that same grouping of people lived the Guiniers, you know. They were an interracial couple that lived in St. Albans.

ROSS: The parents of Lani Guinier?

BEAL: And I baby sit for Lani Guinier and Sari Guinier, and their little baby sister whose name I think was — was it Marie? Something like that. Anyway. And then there was another doctor and his wife, an interracial couple, too, and they had kids. I guess a lot of them had moved to St. Albans for the same purpose. They felt it [was an] integrated neighborhood. So that neighborhood, sure, over the years, though, got torn up quite a bit. So that it is today a pretty much all-black neighborhood, and pretty much has been really run down, you know, the city not picking up the garbage, the city not doing the kind of things to maintain a neighborhood at the level that it needs to be kept up.

But like I said, it was interesting for us and for me in particular, because I was now in a school where 25 percent of the school were blacks, so that was a substantial number. But the school was extremely segregated nonetheless, like in the cafeteria where we went, all the blacks would sit in one place. And then all the Jews would sit in another place, the Italians, the Irish, you know, so it was extremely segregated. And those were also the times when they were having gang problems in Brooklyn and Manhattan — but that hadn't really reached where we lived at that time. But I was scared just hearing about this. Like I said, I was reacting from a very — I'm a small-town girl. What are they talking about here, you know?

I did fairly well in school and soon got into some of the honor classes and that created a certain stability for me, at the academic level. But probably the most important thing that happened to me is, when I had been in grade school, they would teach us musical instruments. So they asked me what instrument I was interested in, and I said the trombone, because there's this boy in the class who was taking the trombone and I thought it was sort of an interesting thing, so that by the time I got to high school I could play the trombone. So I went into the band and into the orchestra, and then this was a subset, you know what I mean? So you knew the people in the orchestra and in the band. My first boyfriend came out of the Andrew Jackson's High School Band.

ROSS: Well, that sounds like one of the more interesting upbringings. 8:42

BEAL: Then, you know, as we began to hear things about what was going on in the South, there were certain incidents at the school that happened, and they created a human rights coalition, or group, and that's what –

ROSS: Using the name, Human Rights?

BEAL: Something like that. The Human Rights Commission: that was the name of it. And that's where I met, uh, what's-his-name? I want to call him — his last name was Donaldson. Not Isaac, he had one of those West Indian names.

ROSS: Ivan?

BEAL: Ivan. Ivanhoe Donaldson.

ROSS: Ivanhoe Donaldson –

BEAL: Yes.

ROSS: – who ended up working for Marion Barry. He was very slick.

BEAL: That's right, exactly. Anyway, he later joined SNCC, and that's where we hooked up again, you know, in Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. But we were in high school together. And he was, I think he was still in high school when he heard the call about what was going on and he rented this truck and he got all his clothes, put it in, and drove south with his clothes, you know. But as I said, a lot of us in my generation were very impacted by Emmett Till, and so our eyes turned south in some ways.

The other influence that was very strong, I think, was younger people, or younger-ish people, had just fought a big war for democracy, against fascism, against racism. And then, you know, the people came back and they weren't prepared to put up with what had been happening. I saw it the other night, a fictionalized vision, a movie on the Deacons for Defense and that link between people who had gone off to fight and then people who were not prepared to kind of stand for the Jim Crow laws and white supremacy, you know, you could see the impact.

ROSS: So how did you become involved in SNCC?

BEAL: Well, I think, like I said, there were two incidents. One was the Emmett Till situation, right? So that just like woke my consciousness up. And then I went off to the University of Wisconsin. And there we began hearing about things happening in the South. So we invited somebody who had been one of the people, and he came and he talked about SNCC and what was happening in the sit-in movement there. So I was completely enraptured by this story, you know, it just like, completely enraptured me, to the point where I had joined the NAACP and I was the vice president of the campus chapter.

And we had heard stories about Woolworths and that there was a boycott going on in the South because they did not hire any black workers. So we did a little thing, and we were walking around in front of the Woolworth's and they came up and they interviewed some of us. And they asked about, Well, why are you doing this here? Woolworth's here hires black — so, I mean, we were not as informed, but there was this sense that Woolworth's was a national corporation, and that they had something to say about local policies. And that therefore we were trying to show our solidarity with our brothers and sisters in the South who were, you know, picketing, doing sit-ins, and things like that.

And so I appeared on television, and I got called in by the adult chapter of the NAACP, and they said, Well, this is not the thing that we should be doing. And direct action was not, you know, part of their policy. They had a legislative and judicial approach, you know, go to the courts and change the law. But this thing about direct action, like, you know, boycotts and that — people forget that that was SCLC, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, SNCC, the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee: I mean, part of their coming into being was in reaction to what they considered kind of do-nothing policies of the NAACP and other organizations at the time.

ROSS: I've read in some histories that Walter White, who was then head of the NAACP, was seriously afraid of being called a Communist. And he actually forced the ouster of W.E.B. DuBois from the NAACP. And that seemed to have an influence on the strategic choices of the NAACP. Did you hear any of that debate going on? 14:15

BEAL: Well, I'll tell you what I know about it, because I do have some friends who were in the Young Communist organization, or socialist-leaning. I myself joined the Socialist Club at the University of Wisconsin because I was interested in some of their ideas. And my understanding was that the McCarthy period had a very devastating impact on the black struggle, because the Dixiecrats and the racists, anybody who said that they were for integration, they called Communist. And they forced a number of the organizations to sign exclusion clauses. I mean, I understand that NCNW, the National Council of Negro Women, signed such a statement saying, We do not have any Communists in our group and we do not support Communist ideology or any of the thoughts or programs or anything like that. And I know the NAACP signed it.

This was one of the differences with some of the new organizations. SNCC was actually approached to sign the loyalty oath — that's what they called it — and refused to sign this loyalty oath. And this played an important role in the period, because all social movements, progressive movements, had kind of felt curbed in their ability to articulate their thoughts because of this big so-called Communist plot. So it's logical to me, let me just put it this way, it's logical to me that Walter White himself would be concerned about that because of their relationship to the money sources and so on and so forth. So I'm not surprised. I cannot in any way personally attest to that, but there's a political logic to it in the sense that they had signed the loyalty oath. They were very concerned about being called Communists, and wanted to kind of separate themselves.

Whereas SNCC was a new organization in the same way that SCLC was a new organization, was filled with a number of ministers like Martin Luther King, who were younger, who were a little bit sick of, should I say — they were young ministers who through their religiosity, wanted to use to make social change in the country, not just spiritual training. So there was a kind of tension between those ministers — many of them Baptist ministers, you know, who had this don't-rock-the-boat type of approach — and the Martin Luther Kings of his generation.

And my understanding is that's the reason there was a split between the National Baptist Convention and the National Progressive Baptist Convention was based just precisely on that question, of what is the role of religion and churches in the face of discrimination, oppression, and exploitation? So some people said, That's the realm of lay people, but for religious people, we shouldn't touch that, you know, we're here to guide people in their spiritual lives, not in their day-to-day lives. And other ministers said, No, we're here to help try to create god's heaven on earth — to put it into religious terms. So I know that that was happening at that time, also.

But this is the thing, that many years later I realized that the civil rights movement, particularly its most activist arms, refusing to sign those loyalty oaths began a process whereby they broke the back of McCarthyism for the country as a whole, because people refused to sign those things.

ROSS: What do you mean about that, when "they broke the back of McCarthyism"? 19:38

BEAL: Well, McCarthyism was so everywhere. I mean, people lost their jobs, people were accused of being Communists and people were asked to tell on each other, what their political story [was]. I mean, there was a complete undermining of Constitutional rights — of due process and Constitutional rights of free speech and free assembly — that was going on at that particular time. And they use these loyalty oaths to keep progressive movements in line. People were scared. All you had to do was point at somebody, claim they were a Communist, and their entire life could go down the drain. So in the sense that SNCC played an important role in terms of refusing to sign the loyalty oath, and still demanding racial justice and racial freedom, it was in a sense spitting in the face of the remnants of McCarthyism that still kept the country — because in many ways the civil rights movement, the active challenge to white supremacy and Jim Crow in the South, essentially broke the back of McCarthyism in that sense of its hold on the political processes that were going on in the country. So that's what I mean by broke the back of — people were able to move to social justice concerns without going through the streak of anticommunism.

ROSS: Now, what type of activities did you do on behalf of SNCC? 21:23

BEAL: Well, I had moved to France — and for a number of years lived in Paris — in 1960. But I came home every summer, and during those summers I would be hooking up with people who eventually became SNCC people. But even in Paris, people were very much in tune with what was going on back here. So for example, in 1965 — was it '65? yeah, early in '65 — we brought Malcolm X to Paris to speak, and organized a number of students to come hear him speak, which he did. And there was an overflow crowd. So then I guess he went back to England and then he was going to come back, and we organized another meeting, in a bigger hall where more people could come and hear him, through this ad hoc group that we had pulled together of people who were concerned about race issues in the United States.

And it was at this second time that he was not allowed back into the country. And we understand now that the CIA had been active in pulling the strings behind our backs. What was interesting — two people who were in our group, a number, were actually called in by the French security forces. And they were not so much interested in any kind of contact that African Americans might be having, what they wanted to know was were there any people from Guadalupe or Martinique in their groupings who were –

ROSS: The French colonies.

BEAL: – who were being influenced by Malcolm X. That's what they — they were concerned about their own colonies, you know, having an influence. But my stay in France was an extremely enlightening one, in the sense that there were all these African students there, and they would be telling — you know, most of them had just been liberated and had their independence for one year, maybe for two years, [so] that they would be having their one-year anniversary or two-year anniversary. And then, of course, this is the time at which Fanon, Franz Fanon –

ROSS: Franz Fanon.

BEAL: – began to write. And there was people in and around a magazine in Paris called *Présence Africaine* that I was kind of hanging out with, and that's where was I was introduced to Fanon's writings. I first met Mr. Fanon in French, I like to say, before his stuff was published [in English], and that was really difficult to [wade through], because, you know, he was French-born and — I mean, he came from the Islands, but he was French-educated — and they have these *long* sentences, they can go on for a whole paragraph, you know. And he was (sighs; laughs) subject to that kind of intellectual type of expression.

ROSS: So there was a certain amount of internationalism –

BEAL: Exactly, more than what existed –

ROSS: – a pan-Africanism that was developing in your consciousness.

BEAL: Yes. It didn't exist, at least at the time I left the States in 1960, you know, because the Vietnam War had not yet come on. People's relationships to Africa had not been established. So that this is, for me — let me tell you another anecdote. The day we got to France, we heard these huge roars in the street. So we were staying in this little hotel in the Latin quarter in [Paris], and I heard this huge roar of people, like a crowd. So I ran down to look what was going on, down to this little square, and on one side there were students with big signs saying, *Algérie Algérienne*. And then other, on the other side, *Algerie Française*. You know, one was saying, Algeria for the Algerians; the other was saying, Algeria for the French, because it was a [French colony] — so then there was a struggle going on, and the National Liberation Front in Algeria had been fighting for years and they had brought the struggle to the shores of France. And so different police stations got blown up, and there was a whole lot of tension going on and big demonstrations about and discussions about how to deal with the Algerian situation.

So I'm looking up and down the street. To me, this is — you know, I'm like 19 years old — oh my god, this is great, right? And this French policeman — they had these capes, you know, that they wore — well little did I — and they were moving through the crowd, swinging their capes at the students. And students were being knocked around. And so I found out that they sewed lead pellets in those capes, and that's why you don't see them swinging batons, they swing those lead pellets. And then one of them came out — I was just, as I considered myself, an innocent bystander. Oh, isn't this great! What's going on?

ROSS: But you do look North African.

27:34

BEAL: I didn't realize it until I went to France, I'll tell you. Well this Frenchman thought I was, because he came up and he slapped me across the face, to the point where I just fell down. I was totally shocked, you know, because this is before the mass demonstrations and so on were going on. And then I saw the signs there. So then I ran back to get in the hotel. I was furious! Do you know what this policeman did? My god, you know, he slapped me across the face. So it turns out that there's this liberation struggle going on in Algeria that I knew nothing about.

Now, for myself, I didn't realize it, but I have a typical North African look about me. One which I had never seen, but which — I would be walking in the street and the young Algerian students would come up to me and start talking in Arabic, Da-da-da-da-da-da-da. And then I would say, as I was learning French, I would say, *Je ne parle pas Arabique*, you know, like that. And they would get angry, thinking I was trying, and accuse me of trying, to pass. So then I had to have a different strategy. And I never spoke French when that happened, because I could understand, by that time, what they were trying to say: Oh, you're Algerian, where do you come from, you know, blah, blah, blah. And so I never responded in French after that. I said, "I'm a Noir American." I'm a Black American, because that's how you said it in French, you know. And I don't speak Arabic, and I don't even speak French (laughs), you know. Because they would get angry, thinking I was trying to pass. But apparently I do — so my older brother and I, we had this brownish hair and at that time, my hair was straightened, you know, but there was something about me that they always knew. You knew that I was that. And I said, I could understand it with my brothers: they've got dark hair, they've got swarthy skin, you know, they're a little bit, not black, but a little bit darker. You know, they look like North Africans. As a matter of fact, you can see the Algerian students, they could be just my brother, you know, walking down the street.

ROSS: Well, let's be clear: you've got that Semitic blood, you've got that African blood, and that's what creates the phenotype of the North African (laughter).

BEAL: Yes, a mixture of — right (laughter).

ROSS: So they're not far off the mark. It just happened on another continent.

BEAL: Yeah.

ROSS: So, once you returned back to the States and you became engaged in your – 31:00

BEAL: During the summers I was sort of getting engaged. I would go into the SNCC office in New York and for one summer I did a couple of weeks in — I was hooked up in Green County, Alabama. I was always interested in Alabama after that, you know. But my real work in SNCC when I moved back to the States in ’66 was out of the New York office. They had created the International Affairs Commission, because by this time, I’m extremely interested in international affairs and understanding how colonialism works and worked in a way that I hadn’t when I went there. So for me, my internationalism came from talking with African students at the cafés — and the different liberation struggles that were still going on, and those that were yet to come, and the Algerian struggle for national liberation.

I happen to have gotten sick at one time and I’d missed this, but it happened, because I was listening to the radio. The Algerian French — you know, people who had been born and raised there — in a disdainful way the French used to speak of them of *pieds noirs*, black feet, you know, like they had been mixed with the African blood or something like that. It was a derogatory statement. So they would sort of look down on the French who lived in Algeria and call them *pieds noirs*, right? And de Gaulle was in power at that time, and there was talk about negotiations. And the people who lived there lived, in many ways, like the white South African, a privileged life. Many of them were civil servants of France, could never come back and live the level of, you know, with servants and people to fix their gardens and people to take care of their kids and cook for them. They could never come back to France and live that kind of life. They would have to kind of wake up a little bit, and so they were — it was interesting to me, because I was really learning about colonialism in a first-hand way.

I tell you one other story that’s a funny story. After Jimmy and I got married, we didn’t live together the first year. I was still in school and he was in the Navy. And it’s in the Navy where he became kind of aware of France and the different race relations that existed there. He said, This would be great for us to go there. So we essentially went on kind of a honeymoon, but with the idea of staying for year if we possibly could. 33:33

ROSS: Now, this is the first time you’ve mentioned Jimmy. So now you need to back up and tell us who Jimmy is, how you met him, and why were you honeymooning? I mean, how did this all happen, Fran?

BEAL: OK. I met him when I was — I think I was 15 years old. He was 19 years old.

ROSS: And who was he?

BEAL: A handsome African American man who people used to tell me and tell him that he looked like Sidney Poitier. And that thing I showed you over there is a picture. He was good-looking. And, uh –

ROSS: But what's his name?

BEAL: Jimmy Beal! James Beal. And he's the father of my children, Anne and Lisa, both of whom were born in France. And he got a job in Paris, first working at *The New York Times* as a production manager, because the *Times* was published there in Paris. It was trying to challenge the *International Herald Tribune* for distribution there. And then he went to work at the Paris branch of the Foote Cone & Belding advertising firm. And he used to do ads for Sunkist oranges and things like TWA. He had some big accounts, you know. And he was, again, the production manager there. So –

ROSS: Well, you met at 15, so how did you all eventually get married and all of this?

BEAL: Well, we met at 15 and I got pregnant at about 17, but I had an abortion. It was illegal and I almost died. And this is important in the sense of my own response later, when the whole question of, is abortion genocide for black women or not, was posed. My own experience there was such that I had to respond that, no, as far as I was concerned.

But it was a wonderful time, in a sense. You're living — you don't have very many responsibilities. I went to school there. First year at the Alliance Française which was basically to learn the language, and after that into something called École de Français à l'Etranger. So the main purpose of the thing was for training French teachers to teach in foreign countries, but I had a specialty in history that I was doing also. So in order to go to school there, you needed a minimum of two years of college. So the equivalent of two years of college is equivalent to their high school. And then most of the students are studying for something called a *propédutique*, which is sort of like an exam they have to pass in which you take some history, and English, and a foreign language, and if you pass that exam, then you can go on and do what you want at the university. So that's basically what I was doing.

ROSS: So you met Jimmy in the States or you met him in Paris? 37:45

BEAL: I met him at Sheila Cohen's sweet 16 birthday party in the Bronx.

ROSS: So you all re-hooked up in Paris?

BEAL: No, we were off-and-on boyfriend and girlfriend until I was like, 18, and then pretty much we were a couple from that point on. So we actually ran off to get married when I was 19, but my mother didn't know about it until the next year, because he went back to his Navy. He was on something called the U.S.S. Suribachi, which went around the Mediterranean. So that was his introduction to France. And he liked it. It was a very interesting experience.

Like I said, there's a level of education that I was getting that we were never taught. Like when I first went in, they had all the people who were Americans to raise their hand. And then they took us out of the class and said, You need this special class because you don't know how to write. And we went into this class and then they taught us about thesis and antithesis and synthesis. They essentially — and I was fascinated, because I always liked writing, but no one had ever taught me that there could actually be a way of teaching people how to set up an essay. This was completely foreign stuff — pun, pun — you know.

And then you just met people from all over the world. It was really wonderful. I mean, in my class, I met a person from Chile and we got to be very good friends. And she was having a problem she finally told me. We were, again, sitting out in the sun in the café and she was saying that she'd been asked to be married by this guy. She came from an extremely wealthy family in Chile. And she had found out — she was very interested in the guy and she thought she was in love with him, and then she found out that he had a mistress and had had two children with this other woman. And she was very hurt, of course. And she didn't know what to do. Should she just ignore it like everyone else in the family — you know, [what] you're expected to do at that class — or should she say she doesn't want to, you know — just go into it. I said, Go find somebody else! He obviously has an attachment to this woman, and if for class reasons he won't marry her — but he's marrying you for money purposes. She said yeah, and then she'd have to go up against her father. So to me, it was like an introduction to a level of family manipulation and marrying people off because of a certain class position that they have and what women are supposed to put up with in terms of that. So that was a pretty big — I remember that discussion so well, because I was kind of shocked, [a] 19-year-old kid, really. Even though I had lived in New York for a couple of years, I was still that kind of kid from small-town upstate New York.

ROSS: Back to Jimmy. How did your relationship prosper during this period when all of this was going on in your life? 41:52

BEAL: Well, he and I are, in many ways, we're alike. I mean, I wasn't very responsible and all, you know. The one problem he had that was a big impact on me, though, was that he essentially drank too much, and he really was an alcoholic, and he came from a family of alcoholics. His mother died of alcoholism, his father died of alcoholism. And there were three people in that family. Two of them had died of alcoholism. So it was that type of a — couldn't tolerate it, type of thing. But he was not recognizing that. And pretty much when I got pregnant — the first time I got pregnant in Paris, I had an abortion. We weren't in any — unfortunately –

ROSS: Was it legal in Paris at the time?

BEAL: No. It was not even legal to have birth control, let alone to have an abortion.

ROSS: What year was that?

BEAL: That was in 1960, because I went there in ’59, so this is 1960. And while I was in the hospital having this abortion, that’s when I became aware of what was happening in Algeria. So my understanding was, because de Gaulle was opening negotiations with the NLF — the French who were in the army were extremely right wing, fascist-like, didn’t want any type of negotiations to go on, so they formed an organization called the OAS, Organisation d’Armée Secrete. It’s a secret army organization, OAS. And its purpose was to try to overthrow those who were selling them out, vis-à-vis Algeria. So there was a threat of them coming to Paris and that they were threatening to be fighting in the streets of Paris. And that’s when I was in the hospital after having this abortion. And it was incredible. They were saying that the — what do they call those things, tanks, like the Sherman tanks? — were going up and down the Paris boulevards and at the union halls they were passing out guns to all the union members to defend Paris against the OAS. Of course, you know, you look back — I said, Oh my god, how great, how wonderful, this is excitement, right? But it’s also kind of scary that the right wing thinks that they can actually overthrow the legitimate government of Paris. But this idea –

ROSS: Right-wingers always think they can overthrow a legitimate government. 45:10

BEAL: But the idea that they would then go to all the union halls and start passing out guns to union members there, you know — at that point, it was obviously a lost cause, and they kind of withdrew. But I was there then (laughs), when that happened.

ROSS: So then you went on to have two children in Paris.

BEAL: In French. It’s like I used to say, “I had two children in French.” (laughs), meaning –

ROSS: Your daughters were born, and their names and –

BEAL: So, May 30, 1962, comes the birth of Anne Beal. It’s interesting about the French system. Because Jimmy was working and I used to work part-time teaching English and then I also learned a certain task around dubbing of films, and so I was not as steady as Jimmy, but I would be bringing in some money, too. And we were both covered by social security, which meant that we had to pay only 20 percent, like maybe two dollars, you know, for a doctor's visit. But if you went to the hospital, you didn't have to pay anything.

So it also showed me the level of social security that the French had that we didn't have. Even then, they all got four weeks of vacation — four weeks of vacation, when back in the States people were getting one week of vacation. So that like today, the French get six to eight weeks of vacation, and we're lucky to get two to three weeks of vacation. So they've been able to maintain a better social security system for themselves than we have here. I mean, there are just a lot of things I learned about the way governments run and the kind of services that are available, the relationships between a country that's an empire and a country that has colonies or former colonies and things like that. So I learned a lot politically by living there.

ROSS: So how long did your relationship with Jimmy last? 47:35

BEAL: Well, we started fighting really badly, I would say, after the kids came. Because at that point, I felt, you know, I had to be more responsible. And so, his drinking was continuing. And that was very bad. And I felt that, in terms of the kids, I wanted a little help from him. So there was a bad — you know, just being in a situation where you have children and you need help, and then he's giving me stories about how this is what a woman's supposed to do, as opposed to what a man is supposed to do.

And the sad thing about that was that, when we went back to the States and I took the girls to visit his grandmother, their great-grandmother, you know, Bunny, and I told her about one of the problems that we were having — and she told me, you know, "He lied to you." And she told me that he and his brother were the ones that were scrubbing the floors for her, and doing the snow, and doing all the heavy type of thing. He tried to make it like, you know, not only was I a terrible housekeeper, but that everyone else in the world knew. So he just had this vision of something, in which it was like a king living in the home, where everyone serves that king — something people later called patriarchy (laughs), you know? But I had too much going for myself to kind of accept that, so we had some enormous fights. And I think part of moving back to the United States after staying there six years, was to set the basis for us to dissolve the marriage — which happened within months of us returning home, literally.

ROSS: Did he stay involved in his children's lives?

BEAL: In the beginning, not that much. He actually married a woman from Denmark, whose name — it's one of those moments — anyway, who I actually liked very much. When the kids did go there she took very good care of them and she was very loving and very responsible to the kids. To this day they are — Rickie, her name is. And he continued to drink and they had problems around that. But he eventually went into treatment and overcame the problem. I guess he was in some kind of 12-step program that eventually took hold and worked.

ROSS: Is he still alive?

BEAL: But he was never very responsible around the financial end of things, and this was also a cause for friction and, you know, irritation. It wasn't until years later, when I was able to do some work with a therapist that I realized we never should have been married in the first place. So it's not like it was his problem — to blame, or me to blame. We were just so different in terms of our outlooks, in terms of what we wanted in life, and in terms of expectations. It was like, you know, people locking horns right from the beginning, once the serious questions of what a marriage is and would be — but that certainly was part of the basis for me jumping into the women's movement a couple of years later.

ROSS: Is he still alive?

BEAL: Uh-huh [yes].

ROSS: OK.

BEAL: I mean, we can talk now, and the kids have a better relationship with him than they did then. He eventually married this Danish woman, who I said was very nice. I thought she was much nicer than he was, you know. That's (overlapping dialogue; unclear).

ROSS: So he knows his grandchildren?

BEAL: Yes.

ROSS: Great. So, jumping into the women's movement — you returned to the States. You were working with the International Committee of SNCC. How did a Women's Committee of SNCC get started? 52:12

BEAL: Well, let me just say, one other thing happened. When I came back, I had to find a job, so at first I got this job working as a legal secretary. But then, I can't remember at this point how, but I heard about this project in SNCC. It was probably through SNCC, because they were hiring some SNCC people at the National Council of Negro Women. They had got funded for a program called Project Woman Power, and the purpose of this was to try to go out in the different cities and organize women around issues of their concern. And I worked in that project. And then eventually I got moved to publishing their newsletter, *The Black Woman*, and I worked there. I worked at the National Council of Negro Women for about ten years.

ROSS: I never knew that. So what was the time span of those years?

BEAL: From ’66 to about ’76, something like that, yeah.

ROSS: I never knew that. So you enjoyed a relationship with Dorothy Height?

BEAL: Yes, very much. And we were kind of the radical-speaking ones, but we were very hard workers, too. We really believed in it. You know, today — our staff of our period came up with the slogan around the different types of black women that should be in, and if you notice in the slogan, they’ve got some very kind of prim-looking woman, they’ve got one woman with an Afro, another with an African dress — to see the kind of different women that existed. And it said, Unity, Commitment, Self-reliance. And that still is the focus of the organization today.

And I had heard from someone else that Dorothy had once said that we were the best staff she ever had (laughs), because even though we were always trying to push her to be more radical and things like that, she was quite a remarkable woman. We learned — I did, at least — a lot from her, in terms of, you know, trying to bring together women of different political and religious stripes and trying to organize that. Hard job. But in some way she was of the old school and we were of the new school. And one thing in particular I could tell you, like, often when many women were in domestic jobs, when they went to work there they would be given the name like Susie or Lulabell or something, and if they thought you had a name that was too sophisticated, they would change it, and say that.

And Dr. Height always said to us, she always called me Mrs. Beal, and Merble — Merble Reagon, you know — Miss Reagon. And she expected us to call her Dr. Height or Miss Height, right, which we did. And I realized that Jimmy’s grandmother, she had gotten married a second time and they always called each other Mr. and Mrs. Mathis, you know. It was almost like, If we’re not respected in society at large, at least among ourselves we’re going to be respected, you know? On Sunday we’re going to dress up and look appropriate and right. And I’ll never forgot that about, her calling us Miss. But behind her back we called her Dorothy or Dottie, right? We were kind of young and disrespectful. But not disrespectful of the sense that –

ROSS: Impudent.

BEAL: Yeah. We were a little bit sassy, I guess. But like I said, I really liked her, because on fundamental things she really was better than a lot of the people that were in and around NCNW. So for example, she always tried to develop the programs for the poor. So one of the first programs that developed out of the Project Women Power was this Pig Bank Program, where you would get some pigs and give them to — two pigs — to each of these families. And when they had babies, they were 57:00

obligated to give two pigs back to the bank, right? So that's to keep the thing self-reliant, to keep going. And she used to say that very statement about, Give somebody a meal, they'll eat that meal and that's it, but give them the means of feeding themself, they can feed themself forever.

And a little anecdote: the NCNW was having a board meeting. And in the midst of the board meeting the phone rings and it turns out it's somebody from Mississippi and the project. And they were so happy that the pig that this boy, a 14-year-old boy, had put in the county fair had come in second, as the second-best pig. So after we got that thing, Dorothy hung up the phone and she relayed the thing, and then she said, "A black boy who gets a second-class pig, that really was a first-class pig (laughs), first-place pig." So that's what I mean, that she really understood those kind of things. But, you know, other black women want to come together and kind of promote just the educated sector of the — Dorothy always, always had a feeling for the poor people and she was in that sense more devoted towards and not at all the kind of person who wants to create a kind of elite black women's organization. So on that level, we used to get along very well.

ROSS: So tell me about the publication *The Black Woman*. What type of impact do you think it had? 59:32

BEAL: Well, one of the things I remember when people were raising their hands is, we took this picture from *Our Bodies, Our Selves*, which was a naked picture which showed fallopian tubes and all the rest of women's sexual things. They did this article and put it in (laughter), things that nobody — probably no other Negro women's organization had ever seen anything like that (laughter).

ROSS: OK.

BEAL: So then, we talked about certain things that the NCNW was doing, but it was also an attempt to get — and then Dorothy would have a little column in it. You know, it was some way to get a communication amongst the women going, so.

ROSS: Well, I would suspect that you influenced an editorial that I quoted in our book, which is, in response to the 1973 *Roe* decision, the NCNW did an editorial that problematized the word "choice." Do you remember anything about that?

BEAL: I don't know. We used to have so many discussions like that. And you said problematized?

ROSS: In other words, they said, Black women aren't really given any choices, so for us to even talk about pro-choice as an option for black women ignores the white supremacist construct under which black women live. Now, I'm totally paraphrasing.

BEAL: Yes, I understand that.

ROSS: But their concept was that choices in a racist system don't exist for many black women. And now that I'm thinking about your fine hint, I thought that was a bit radical for NCNW, but now that I hear that you were there (laughter) –

BEAL: Well, not just me, by the way. I'm just saying, the rest of the staff was our generation. I mean, NCNW hired people who had been in SNCC. Almost all the people had been in SNCC, so it was like an act, you know, so we were young Turks, or Turkettes, whatever (laughs), in the group. But she always listened. She always had an open ear. And what I am just amazed about is like, 20 years later, I meet her and she knows. She knew that, because she had seen my kids, because at events and things I would bring them. She knew Anne had gone off to Brown University. She knew that I had put Lisa into Little Red Schoolhouse, which is a private school in Manhattan. And she told me that when she was coming to be a teacher and had to do a teacher training, that was the only school in the whole city of New York that would allow a Negro student in to do her teacher training.

ROSS: She's very special. We're going to stop right here. 102:30

END DVD 2

DVD 3

ROSS: Before you went to the National Council of Negro Women, though, you were involved in SNCC and a women's committee was developed. So how did a women's committee develop within SNCC, and what role did you play in that?

BEAL: These things happened more or less at the same time, OK? So let me just say that, to back up a little bit, there had been some tensions in SNCC around the role of women and so on and so forth. And there were some white women who had done a kind of manifesto to raise some of their concerns. But I just want to say on behalf of SNCC, if you compare it to some of the other organizations, they were much better on this issue. Not from a theoretical point of view, but SNCC women were playing some leading roles — not roles where they were there for the TV cameras, but roles which, at the concrete place of organizing, they were there. And unlike the women in SCLC, SNCC women were not just handling the coffee and the cake and the things like that.

However, this is not to say that there were not problems, because people have to throw back their minds to a period where it was accepted behavior. But what happened to me, and I think what happened to a lot of people, is that the agitation and the talks — you know, at night, you would stay up all night talking with people about freedom and talking about liberation, and challenging the racial construct in such a way that it was almost like liberation and freedom was in the air. And when somebody then came up with some backward ideas, those of us in SNCC who had been fighting for years now around racial things and talking about equality, talking about white supremacy, the injustice of it — [for us it] was very easy to begin to see that being a woman is no different, you know, in terms of the oppression and exploitation she feels.

Now let me get personal about it. I think there were two incidents. My own, what I considered oppressive, relations that existed in the marriage that I was struggling against gave me a foundation that was very important, although at that stage it was an individual response — me, and this is how I feel about it. But later, as women got together and began talking about their role in the society and their role here, within the organization, some of us began to see it wasn't an individual problem but a social problem. And then from there, we began to see it, you know, in broader societal terms and also in terms of the organization. 2:46

The other thing that happened at that time which was important, I think, at least within SNCC, some of the young men were getting kind of attracted to the Muslim and particularly the Nation of Islam perspective. And they were coming up with formulations — and also in the North, the Congress of African Peoples, LeRoi Jones, who later became [Amiri] Baraka, you know, over there in New Jersey — talking about abortion was genocide.

I had gone to high school with a woman who — Claudia, no, it wasn't Claudia, her name escapes me right now [Cordelia]. The important thing is, When she was a freshman in college she went to have an abortion, and she died from the abortion. So here I was, you know, 18, 19 years old and someone so young as that has died because she didn't have access to a doctor to do this type of thing, was a big impact on my life. You know, at that age, you generally don't have people — well now, young people do, but at that time you didn't have young people that were dying. So it was a big strike on me. So I did not go at all along with this thing that abortion should not be a choice that black women had.

One of the things we had noticed in SNCC, too, was that in the South, there was a sterilization abuse problem amongst black women, and a number of black women found that when they went in to have a baby or after they had had a baby, unbeknownst to themselves, they were sterilized, so they couldn't have children anymore. So we began to talk about it, not in terms of just abortion or sterilization, but in terms of reproductive rights: what right does a woman have to control her own body and not be subjected to political or economic pressures in order for the choices that they make.

And again, when people had heard the stories that — '45, let me see, '55, '60, so this is only 15 years, in a sense, the early '60s — after all the stories about the Nazis sterilizing women in the camps, you know, Jewish women, political opponents, gypsies, homosexuals, and so on. This often happens. I've discovered that often it's not that you just all of a sudden come up and say, "Oh, I'm oppressed. Let me be for abortion." It's someone else puts forward a formulation or a policy and you disagree with it so that you feel that you have to organize against that incorrect thing, and I think that that's what happened to us.

ROSS: We call it reproductive oppression, within SisterSong.

BEAL: Yeah. And I think what happened in this particular case is that some of us who already had children, we said, We have the right to safe reproductive services. And that the question of abortion, the question of sterilization and all these questions are under the bigger picture of reproductive rights. And then when the men were talking about having babies for the revolution, I know that was kind of a theme that we heard amongst the Panther women — they were subjected to that kind of thing. I have to say, I never heard that within SNCC. That was not a line, but those who were, like I said, those who came into contact with some of the Panther women said that that was something that was said, or CAP [Congress of African Peoples], that abortion was a plot, you know, to kill the black race, and therefore we shouldn't have it.

So a lot or our initial studies and discussions that were going on in SNCC were around the question of abortion. Then we said, Well, we need some organized forum to take up some of these questions. And we made a proposal. It was based on an initial draft that I had done of "Double Jeopardy: to be Black and Female," but only the section on reproductive rights and abortion. And propose it, not as a male versus female thing, but what's the status of black women in society. And at home, in society, we had these explicit questions that impacted us as women, that was not the same as all the things that the men had.

So actually, SNCC voted in a meeting in New York in 1968 to have a SNCC Black Women's Liberation Committee to investigate some of the conditions under which black women function. And that was the founding of it. We concentrated at first on the abortion question, because there was a lot of activity going on at this period because, in New York in particular, there were enormous meetings and speak-outs where women would get up and talk about their experiences of having an abortion. Some of them were pretty horrible and, you know, how they were butchered, and it was a pretty horrible situation. We were also aware of the particular aspect of sterilization abuse on the Puerto Rican women in New York.

So between that and some of our own personal experiences like — Cordelia — that was her name — we felt that we needed to take a stand against these guys who were talking — first of all, they were never the ones that were fathers already. They didn't have the responsibility of kids. Who was going to take care of this army of babies that they were going to be talking about? So there began to be some real pressure. We were called lesbians and dykes. They accused us — this was from of the SNCC people — they accused us of dividing the movement. They said, That's not as important as race. In other words, they just kind of wanted to dismiss it as an issue. So these were the kind of questions and things that we were confronting at that time. So we rose, and our consciousness rose in reaction to a reactionary line.

ROSS: So how did "Double Jeopardy" come to be written? 11:40

BEAL: Well, as I said, we began to have a number of consciousness-raising discussions. And I began to write some pieces, different short pieces, and to speak in some of the groups around New York City, defending a woman's right to abortion. So I did some research and found some pretty horrible statistics about how many black women and Puerto Rican women were actually killed by these illegal abortions that they had. Then we also were talking about how women on the job were getting second-class citizenship or didn't get paid the same type of thing, and how attitudes in education — how women were very restricted in the type of jobs that we have. Well, what I did was to try to pull together a number of those streams. I explicitly wrote it because I was called by Robin Morgan to say that she was doing *Sisterhood is Powerful* and she wanted an essay on black women. And I said I would take a few of the things I had already started on and pull together kind of an overview, and that's how "Double Jeopardy: to be Black and Female" was born.

ROSS: So "Double Jeopardy" became "Triple Jeopardy"?

BEAL: That's right.

ROSS: How?

BEAL: That became "Triple Jeopardy" because after some meetings — let me just say, SNCC Black Women's Liberation Committee was born at a time when SNCC itself was beginning to recede, particularly in the North. And in the South, too. Because this is like, we're talking now 1968, 1969, and pretty much, you know, SNCC was closing down all over.

ROSS: Rumor has it, it was because of the "Jewish question." 13:55

BEAL: I would like to speak to that, because in '68, I was in SNCC at the same time. And what was said — if people go back to read what was said — was that, essentially, the history: that Palestine existed there and the Jews came afterwards, and some resolution had to be made that took into account the people that had already been living there. And that it appeared to be some sort of a colonial relationship. And all of a sudden, we started being called anti-Semitic for that. And a lot of Jewish people said they would no longer give money to the organization. But that is not the reason why this organization began to lose steam.

My own view is that SNCC was a part of a generation of activists whose main target was to destroy Jim Crow, the formal structures of Jim Crow — basically, the legal structures — and then to implement, you know, your life under the new circumstances. And even though there was still — racism existed in society, it was unclear what the next step would be after the legal aspects of Jim Crow. How did you deal with questions of pro forma racism, and was SNCC, as a student organization — which all of us were getting older, by the way — what role did it have to play at that particular stage. And it was unclear. And I think that's the reason it lost steam, is because the objective that it had established for itself had essentially been accomplished, and therefore, unless it had a new conception of what its job was in the new period, it would automatically recede. So this question about the anti-Semitism charge, the false charge of anti-Semitism — I think it's incorrect to say that that's what made the organization recede.

I think what did happen, however, is that the level of racism on the part of whites was so strong that many people in SNCC felt that the role of whites at this point was to work in white communities and deal with the racism that existed in white communities, and that that would be the best thing to advance the racial justice movement, which is a far cry from, you know, that whites have no role anymore in the racial justice movement. They did have a role, but it wasn't in the black communities. So I think this was also — many people were frightened by the Black Power call, because the concept of, you know, blacks being humble and pleading for their rights was one that many white [people] could kind of unite with, but once they were demanding black power, I think there was a lot of fear about –

ROSS: Well, black anger has always been capable of either scaring or paralyzing white America – 17:35

BEAL: Yeah.

ROSS: – and causing a tremendous backlash.

BEAL: So, in any case, because SNCC was in the point of demise, and a lot of the women that were now coming around the SNCC Black Women's Liberation [Committee] had no relationship with SNCC, they changed the name to the Black Women's Alliance — very explicitly not connected any longer with SNCC as an organization.

ROSS: And when did this happen?

BEAL: We went from being SNCC Black Women's Liberation Committee to the Black Women's Alliance, to the Third World Women's Alliance, within about a year. It was that quick.

ROSS: In what year?

BEAL: Well, the call to form it was at the New York SNCC staff meeting, December of '68. So then it was in '69, sometime in '69, that we became the Black Women's Alliance, I think about six months later. And then what happened is, we were approached by a number of women who were Puerto Rican [who] said there was nothing in the Puerto Rican community like this and they really would like to come into the Black Women's Alliance. So we had a big debate in the organization. And what we were essentially dealing with here was, what were the things that were particularly African American, as opposed to what were the things that were specifically Puerto Rican. And we had, like I said, big discussions around that.

And when we looked at the Puerto Rican sisters, we saw that they were trying to deal with both their national oppression of living within the United States and a kind of racial and class thing that was separate from just being a part of America as a whole, and then how does your gender fit in when you have this other overriding oppression. And then black women were essentially trying to deal with the same thing: how do you deal with the question of race and class and gender, in terms of what kinds of inter[sections] —

So we finally decided that the two forms of oppression, while not precisely exactly the same — race versus, say, nationality — but the idea of the complexity of women's liberation in that context was fundamentally the same. You're trying to deal with these other things. So that's how — and then someone said, OK, if we're going to have other women of color in the organization, we should change the name to reflect it. And then the Third World Women's Alliance came into being, like that.

21:15

ROSS: And you went from "double jeopardy" to –

BEAL: – to "triple jeopardy." There was a criticism made, [someone] came up who said, It's really triple jeopardy, because it's not just race and gender, it's also race, gender, class, you know, so. People have to also understand, this was a time when enormous challenges to the status quo were happening on a mass scale, particularly amongst young people, which I was one of at that time. Challenging — so the war in Vietnam now comes to the fore and pretty much, SNCC was one of the first black organizations to come out against the war, six months before Martin Luther King did. And in some ways it's obvious why. They were the ones who were going to be and were being drafted. Martin eventually, I thought, to his credit, did come out against the war, but he had been under the enormous amount of pressure of not mixing up the movements, not, you know, confusing the issues, and the same kind of process –

ROSS: Domestic with international issues.

BEAL: Right. And the same kind of things that Walter White was dealing with. So the very fact that SNCC was breaking through on the international issue, too, was, I think, a very important contribution that SNCC made to the people's movement as a whole. And when Martin took that up, that was an enormous push in consciousness relative to movement and what I would maintain to this day is that black people, women, you know, all of the different sectors that are fighting for equality and fighting for social justice, cannot ignore the international implications of U.S. foreign policy. Because for every bomb that goes off in Iraq today is two or three schools that are not built in the United States. For every bomb that goes off in Iraq is how many hospitals and healthcare that people don't get. So I think that that was one of the big contributions that the civil rights movement of the '60s eventually made to our understanding of the link between international affairs and domestic affairs.

ROSS: One of the things that strikes me about your analysis is that in the process, your group of women were doing considerable theoretical development in the face of the charge that black women don't do theory. 24:12

BEAL: That's absolutely correct, and let me give you an example. Not only were we political in the broad sense, but on real gender issues we were dealing with things like, Well, OK, what does it mean if a woman is defined by her physical characteristics. So there's, you know, a whole bunch of things that you can say about that. What does it mean when beauty is defined by white, blue-eyed, blond, you know, blond, blah, blah, blah, blah. So there's that problem of physical characteristics of being female, so we were challenging not only the particular concepts of beauty, with white, and so on. So this is where the Afros begin to come from, and the being proud of your own ethnic background, to the point where people began teasing their hair in different ways. It was the Afro. If you look today you have these, you know, the braiding, and the dreds, and just things that were — never, never, in our day could you have had such a thing without people having to first embrace their blackness. And that I think was an important breakthrough at that particular time.

Now we challenged the whole question of, femininity equals a physical type of beauty, because we thought it was oppressive, particularly to black woman who, you know — like today, I look up and I see these little skinny girls on there, on the TV, and this is presented as beauty, you know? And I say to myself, I can't really believe — I'm not a man, but I can't really believe that men would look at this and think — you know, where is it? You want something to hang on to, you know? So the whole question of — even though there are different black forms, and I don't want to say everyone's alike, but a lot of us are, you know, we got the hips and we got the breasts, and I also think in black women in general, we carry 200 pounds around proudly, you know what I mean, some of us do, whereas others, you know, white women, wouldn't — you don't see them — let me just say this: anorexia is not a major problem amongst African American women.

ROSS: But it's growing.

BEAL: Amongst teenagers. 27:30

ROSS: As our children become much more persuaded into patterns of self-hatred and assimilation and imitation, in pursuit of that –

BEAL: It's terrible.

ROSS: – white beauty standard that has resurrected itself. I actually had a debate — I'm sorry to interject here — with my staffers, because I have a lot of 30-something, 20-something staff people, and I asked them why were they forcing their feet into these impossibly high and painful heels again, when we had fought for the right for you to be seen as a beautiful woman and comfortable at the same time? And they argue with me that it was their feminist right to wear those painful high heels –

BEAL: This is the –

ROSS: And force their bodies into those baby t-shirts that make the smallest of them look fat because the shirts are too small.

BEAL: It's an interesting argument, to pose it in terms of a feminist thing, because part, as you said, part of our liberation was to be comfortable. Now I, as a person who went to college in the late '50s, early '60s, was made to suffer through the girdles, you know. And no jiggle was permitted whatsoever, you know. You had to suffer through the full girdles, and they were horrible. And they would cut into your legs and oh, it was just horrible. Even wearing pants was a liberating type of thing, because you didn't have to be concerned that someone was looking up your dress or what have you. So it's an interesting argument, but I think it misses completely what we were going through at that time, which was the liberation of the confining strictures of society at large, and girdles in particular.

So the whole question of — you know, people can laugh about the burning of the bras, but it symbolized that kind of restricting of women in terms of their dress. Because if you have dresses, you have to walk a certain way and talk a certain talk. I mean, I don't think I ever wore — once I understood that, I never wore a girdle again, to this day, never wore a girdle again. But it was amazing to me in college, you had these girls that were — I was never a skinny person, but I was, you know, zaftig. I had a nice figure in college. And these skinny girls would be pulling on these girdles, you know, and they'd come down with long legs like that, and you know, running around the dorm, like that.

But then the other thing is the makeup, and the thing is — you know, the lightening of the skin — all of those things were being challenged by the different groups and the discussions that people would have. And the straightening of the hair that gave rise, as I said, to the Afro type of hairstyle. And in many ways it was a liberating feeling of, no more white gloves on Sunday, no more stockings every day, and so on and so forth. So it's amazing to me that anyone can turn around today and say that that's their feminist choice. It's not their feminist choice. It's a choice imposed upon them by the styles of the moment. And it's like you say, men's shoes don't get heels put on them, you know what I mean? (laughter)

ROSS: Men do not, voluntarily, at least not since the *Superfly* days, wear shoes that hurt their feet. And the whole perversion of feminism behind mindless individualism without understanding our larger social construct is bad.

BEAL: Well, what's really sad to me is to see these young girls who are trying so hard to be white in terms of their features, or — you know, Michael Jackson is such a sad story, because –

ROSS: Well, he's trying to be Diana.

BEAL: Well, aside from that, I mean, he was such a cute kid. My children were in love with him. You know, he was their own age and he had a big Afro and nice thick nose and — but I guess I use that example to show how the question of beauty in this white construct — it can be extremely emotionally destructive to black kids, so I'm glad –

ROSS: It continues.

BEAL: – that we did make some breakthroughs there, but I'm unhappy that a 33:00
number of the young girls today that are projected as beautiful are all these black girls that have all these white features. Straight, straight hair: there is nothing African about it, you know, at all. And it shows the kind of rejection, once again, of our own cultural background. So rather than starting with it being black and nappy hair and then moving from that point forward, it's like, Oh no, I'm trying to be whiter than white.

ROSS: And what's sort of ironic is that they don't recognize the lack of originality.

BEAL: Yup.

ROSS: There's nothing original about the quadroon (laughs).

BEAL: Yeah. By the way, I wanted to speak a little about this term, "feminism." The Third World Women's Alliance — at least in the chapter that I was working with in New York — did not like that term, because at that time it came to mean women who put female first and that was the only thing, you know, it was a very narrow perception. And what we were trying to deal with was the integration of race, gender, class, in consciousness, and not like just put one above the other, because we didn't think it actually operated as one is more important than another, but that there was actually an integration of that. And I'm proud to say, I think that the activists of that period were the first ones to put together this kind of construct about the integration of the different things. But the reason we didn't like feminism — because it also was, people were trying to do these constructs of male and female separations or, you know, and that was the dynamic of life. And quite frankly, that came up in opposition to other kinds of ideological trends, like Marxism or historical materialism, like that. And what we used to say, even though it was more clumsy, and it's not a 30-second [sound] bite, [was], it's black women's liberation — because black women's liberation is not just the skin analysis. It's not just the class analysis. It's not just the racial analysis. It's how those things operate in the real world in an integrated way, to both understand oppression and exploitation and to understand some methods by which we might kind of try to deal with them.

ROSS: So what Kimberly Crenshaw two decades later called intersectionality. 35:56

BEAL: That's right. I mean, it wasn't just her. It was that whole stream of even white quote "feminists." Academicians is, I guess, is the term that we should use there. And one of the things I wanted to kind of go back to, because I think one of the most — we had an enormous ideological, philosophical impact on taking up some of these subjects — but the one concrete thing that our chapter did in New York was to challenge sterilization abuse and to force the city of New York to put in certain procedures and policies around sterilization that would ensure that this was informed consent. And we talked before the city councils and we wrote petitions about that and got together some of the doctors who were interested in that. Dr. Helen Trias, very well known in the Puerto Rican community, recently died, but she was very active in the anti-sterilization movement in the city of New York.

The other thing that we were very active in was on an international level in the struggle against the war in Vietnam. And many, many black women were very opposed to the war in Vietnam, partly because of what I mentioned before, of the impact of a war economy on domestic realities, but also because of the realization of who gets killed over there and, you know, the cannon fodder and all of that kind of thing. We had an organization in SNCC, about the same time that the Third World Women's Alliance came into being, called NBAWADU — we wanted it to sound African — that stood for the National Black Anti-War Anti-Draft Union, and it was an attempt to bring consciousness to young people around the war, and why we should not go to that war.

So our own international work had to deal with solidarity with the Vietnamese women, and as it pertained to Africa, it also was solidarity with the women in FRELIMO [Frente de Libertaçao de Moçambique], the women in South Africa, and we were very much influenced by Amilcar Cabral, in terms of some of his writings. And then Cuba I think also played an important role, in terms of our kind of evolving consciousness around both some race and class issues, although some people had some differences about the speed at which some of these old problems were being addressed. But I think that many of us have, you know, witnessed in Cuba the possibility of a society in the future that was free of racism and the possibility of a society in the future in which women played an active and equal role in society. So this influenced us a lot.

ROSS: Now, obviously the Third World Women's Alliance was a precursor to many efforts that have been subsequently made to organize what after 1977 became known as women of color. What would you say, looking back, [in] 30 years' hindsight, was the impact of the Third World's 40:20

Women's Alliance, in terms of the work you see being done now by women of color?

BEAL: Let me think. I think we had a theoretical impact, although we didn't write big theoretical treatises about it. And one of those things had to do with the intersection of race, class, and gender. So that's one thing. I also think it had an impact on a recognition that international foreign policy of our government very much impacts us here at home. So that's the second one. And that you can't really take up one without the other thing. Thirdly, I think there were, as I said, some concrete gains made in terms of protections of women [against] sterilization abuse. We helped fight around abortion rights and we were very much supportive of *Roe vs. Wade*, but we, in terms of the Third World Women's Alliance of New York, had already been through the fight in New York State. So in a sense, that was a precursor.

I think at the level of ideas, also, the Third World Women's Alliance had a big impact. We wrote a program that was very comprehensive around what it would take for black women and other women of color to be free. And it included free education, free childcare services for women and for families. It included free health care services for women. It called for funds and resources to be placed in women's health services so that they could develop, you know, services and things that particularly impact women. We called for equal education opportunities. We called for moneys for young families to be able to lead a decent life. And in general — I have to get my hands on that program because it was very comprehensive. And we also put forward ideas not only around women being able to participate in female things, but that women should be articulate in certain areas that have nothing to do with just being female: so, politics, or a lawyer, or a doctor, I mean, those are easy ones that we can see, but being an engineer or whatever, and in society, you know, running for office, being a political human being.

The unfortunate thing is that when women — and those who are in and around, say, NOW, National Organization for Women — they have a number of good qualities, but they also have some qualities that have led them to be able to call themselves feminists and take up and become attorneys and then become elected officials — and at the same time, hire immigrant women or women from the South to take on the jobs that they as women used to have around the home. And in all too many cases, it's an exploitative relationship because they underfund them. They pay them as little as they possibly can. They often don't pay social security for them, so that they're not — so you see a thing emerging of women oppressing and exploiting women. We used to talk about the double day: women in the home, women in society, women at work, and how you balanced all of these things and how difficult it was. Now, in our day, how did we deal with it? We called for a social solution to it. We called for free, 24-hour daycare centers, so that women could be freed from that aspect of child-rearing so that they can fully participate in society. Today, people get individual maids or individual nannies to take on those things, so it's not a social solution, it's an individual solution that rests upon their status in society in terms of being rich, in particular.

ROSS: And ability to exploit low-paid women. So there was never really any intention by people in The Third World Women's Alliance to engage in any constructive engagement with the mainstream women's movement. 45:45

BEAL: No, that's not completely true, but I would say — for example, we were involved in that march down Fifth Avenue which pointed to the — I think it was August 26th of — and what year was that, I think it was 1970. And there were 50,000 women, and we carried a sign that said, Hands off Angela Davis, because at that time, she was underground and the FBI was looking for her. And we were approached from some people from NOW who said, Take down that sign, because we don't want — Angela Davis has nothing to do with women's liberation. So we essentially responded, It has *everything* to do with the kind of liberation we're talking about, in terms of, she was talking about being a political activist and, you know, not being oppressed and exploited by that status. So you can see that there were some differences of opinion about that.

But on certain issues, we saw we could unite with people. The right to abortion, for example, was one of those things. There were certain things that spread across the classes that made up the different women that were for women's liberation, or feminists, if you wish. But they did not have to challenge the class strictures that existed in society, and we felt that we had to do those things. So it's not uncommon for us to see most of the women's movement made up of women of sort of middle-class or up backgrounds, whereas the working-class women, white and black alike, but [poor] white women in particular, have very much been ignored by the women's movement, in the sense that it's a class of women that they have not put their money behind. Let me say that.

So if you say to them, what about — oh yes, we're all for that, too. But if you show their program on what they choose to struggle on, that's where the dichotomy between their interests and other women's interests [is], because for working-class women to be free, and for most black women to be free, and other women of color, we need a social remedy for many of the things. So either we trade the job off with the men, and they become the homemakers — and some people, maybe, can do that — or society says, we must socialize some of the things that women need done in order for them to exist on an equal level in society.

That was the choice that we made in terms of our program, but it's not the choice that the women's movement of today made. So whereas women have made enormous advances, there are still a number of issues, like childcare, health care, educational opportunities, where women of color and women of lower classes or working women still have on their agenda that need to be done.

ROSS: We're close to the end of this tape, but I think we have about ten more minutes, and at this point, I'd like you to tell us how the Third World Women's Alliance transformed itself into the Alliance Against Women's Oppression, which is how I met you. 50:00

BEAL: Right. Well, what happened was that a few of the women — the Third World Women's Alliance more or less went into demise, right, and a couple of years later I moved out here, so the Third World Women's Alliance was still sort of going here. So some of the women from the Third World Women's Alliance began to organize this Alliance Against Women's Oppression, and that was a white as well as a women-of-color organization. And they did that based purely on a logical view, and it was logical, that if everybody agreed with the program and the actions, there was no need to have it separated or segregated, which from a logical point of view, you can see that that's a –

ROSS: What year was that?

BEAL: Something like that early '80s, OK? But to me, the social reality is that our society still exists in a very separate way. And in order for women of color to put their needs to the front, they need to organize first amongst their own ranks. And in that way they're able to bring to a larger women's movement their issues, and don't have their issues then subjugated to the interests of other sectors. So I think that that's essentially what happened with the Alliance Against Women's Oppression, people were a little unclear where they were going to go. So then what happened was, when that sort of came apart, some of the women, including people like Linda Burnham and Miriam Louie, like that, came together to form the Women of Color Resource Center.

ROSS: OK. Now I've got that story, so let's stick a little bit longer –

BEAL: OK.

ROSS: – with the story that's not as well known, which is The Alliance Against Women's Oppression.

BEAL: You know, the thing about it is, I had moved out here by that time –

ROSS: So you were not that engaged with the –

BEAL: That's right. I had moved, basically, to antiracist work, explicitly, which didn't mean I didn't raise the women's issues, because I was extremely conscious of that, but my own work was now (unclear) being on the antiracist work. And by this time, I'm doing a lot of writing, you know, because I'm getting older. So I wrote for a couple years after I was out here. I was the associate editor of *The Black Scholar* magazine.

ROSS: Robert Christian?

BEAL: That's right. And I wrote, when I was there, I did a lot of writing, not only editorial work, on certain women's issues [and] that was fun, you know. And then became very interested in the anti-apartheid movement.

ROSS: So what have you been doing primarily –

BEAL: I've been doing a lot of writing –

ROSS: – in the time that you've been off of the East coast, on the West coast.

BEAL: OK. Since then, like I said, I was working in something called NAROC, the National Anti-Racist Organizing Committee, and we were doing a lot of stuff around Klan work and so on. But once I came out here I began to do more of the writing, that was basically the thing. So I worked for *Frontline* newspaper for a while, and I got a job at the ACLU of Northern California, so that kind of kept me up with some of things on the civil liberties level that were going on. And then it was three years ago, four years ago, they developed a program, the Racial Justice Project, and I worked with them on that until I became ill. The other thing is that I had a weekly column going in the black paper here, the main black paper here. And then with the new technology, a lot of my stuff got going on the internet, you know, so that's how a lot of people kept a hold of me. And basically I was doing national black politics, so that had become more or less my area of expertise. 54:00

ROSS: So are there other key memberships in other organizations you'd like to mention –

BEAL: Oh yes –

ROSS: – that influenced you and are part of your legacy?

BEAL: In 1998, a number of black people from around the country had become concerned with the Million Man March, the attack on Anita, um –

ROSS: Hill.

BEAL: – Hill, around the — it was really a bad attack on her.

ROSS: Clarence Thomas.

BEAL: Yeah. And it was around the Clarence Thomas nomination. And it threw right back into the black movement of all stripes, How are you going to deal with these questions of women's oppression and exploitation in the context of, you've got, you know, an anti-racist struggle going on. And more than anything else, I think that if black people are suffering today from the rulings of Clarence Thomas — and they are — a lot of it has to do with their refusal to take up Anita Hill's exposure of him as a sexual abuser. And had they taken that a little bit more seriously, they would recognize that black faces in high places is not something that's going to resolve the problems that black women are facing today, nor that other people of color are facing today. So I think that was a lesson for some people. Then again, it had an impact on a number of people feeling there needed to be a more progressive black voice in the country, and that's when Doctor Manning, um –

ROSS: Marable?

BEAL: – Marable got together with people like — what was his name?

ROSS: Ron Daniels?

BEAL: No, Ron was not involved in this. It was Bill Fletcher from the labor movement, Barbara Ransby [who] was a very well known black woman feminist — and to try to pull together a congress of radical black people. So they called for a conference in 1998, and much to their surprise — they're expecting five or six hundred people — over two thousand people showed up at this. And then the following year I was elected to the national body – 58:03

ROSS: Of the Black Radical Congress.

BEAL: – of the Black Radical Congress, and was active also in the Feminist Caucus of the Black Radical Congress. So more recently, as I think I told you before, I've been a little bit out of things because of my health. I had a hip — my grandkids say they aren't going to call me Granny Franny anymore, but the bionic woman, because I've had a hip replacement on this side, a hip replacement on that side, a knee replacement here. So I now, when I go through the airport, I set the bells ringing (laughs). But up to now, basically, at my age, I'm now 65, I think my basic contributions are through my writing abilities.

ROSS: OK. What additional information do you think is important for understanding your life?

BEAL: I think that living in the moment is very important and trying — I think never forgetting that whatever we've got today, we stand on the shoulders of people who struggled before. But one other thing I think we're learning as these reactionary policies are taking hold in the country is, you need to keep on struggling to even stay where you were, because otherwise they take some things back. So we need a whole other generation of young people there who are prepared to step forward and fight for civil liberties, fight for racial equality, and fight for a better world where peace is the main diplomatic strategy that people use, and not war. So whether you come at that position from a religious perspective, or from a humanist perspective, I think the struggle for peace is something that is very, very important to the salvation of our souls.

ROSS: Have you been the subject of other oral interviews or documentaries?

BEAL: Some different people have interviewed me because they're doing mostly a thesis, a doctorate on, you know, black women and the early black women's liberation movement. I was recently interviewed by a woman from New York who's working on a documentary about black women and feminism. So, like I said, I've had innumerable number of interviews, but nothing like this, nothing like a kind of comprehensive, you know –

ROSS: Well we appreciate your willingness to do this.

BEAL: Well, I think it's important to record these things, because, you know, after we go, it's like, who's going to be around to tell our story if we didn't leave a few words behind.

ROSS: In addition to our very large footprints. Do you have papers? Files, photos, correspondence, journals, memorabilia, that you would consider preserving at the Sophia Smith Collection at Smith College?

BEAL: I'd have to go through my things, because an unfortunate thing happened when I moved from New York here. I left a number of my papers in someone's garage, and after a few years it just got tossed, and I lost a bunch of memorabilia that I — I still can't even talk about it now, without — I do know that the Women of Color Resource Center here has made an attempt to collect some types of things. But I have to go through my stuff and take a look, and I would certainly consider Smith. It's a wonderful institution. You know, women's education, so –

ROSS: And final question. You will receive a copy of this interview. Do you want DVD or VHS?

BEAL: Well, I don't have a DVD, but I was thinking of getting one, so can I put that question off?

ROSS: You can actually put it off or say both.

BEAL: Yeah. Maybe both.

ROSS: All right. Well, thank you Fran Beal and –

BEAL: Thank you.

ROSS: – on behalf Smith College and the Sophia Smith Collection, this was an unexpected gift that you offered today. Thank you for going so long.

BEAL: Thank you. 103:43

END DVD 3

END INTERVIEW