Voices of Feminism Oral History Project
Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College
Northampton, MA

GERALDINE MILLER

Interviewed by

LORETTA J. ROSS

October 14, 2004
Brooklyn, New York

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with generous support from the Ford Foundation.

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NARRATOR

Geraldine Miller (1920–2005) was born in Savetha, Kansas, and founded the Household Technicians' Union for domestic workers in New York City in 1971, which successfully won the national right for domestic workers to be covered by the Federal Minimum Wage Act. She is also the past president of the National Congress of Neighborhood Women, and is the founding and current president of the Bronx Chapter of the National Organization for Women. As an early African American feminist, Miller has received many awards for her tireless activism on behalf of domestic workers.

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 of 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, during which time she met and worked with Geraldine Miller. She was also the Program Director for the National Black Women's Health Project. After managing research and program departments for the Center for Democratic Renewal, an anti-Klan organization, in 1996 Ross established the National Center for Human Rights Education, which she directed from 1996–2004. She was the Co-Director of the April 25, 2004 national March for Women's Lives in Washington, D.C. 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 Geraldine Miller describes her life as an African American child born in the Midwest in the 1920s. As a child of incest between her mother and her mother's stepfather, Miller focuses on her struggle to lift herself out of poverty, overcome the murder of her mother, and launch her career as a national organizer of domestic workers and leading feminist with the National Organization for Women and the National Congress of Neighborhood Women. With a story spanning eight decades, Miller pioneered work that crossed boundaries of race, class and gender and demonstrated the power of working-class women in the feminist movement.

RESTRICTIONS

None

Format

Interview recorded on miniDV using Sony Digital Camcorder DSR-PDX10. Four 60-minute tapes.

Transcript

Transcribed by Luann Jette. Audited for accuracy and edited by Revan Schendler. Reviewed by Loretta Ross. Ms. Miller died before being able to review the transcript of her interview.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: Miller, Geraldine. Interview by Loretta Ross. Video recording, October 14, 2004. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote:** Geraldine Miller, interview by Loretta Ross, video recording, October 14, 2004, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, tape 3.

Transcript

Bibliography: Miller, Geraldine. Interview by Loretta Ross. Transcript of video recording, October 14, 2004. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote:** Geraldine Miller, interview by Loretta Ross, transcript of video recording, October 14, 2004, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, pp. 22–24.

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Transcript of interview conducted October 14, 2004, with:

GERALDINE MILLER

at: Offices of the National Congress of Neighborhood Women
Brooklyn, New York

by: LORETTA ROSS

MILLER: …and me and my Capezios. Those shoes? I held on to them until they mildewed. (laughs)

ROSS: OK. Today is October 14, 2004. I'm in Brooklyn, New York, at the offices of the National Congress of Neighborhood Women and it is my joy to be interviewing Geraldine Miller. Geraldine.

MILLER: Yes.

ROSS: I'm so happy to have this chance to interview you. Why don't you tell me your basic information to get us started? What is your date of birth and where were you born?

MILLER: OK. I was born January 7, 1920, in Savetha, Kansas.

ROSS: How do you spell Savetha?

MILLER: S-A-V-E-T-H-A.

ROSS: Did you have any siblings, brothers or sisters?

MILLER: No. Only me. My mother threw away the pattern, she told me.

ROSS: Broke the mold. Tell me about your parents — your mother, your father. How did you come about? 1:15

MILLER: Well, from what I understand, my mother was a 13-year-old child who had a baby by her stepfather, who was my father.

ROSS: So, there was incest in your background. How did that affect your relationship with your mother?

MILLER: I didn't know it. They were afraid to tell me –

ROSS: When did you find out?

MILLER: – until I got grown.

ROSS: How did you find out?

MILLER: I kept asking, uh, because every time they would tell me, "This is your father," and I would say, "Uh-uh, no." I just seemed to feel that that wasn't the truth, and I was correct, and then so they finally told me.

ROSS: And what was your mother's maiden name?

MILLER: Davis.

ROSS: Her full name?

MILLER: Gertrude Davis Dunn.

ROSS: Was she also from Kansas or how did she get to Kansas?

MILLER: Well, see, I'm not quite sure. See, what it was is that I didn't really and truly get a lot of background. There was, you know, I was a much-loved child from the great-grandmother, the grandmother, the great aunts, my aunt, my mother's sister, everybody kind of like was wanting me, and so they just showered love on me.

ROSS: So, tell me about these great-aunts and aunts. They seem to be very important people in your life.

MILLER: Oh, they were.

ROSS: Tell me who they were and tell me what they did for you.

MILLER: Uh-huh. My great-grandmother, I don't know if that's great or great-great, but uh, I stayed with her for a year or two.

ROSS: And what was her name?

MILLER: Eliza Murphy.

ROSS: And she was from Kansas, too?

MILLER: Well, yes. We were all in Savetha at that time. We hadn't — see, when it ended up, we were jumping from one place to the other.

ROSS: Why?

MILLER: And that's because, I think, of work and money.

ROSS: What kind of work did your mother do?

MILLER: My mother worked in food, she worked as a household worker. I remember being a little child and wanting my mother to come out of the house where she was working, and these people had a big dog. I'd fallen down and I was not able to get my mother's attention. And that bothered me, you know. And I remember it to this day and that's quite a long time ago.

ROSS: How old were you?

MILLER: I don't think I was school age. I think that was the reason why I was with her.

ROSS: So she took you to work with her. Because she didn't have child care?

MILLER: That's right. Not in the 20s. (laughs)

ROSS: So, let me go back a little. Would you say again your father's name? I'm not quite sure –

MILLER: George Dunn.

ROSS: George Dunn. And he was your stepfather — he was your mother's stepfather.

MILLER: And my step-grandfather, plus my father, which was kind of hard to take.

ROSS: So he wasn't around when you were growing up?

MILLER: Uh, in the beginning, you know. And then we went to Atchison, Kansas, and the whole family, you know, like the aunts and my mother and my grandmother were all working in this hotel in Atchison, Kansas. Then, I think the session of whatever it was, was over with, and I remember we all were in this hotel, and my two cousins were there, Mary and Paul, and then we moved back to Savetha and I don't even remember the sequence to where my grandmother died. I just remember that they had the coffin in the house, you know, and that is a blur to me.

ROSS: OK. So you don't remember what age you were when your father kind of disappeared from the scene?

MILLER: Well, he didn't disappear. He stayed there at the house and we, like, my mother and I and Aunt Ada, we kind of moved around quite a bit. After Atchison, uh, for — she met this man named Vernon Fields who was

my stepfather, who was just a wonderful, wonderful person, and we were in St. Joe's, Missouri, for a couple or three years and then he came down with tuberculosis. So my mother sent me to my Aunt Retta. You know, I could stay with any one of them, the aunts would take me, so I stayed with Aunt Retta, and I think that that was really a good thing because she pushed education, you know. She had put herself through college doing housework, you know. But she had so much to offer.

ROSS: What was Aunt Retta's full name? 6:50

MILLER: Retta Alexander.

ROSS: OK. Do you know what college she went to?

MILLER: No, I don't, you know, but she kept telling me over and over again that she had saved money for me to go to college and I didn't want to go.

ROSS: What city –

MILLER: I wanted to dance.

ROSS: We'll talk about dancing later (laughs), but what city was Aunt Retta living in?

MILLER She was in Hiawatha, Kansas. She also had her own — how do you say it? — her own houses she had bought. The one house that we lived in, they started from one room and then they built onto it and then there was, like, at least three or four different extra rooms downstairs, and a porch that went like halfway around the house, even with a little washroom. Then she build on top of that and had two rooms upstairs, and like an attic space, which was just really — plus she had a very good library. And I remember her one time, she had guests, and she told me to not be so conspicuous.

ROSS: What did she mean by that?

MILLER: I was carrying on. I was, you know, I was a fresh person. I was a little person but I was fresh. I did not know how to keep my mouth shut, and to this day, I still don't.

ROSS: OK. So, Aunt Retta was very influential in helping to raise you?

MILLER: Oh, yes. Every morning God sent, she would take my — comb my hair and braid it and make me say them time tables, which I hated, girl. I hated them with a passion. But I learned them.

ROSS: So, tell me about your mother. How long did your mother live and how old were you when she passed? 9:00

MILLER: My mother lived — she was 13 years older than me. She had to be 12 when she was impregnated, and she lived to — I think it's 30, I tried to count it up the other night. I was 17 years old, and I had just came back from my visit with her in St. Joe's [Joseph's], Missouri, when I was called back, to say my mother was in the hospital. And so they sent me back by myself, and I was in the room when my mother died, and then I found out that she had been poisoned by another woman for her man. And then my — good thing my Aunt Ada, my mother's sister, and my other aunt, Aunt Agnes, they came together in a day, you know, to be with me so I wouldn't be there by myself. And I was devastated. They were so afraid that I was going to beat the woman. I had been taught to box and I was, like, you know, could be a little messy at times.

ROSS: Was there any kind of official police action taken –

MILLER: Never, you know.

ROSS: – over your mother?

MILLER: No. When you want to think about it, there has never been the type of justice for people of color that, you know — if you — if we kill one another in them days, we just did it. It was not written up. It was not talked about, you know.

ROSS: But you knew who did it.

MILLER: But you'd know who did it, because I never will forget the woman, her name was Agnes Favors. I'll never forget it. And she had a nerve enough to come to the funeral. And so, I had cried so hard, you know, from the time she passed. I was in a room by myself, and I was so thankful that it was in a Catholic hospital. The nuns were so wonderful to me. I don't think I'd have made it.

And then I just went haywire, life-wise. I was just into everything. And so, I'm thankful that I'm — I stopped doing what I was doing.

ROSS: When you say you went haywire, do you mind sharing with us some of what you went haywire about?

11:50

MILLER: Oh, boy. I was to the point, you know, I was also liking to dance, and

Do you think she was a slave down South or in Kansas?

MILLER: Yes. I think she –

ROSS: What part of the South?

MILLER: Well, she didn't say. And see, I might not remember, because I was quite young.

ROSS: OK. So when you say you went wild when your mother died, though, you — what kind of wildness did you exhibit? That's OK. We can embargo some of this –

14:30

MILLER: Well, let me tell you, I think that I was quite –

ROSS: – if you don't want to get to the juicy details –

MILLER: You know, I was trying to drink myself to ease that pain, that I was into drinking. And I would just drink and then I had to laugh, sometimes that the cab drivers who would pick me up to take me home would make me drive the car, so that I'd shut up because I would be crying. I'd be on a crying drunk. I think that I was still crying for my mother, because there wasn't anything else that I could cry about. So I just think that I was into feeling sorry for myself, and not quite understanding it, you know, and I didn't have — it's not like it is now. I think it's very good when older women take the time to talk to you. Because that's what happened at many times with me. There was — the woman who, there in Omaha, Mildred, I can't call her last name, who had the Omaha *Star*.

ROSS: That's the newspaper?

MILLER: Mm-hm. Black newspaper. And I would go and talk with her. See, I had picked out people to talk to that were helpful with me, you know, especially after my mother died. And I needed somebody to talk to and there was another couple that worked at the Urban League, uh, that were good to me and I could go talk to. Then there was a couple, a Jewish couple that had a store where I bought my clothes. They would talk to me. Take me in the back, feed me gefilte fish with matzo ball soup, and that was a kind of a warmth that I needed. And I think that helped, you know, having somebody to talk to, that was leading me in the right manner, or steering me in the right manner, I should say.

ROSS: Now, it sounds as if your home in Kansas was a very rural kind of atmosphere, a very close-knit community.

16:50

MILLER: Oh, yes.

ROSS: So what impact did that have on your upbringing? Obviously you're able to reach out and get support from a lot of people in your life, but you were definitely in a rural environment, so tell me more about that. Describe the home you remember the most.

MILLER: Well, I remember the place I was born, that little house there in Kansas. It was a little shack. I remember one thing. This is cute. They used to paper the walls with newspaper, clean newspapers, and I remember that, being able to look up and see the lettering on the wall, you know. That

was something that was nice. I used to love to see the clean lettering. So I remember that. That's vivid. I also remember the backyard where you'd go down and there was an outhouse. You'd have to walk almost to like to this corner here to get to the outhouse. And that's, you know, the outdoor toilet.

ROSS: I know what an outhouse is.

MILLER: Well, not everybody knows what an outhouse is. (laughs)

ROSS: OK.

MILLER: Or you walk a mile to get there almost. But anyway, we had a little garden and I remember there was kind of like a barn or something, a shed, and they had bought me, or somebody had given me this little iron stove for me to play with. And I remember having a ball with, you know, trying to cook outside, you know, on my little stove. And if I had anybody to play with, I'd get mad at them if they didn't want to eat my mud cakes.

ROSS: Were you aware of any incidents of racism in your home town? Or what was the relation –

MILLER: That's an odd thing.

ROSS: – between blacks and whites that you remember.

MILLER: There probably was but the only thing that I paid attention to as I've gotten older, is that I was on the wrong side of town. I was born on the side where all the whites were, but its very edge. There was also another person there, we called her Aunt Susie, who was the one who was the midwife who brought me into this world. The doctor showed up later. And um, of course I got mad at him, too, when I read it. On my birth certificate, he says, baby girl born alive.

ROSS: That's all he said?

MILLER: Thirteen-year-old schoolgirl. So, boy was I upset and angry and I said, you know, that just shows you how people think. Now, here's a child who has had a child. How come they can't make it, like, you know, sound different? That it doesn't have to sound like she was this terrible person. Thirteen-year-old schoolgirl. I think they could have said something else.

ROSS: So, what was your mother's educational background, if you know it.

20:15

MILLER: Now, that — also, I'm not too sure of, because if she got impregnated at 12, then they probably had to take her out of school, right? So that at 13

when she had me, which was in January, then you have to think about what was she doing. Because you see, as a child, I remember a couple of times, you know, as I was growing up. See, I remember back when I think I was just talking good, there's certain little things that I remember. That's like telling my — going to the outhouse and she had company, and I'm out there, screaming, yelling, "Gertrude! Bring me some toilet paper!" And I remember her being not upset, but saying to me, uh, "You can't say that to me like that. Yes, my name is Gertrude, but you are my child and I am your mother." And that I never forgot.

ROSS: So, just one more time. Your mother's full name was Gertrude –

MILLER: Davis Dunn. And then Fields, because she married — she married after, oh, goodness, I had to be at least seven or eight years old.

ROSS: So your birth name was –

MILLER: My birth name is Geraldine Amentha Dunn Fields Miller.

ROSS: Oh, Miller, once you got married.

MILLER: Mm-hm.

ROSS: We'll talk about that in a little while. In terms of your education, let's grow you up a little bit.

MILLER: OK.

ROSS: (laughs) Tell me about going to school. What was school like for you when you first went to school and how did that turn out for you?

MILLER: Like, from kindergarten on?

ROSS: Yeah. Tell me about –

MILLER: Well, kindergarten. I thought I was a model child and I went back years later, just to visit the school, and the woman looked at me and she said, "Oh, my God. You were a holy terror." Well, that kind of, like, wilted my spirits (laughs), because I always thought I was a pretty good child. But I think I was headstrong, you know, that I would do things that maybe another child wouldn't do. And I think it's due to my mother telling me constantly I had to take care of myself because there was no one else, you know, that I didn't have any brothers and sisters. So that's the way I feel that she meant, you know, because I don't think she came out and said that. She also told me I could ask her any question, and I have a feeling that I did. Because I've seen some very strange looks on that poor woman's face. So I know good and well that I was asking

23:25

questions because I was trying to figure out, you know, what was all of this about in life.

And I think that she also allowed me, when she was living in St. Joe, that there was call girls, you know, prostitutes. She would actually let me talk to them and they would talk to me and I think they also put some very good ideas in my head. They stressed the fact about, that education was what was needed and that type of thing. And that I had to keep myself, you know, on the straight and narrow. In other words, don't be chasing boys, which I did. My first boyfriend was gorgeous.

ROSS: How old were you?

MILLER: Uh, it was before I was 17. Fifteen? Ronald Holmes was just absolutely gorgeous. We both were dumb. And his mother liked me, so that I had an open way of being able to go to his house or he, you know, come and get me and we'd go out. But later on, he was really so handsome that one young lady decided that she needed him so she told him she was pregnant, which was not true. And so, later on when he came back and said, you know, "I see I made a mistake. Can you and I get back together?" I said, "No way. Mm-mm. That's over."

ROSS: Was he your first sexual encounter?

MILLER: Yes. And as I say, we were dumb. I'm laughing. It's a fact that neither one of us knew what to do. So an older person told us and showed us what to do.

ROSS: Now that must have been interesting. (laughs) How did you get tutoring from an older person?

MILLER: I don't know. I don't know how a lot of the things happen anyhow. They just happen and I just go along with it.

ROSS: OK. You didn't get pregnant?

MILLER: No, thank God.

ROSS: Have you ever been pregnant?

26:15

MILLER: They say I was. I had to have a hysterectomy when I was, what — 21? in which they left the cervix, and they just took it out in '98, because it had cancer cells growing on it. See, back there, they didn't take the cervix.

ROSS: A subtotal.

MILLER: They left it. And now they take them, you know, so that you don't have that worry.

ROSS: Right. But you got pregnant and you think you were pregnant and they did the hysterectomy? Tell me why –

MILLER: It just didn't hold. It didn't take. In other words, I guess I lost them. It says that I had the — the doctors said that I had probably been pregnant more than one time, but just didn't hold them.

ROSS: OK. And why did the doctor recommend a hysterectomy for you? 27:14

MILLER: Well, I — it started off with me going from — I don't think I was in Kansas, and I'd been visiting, and I had, as a child, they would tell me not to, uh, bring in too much water or too much coal. I did as I wanted to. I'd bring in a bucketful instead of a half-full. Didn't want to go back out there again. And I think I pulled something or something in my stomach, so that part of my ovary — one ovary, I think, was gone, and one of the tubes. And I was going from Hiawatha to, I think, Savetha or Fairview, one of the two, because I had a great aunt living in Fairview with cousins, and I would also visit them, too, regardless of where I was, I'd go from one to the other. And it felt like something broke, something snapped inside of me. And I think that was — either the — it had to be the tube, right? Sounds like the tube. Because, see, they never really explained it and so that I went from being ill at least once a year to finally going to have this operation.

ROSS: Was it at a hospital? What's the name of –

MILLER: Yes. In Omaha.

ROSS: Do you remember the name of the hospital?

MILLER: Not right off, no. I used to.

ROSS: Now, I've noticed that you haven't talked about the influence of religion in your life. Were your family churchgoers? And if so – 28:50

MILLER: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

ROSS: – what church did they go to? What denomination?

MILLER: African Methodist Episcopal Church. It was the only church they had.

ROSS: The AME.

MILLER: The AME. Later on, they finally got the Holy Rollers, as they called them –

ROSS: Pentecostals.

MILLER: – in the tent. In a tent. And uh, I don't know if they held onto that or not, because see, by — what? by the time I think I was 15 or 16, we had moved to Omaha, Nebraska. And then I started — I had my last year of — what do you call that, junior high? And then into high school there in Omaha.

ROSS: When you went to high school, did they do a full twelve years?

MILLER: No, that was a four-year, I thought.

ROSS: I mean, I'm saying — I happen to know that my mother, who graduated high school in 1933, high school only went to the eleventh grade back then in Texas.

MILLER: Oh, it went to the twelfth grade.

ROSS: So it went to the twelfth grade where you were.

MILLER: But I missed the twelfth grade because at 17, my mother died.

ROSS: And you –

MILLER: And I just dropped out. I couldn't handle it.

ROSS: OK. That had to be very devastating. So, you were 17. You were born in 1920, so that would have been 1937 when you dropped out of school, if my math is right. Tell me about the Depression, because obviously, that was going on while you were in school. Tell me how that affected your family.

30:50

MILLER: Well, um, we were able to, I guess, survive, because someone would get the food they gave out, you know. They gave out cans of meat, they gave out cans of different types of meat, but they also gave out beans and flour, and I remember, uh, my — Aunt Agnes's son, his wife was working at a place, they used to come up with sweet potatoes. She used to bring them home. And I'll never forget that. But it was really a tough time for a lot of people.

ROSS: But your family was able to survive it largely because you all were food self-sufficient, more self-sufficient in terms of food?

MILLER: Oh, yes, you know. We would, uh, you know, scramble around and come up with ways of bringing food to put on the table.

ROSS: And what does that mean, scramble around?

MILLER: Well, you know. This one would work someplace to get a certain amount of, maybe, flour, beans, whatever. Staples, I would say, you know.

ROSS: So it sounds like your family had the — I hate to say this, but like an attitude towards work. I mean, it seems to have given you a strong work ethic.

MILLER: Mm-hm.

ROSS: Could you tell me about who influenced you in terms of developing a strong work ethic and how –

MILLER: Well, again, I go back to that Aunt Retta.

ROSS: She was clear?

MILLER: She was just, you know, she told me to do housework. I learned to cook from my mother and others. But my Aunt Retta was just a stickler for being neat, of which I'm not at this present time, and keeping myself and the place clean. She used to tell me, "When you get to clean a house, it's yours until you leave it. Clean it like it's yours. Then you can turn and look 'fore you walk out that door, turn back to look to see what it is that you have done."

ROSS: OK. But did you always plan on being a housekeeper, or were you planning on doing something else with your life, before you dropped out of school? Tell me about those early dreams of Geraldine.

MILLER: Oh, well now, before I dropped out of school, I didn't tell you that I think the year before, I had — with Expression, I think it was Expression [i.e., a class in oratory — LR], I took a book called *Dreamy Kid*, pulled it down — I mean, a book. Pulled it down to a half an hour, picked out the people to do this *Dreamy Kid*. Got the glee club to help, and we decided we would do this play called *Dreamy Kid*. We did. And we did it, we were good enough to do it against the other high schools. That year, Central High won. My *Dreamy Kid* came through. The only thing that bothered me is the young lady who was supposed to be helping me, who would open up the door, look in, and say, "How're you doing?" Close the door and go on about her business. She had no idea what I'd done. She didn't know what, how we had rehearsed, all of that. That was done by me, and I was just enjoying it. It was fun, you know. I had parts of the glee club singing in the back. I played the part of the grandmother who died. (laughs)

ROSS: So, you acted, produced –

MILLER: Oh, I hadn't thought of that in that manner, but it was so much fun. And then we're looking in the newspaper, and it talked about her being the one. So I ran to this Omaha *Star* person, Mildred, and told her what had happened. She just immediately called the Omaha *Herald* and told him he had to retract that. The young lady's here. She's heartbroken. So they retracted it.

ROSS: So now, what was it that you didn't like, that they had credited the play to the other girl?

MILLER: This woman who had opened up the door and said, "How're you doin'?" She had did that. No, she hadn't put them people together, I did. And I did not want her getting credit. See, again, that's me. That's the part that my mother was saying, "You got to take care of yourself. Don't be afraid to speak up." That type of thing. So, I grew up with that in me. To be aggressive, I think is the words.

ROSS: And claim what is yours to rightfully claim.

MILLER: Right, right.

ROSS: OK. I'm going to take a break right here. We'll come back in a minute… [pause in recording]

OK, we are recording again. We had just finished talking about — you're dropping out of high school, and so what did you do when you first dropped out of high school in terms of deciding what kind of work you were going to do, and who encouraged you to do that?

36:30

MILLER: Well, I was doing housework, plus I was dancing at nights. I would go find myself gigs and would try to teach a couple other young people to be able to have someone to work with. So, we would make our little piece of change from that. You know, we'd go in and ask the man did he need an entertainer. We was there to work if necessary. So, I got a lot of jobs like that, you know, to where they'd let you walk in.

And then, after a certain length of time, I worked at a placed called the Barrel House, which I just loved. It was so much fun. There they had a little band and then there were two or three of us girls that would work or dance, you know. We had had steps made, like Bojangles, and we danced up and down the steps, tap danced. That was fun, you know. The woman who worked with me's name was Helen. I can't remember her last name.

I'm doing good to remember, uh, all the different names of different people I've met along the way and have had something to do with my life and helped — I would say, it helped mold me into the person that I am.

ROSS: So, how did you get — I mean, did you just normally want to start dancing, or how did you get into dancing?

MILLER: As a child. Remember I told you that, in kindergarten, we won the talent show, and traveled across the state of Kansas? And my mother bought my first grade clothes with that. And anytime that when I was little, any time that I heard the drums, I didn't need to hear anything else. Just the drum beat itself would cause me to start wiggling and do my thing.

ROSS: What did they say about you wiggling to that drum beat?

MILLER: They did not like it, because I was constantly trying to twist the rump.

ROSS: What did they call that kind of music? Oom-pah music?

MILLER: Well, the Oom-pah music ended up being when I was in high school, and I had joined the glee club. And I had a nice voice, which I cracked my larynx when my mother died, because I would dance, sing, whatever. Anytime, anyplace, anywhere. As long as you paid me.

ROSS: So how did you become a domestic worker?

MILLER: Well, there wasn't hardly anything else there for you to do at that time, you know. We're talking about the 40s, 30s, 40s, and 50s. Uh, later on, we'll say, at the War, the time of the War –

ROSS: World War II?

MILLER: Yeah. They were actually — I actually got a paper asking me to sign up for the Army, and there was a man that, who was a friend of the woman next door, who didn't like the idea of me being so young and trying to get into the military forces. So he would talk to me for hours about not joining.

ROSS: And so you stayed in domestic work?

MILLER: Well, it was either — it wasn't so much as domestic at that time. See, I was still in school.

ROSS: So what age were you when you became first a domestic worker?

MILLER: Oh, I had to be, what? I think I was in grade school, because the first time I did anything for money was — I went to this woman's house and would make a fire in her furnace, because as a child, I had been taught how to make a fire, you know, in one of those old cook stoves.

ROSS: Potbelly stove?

MILLER: No, not the potbelly, but the regular cooking stove that you used wood and coal in. And see, I had been taught how to lay the paper, how to put

the kindling on, and then how to put the coal on. So I was taught how to do that as a youngster. And I remember peeling potatoes, and I'm quite sure I peeled almost all the potato away, and I don't think I washed them, but I'd take these dirty potatoes, put them in a skillet, and fry them and eat them.

ROSS: OK. So you're saying you became — you started doing paid domestic work when you were in grade school?

MILLER: Mm-hm. Yes.

ROSS: So that it's been there for you all along.

MILLER: Yes.

ROSS: So when did you become, like a professional dancer?

42:20

MILLER: Um, well, I had to be 18. The time — a year after my mother passed. I had to have money to live off of, you know. I was constantly with one of my aunties, either Aunt Agnes or I'd try to find — and they'd try not to get me to go off and live by myself but I would, you know. And so it was doing housework during the day and trying to get some work doing dancing, or getting a waitress job, you know. It was those three things. I finally got an elevator job at one of the major hotels. And I saw the ad, went in, and the man — we talked about, you know, the job and what it entailed, and then I told him that he wasn't born to the seat that he was sitting in.

ROSS: Mouthy thing, aren't you?

MILLER: And so I kind of laughed, and then he told me why he gave me the job. He said, "You know, you made me think back to when I was a little poor child, a urchin out here on the corner in front of this hotel, shining shoes." He said, "And I thought you needed the job, beings you reminded me of it."

ROSS: So, were you one of the first black women to run that elevator?

MILLER: Yes. My color. In other words, there were Ruth Gail Griffon, who was a high school friend of mine, who looked almost white, she had a job as an elevator person. But as a woman of color, African American, of brown skin and darker, definitely would not get front-type jobs. I was in a major hotel and running a front elevator. Not a back one, but a front one.

ROSS: So how did the whole question of light skin, dark skin, black people, affect you? I mean, were you conscious of colorism as you were

44:42

growing up? That the light-skinned people seemed to be preferred? I mean, did that affect you at all?

MILLER: Not at all. My cousins, and they would all be second cousins, because they were great-aunts' children, were different colors. Aunt Middy's children — because she was dark — she had Irene, who looked almost white; Melvin, who looked like he could be Italian or something of the sort; Bill and the other one were more brown; and Nina was the only one that was dark like her mother. So I was used to that. I came up around it. The different colors never bothered me. See, no one never said anything to me about me being who I was, so I didn't question it.

And the first time I heard the word, the "N" word, I knew what it meant, but that wasn't gonna be me. In fact, I told a little white girl one day, she said, "Oh, there goes a nigger," and I got up to her and I looked down in her face, and I said, "You are a nigger." And this child almost had a fit.

ROSS: So you turned the tables on her.

MILLER: Mm-hm.

ROSS: So, I have this photo of you as a nude dancer. What age were you when this photo was taken?

46:27

MILLER: Twenty-two. I had just come back off the road. I was with Hinny Brothers' Carnival and it gave me the opportunity to see the South. That was 1949 and '50 [sic], and I really and truly loved going to the places. It was — I didn't like the idea of going in the back door to get something or going around the corner there to be able to get what I needed, and people had a hard time making me not say the wrong things to the wrong people. Because if the white person said the wrong thing to me, they had to really and truly kind of gather around me to keep me from answering, because I did answer.

ROSS: So tell me about nude dancing, though. I mean, you've heard the story of Josephine Baker and how she was the heartthrob of France.

MILLER: See, I was a chorus girl, so being a chorus girl doesn't mean that you're out front. So I was one of those that helped break the barrier. We was in Mississippi, I forget where in Mississippi, but I was standing outside, uh, a store, and they had a lot of lovely clothes in the window, and I'm standing there looking with four or five other chorus girls and the woman came out and of all people, she grabbed my hand and was pulling me in the store. And she's saying, "Honey, you can buy any one of those clothes you want to, and you get through picking them beans, you can come in here and pay on that a little at a time."

So I still hadn't answered her, and everybody looking at me, and I could tell by their looks, they didn't want me to say anything. But when

she pulled me all the way in the store, and I said, I gotta answer her. She finally says, "Which one would you like to have?" I said, "Well, I didn't really come in here to buy. I was just admiring the beautiful things you — in your window." And so she dropped my hand like it was a hot potato. "Well, where y'all from? Who y'all with?" You know. And I told her that we were with Hinny Brothers' Carnival and that we were going to be on that night and why didn't she come to see us?

So she brought not only her family but the people from the store and I think a couple more families. They took up the whole front row. And because they could not see me, but they could hear me, I'd be in the back. I had a ball in the back. You couldn't see me, but you could hear me. And they said, Bring her out front. And it was just like a chant, and it got louder and louder and louder. Bring her out front. Bring that woman out front. And I helped break that barrier of the darker girls being in the back and the lighter ones in front.

ROSS: So, colorism did affect you, because you were in the back row of the dance?

MILLER: But who cared? I had fun back there. I was back there all by myself. I was yelling, I was, Ha, ha, ha. And I'd sing along with — I did all sorts of things in the background. I had a ball.

ROSS: Was there sexual activity and abuse, maybe, of the girls who were in the chorus line while y'all traveled with the circus?

MILLER: No. No, we had a very clean group of people. It was really, really nice. Uh, I think only one girl decided to get with the — what do you call it? the men that put the stakes in and what have you, put the tents together? And I think we tried to tell her that he was not for her. She was out of Chicago. She was just a beautiful young black woman, and she decided to get with him and I'm quite sure her life was not as good as it could have been.

ROSS: But tell me about the culture of posing nude. That just seems so astonishing to me. (both voices)

51:08

MILLER: Well, the reason that was done — that was the only time I did that and there was no one in the house but my husband and I, and I had just come off of the show, and I'd been in Hot Springs, Arkansas. I quit the show in Hot Springs, Arkansas, and got a job waiting table there. There was a man that lived there. He was there for some unknown reason, who had been a person who, a masseur or whatever, that took care of fighters, and he used to — him and I used to take his truck and go up there and fill up God knows how many containers and get that Hot Springs water, bring it back to the hotel, pour it in this big tub, I would get in and soak in it. My skin, when I left Hot Springs, was absolutely gorgeous. I was just really proud of the way my skin looked.

So he used also to, because I had been dancing — when you start dancing, you have all sorts of aches and pains, you have what they call charley horses: you wake up in the middle of the night screaming because your muscles that you've been using daily are not being used anymore, so they contract and all that. So he was helping me out with that, like he'd crack all the bones in my fingers and toes and what have you. And so that when I went home, I looked like a new person.

So I was proud of that skin, and my husband and I was talking about it and he said, "That water really did you good." So we decided that I should have a picture and in it I would probably stand like I was holding a big ball, but with my back kind of turned, so that, you know, you don't get a frontal thing. And that was my idea of pose.

ROSS: It's a pretty picture. Now, this is the first time you've mentioned your husband, so tell me how you met, how you got married, how long y'all stayed together.

53:19

MILLER: Well, I met him because I used to go to Council Bluff. I had an aunt by marriage who lived there with her son, and I met Irvin through that manner, you know.

ROSS: What was his name?

MILLER: Irvin.

ROSS: Irvin what?

MILLER: Miller. Leslie Irvin Oliver Miller. That was his whole name. And the man was very bright. He could read blueprint. He could draw blueprint, and then he could build from it. He built me the most beautiful kitchen from the back porch that you've ever seen in your life. Beautiful kitchen. But he was also a person that liked — he made good money, he worked at the wheel foundry, where they made wheels for the train? So it wasn't that he didn't make the money, but he'd drink it up, you know. I'll never forget the time that he came in and they said he had bought champagne and was drinking it out of some woman's shoe, and I said, "This is ridiculous," and he had crawled in the house. I was so mad at him I just beat on him and the next day, he said, "I don't understand why I feel so sore." And I looked at him and said, "I don't either."

But you also had — if he'd hit me sometime, I think the one time he hit me and I said, "I'm not going through this." I picked up an ashtray I had. I bent the ashtray — one of them standing ashtrays? I just tried to bust his head open with that ashtray. Because see, I had not been taught to be, you know, to sit back and allow you to hurt me, so of course when you hit me, then I was ready to hit you back. First couple of times, that was — I said, you know, I think I shed a few tears the first time. The second time, I began to think about it and the third time, I just tried to

do him in. So when I figured one day that it was time for me to go, that I'd had enough.

And see, I hadn't been married no time when he said, when the people came around and asked, could I go on the show, he told them, "Yes." You know. I don't think I'd a let my wife who was only — had been married to for a short time, I wouldn't have let her go someplace like that. Not unless I was going to be there with her. That's my idea, but I had no idea how he was thinking.

ROSS: So how long did y'all stay married?

MILLER: Two years.

ROSS: Did you officially divorce?

MILLER: No. I got a legal separation and then I let it drop.

ROSS: So, technically, you're still married to him. Is he still alive?

MILLER: No, I don't think so.

ROSS: You haven't stayed in contact?

MILLER: No. The last time I heard from him, he was in jail and he told me I was still crazy.

ROSS: What city was he in, in jail?

MILLER: I didn't hear you.

ROSS: What city?

MILLER: Uh, where was I? I was in Ocean City, New Jersey. I had, um, been able to come out of Omaha because — in the Middle West and in certain areas in the South, you didn't really make a whole lot of money. I started off work, I was making 25 cents an hour. So in four hours' time, you know what you had. You had a dollar, right? So, in eight hours' time, you had two dollars. Well, what're you going to do with that, you know. So as I went along, I think I learned so much from working in homes, like my Aunt Retta had told me, that house was mine until I was through with it, and then I was to stand back and look and see what I had done. You know, look at the work that you had done, to see if it was done correctly, if it looked well. If it looked good to me, it should look good to you.

ROSS: So, how did you make your way to the East Coast? Was it by following higher wages?

MILLER: More or less. But let me explain. I dreamed one night that seven and seven in the horses was running and that I was going to win. And also in that dream, I swore up and down, I told somebody which I did not. So that when I got to the racetrack and played my first seven and played, you know, the double so I'd be able to have the two horses together, the daily double, I told this — the twins, there was two older women that were twins that I hung out with when we went to the track — "I think I told you this." She said, "No, you haven't said anything to anyone." "Yes, I did." "No, you didn't." So then she said, "And you need to put a place or a show bit on that because that's a nag, that's not gonna run anywhere."

The first horse got out there in front and didn't stop until it come in. In the second race, that seven got out there and they swore up and down that was a nag, too, wasn't going to win. And I won so much money, I can't tell you how much I won because I can't remember it, I was so excited I didn't know what to do with myself. So when I went to get my money, the man thought that I was, you know, I was able to control my facial expressions and I couldn't control my knees trembling but I could do something about that facial expression. The man said, "You don't seem nervous. This is an awful lot of money you got comin'. How do you want it?" I said, "in hundred dollar bills." I had a stack of hundred dollar bills. I mean, I had a stack of hundred dollar bills.

So I paid off everything and I said to myself, now I have the money. If I need to travel, I can. And I began to search and see where else was getting more money than what I was getting there in Omaha. And then I was tired of Omaha anyhow. I'd left my husband and I had bought some nice things for the house — I had a house, was renting a house. And I just thought it was just time to see where else I could, oh, live and probably make a better living than what I was doing here.

ROSS: Let's stop right there because the tape's getting ready to run out. I still want to follow up with a question on that, though.

END CD 1

CD 2

ROSS: It's a gray day today. OK. And so, you won this money on the horse race, hundreds of dollars, so what did you decide to —

MILLER: Thousands.

ROSS: Thousands of dollars. Well, what did you decide to do differently to change the course of your life in that moment?

MILLER: Well, you know, I tried to find out what would be — not what, where would be the best place to go, so I began to write different ones, you know. And as I got answers back, I said, well, you know, the aunt by marriage, Kathleen, had told me about that work, you know, work was good there in New Jersey, especially around the casino and what have you. So when I went to Ocean City, New Jersey, and worked for a woman there who had money –

ROSS: You worked in a private home?

MILLER: Yes, and I remember meeting the princess — the one, the young American girl that married the prince? God, how come I can't think of their name?

ROSS: Oh, the one that — she was in *The Philadelphia Story*?

MILLER: Yes, yes, yes.

ROSS: I don't remember her but I know who you're talking about.

MILLER: I remember her being there in the house and playing the piano.

ROSS: Grace Kelly.

MILLER: Huh?

ROSS: Grace Kelly.

MILLER: Grace Kelly, yes. I remember meeting her, and I thought about it later on as, you know, when she got married and all that, and I said, "I remember meeting that young lady."

ROSS: So you were mainly working for white women who were quite wealthy –

MILLER: Yes.

ROSS: – while you were there? So how were the race and class dynamics between you and the women that you worked for? Did you feel that they respected you? Did you have problems respecting them? Tell me about some of those experiences.

MILLER: Well, I very rarely had a problem. Before I left Omaha, I worked for a woman who had a daughter that danced, and she was the head of AGVA [American Guild of Variety Artists], the entertainers' union. And she told me that "I could give you a card" — because she knew that I was doing this work dancing at nights — "but you got to continue to work for me." And I got mad at her and quit. Because she again has that, you're telling me what to do, and being who I am, I've never taken kindly to being told what to do. I kind of like think for myself. As I say, my mother was very big on that, me being able to think clearly and do what I thought was right, not what somebody else thought.

ROSS: So, and in New Jersey, did you run into race or class problems with people that you worked for?

MILLER: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

ROSS: Tell me some of those problems.

MILLER: I worked for one couple who had, I think, two children, and the baby, she was like, a, you know, wanted somebody to be working around the clock almost. She wanted you to take her baby out for a walk, she wanted me to bombard him with words, and, uh, because she had to go to B'nai B'rith, or she had to go shopping, she had to go here and go there, and she'd actually tell me, "You have to start lunch or dinner or whatever, after you get through with this, plus, you got to take the child out." How're you going to do all that? And one day, she started telling me about this and I just lost it. And I told her off but good. I said, "I am a human being. I am not a mechanical person, you know, and I am going to do the best I can but it's impossible for me to do all these things that you want done at the same time. It's just impossible." So, she said, "Well, I guess you're gonna quit now." And I said, "No, I'm staying here until after Christmas."

ROSS: So you managed to stay in control of your own life and situation. What happened, when you were ready to quit, then she didn't want you to go, right?

MILLER: She probably was ready to let me to go but it gave her an opportunity to get someone else.

ROSS: So how did you find new jobs?

MILLER: By word of mouth, or, like, it was hard when you got here to New York, because I had to go to the New York State Unemployment office, and would get word. Because you just couldn't take somebody's word that somebody needed someone. And I worked for some very nice people and I worked for some that I figured that I wished I had never met them, you know. But I've been lucky and working for decent people, you know, that they — I worked for one woman, I'll never forget. That the cheese was so old that if you throwed it on the floor, it would make a sound, you know. So there are people that want to get by with very little and hope to work you, overwork you, and then there are people that realize you're human and that they need to be decent, respect you.

ROSS: What year did you move here to New York?

MILLER: 1954.

ROSS: That was during the Korean War. Was there a lot of work available for domestics back then?

MILLER: Yes. I imagine so, but I did a whole lot of things. I just didn't work as domestic.

ROSS: Well, what other things you did?

MILLER: I was a wrapper, I would cook, I would wait tables. I would — what, anything as long as I wasn't stealing, you know. I used the fact that I'd learn to cook as a youngster coming up. I remembered a lot of the recipes and then I was able to listen to other people and get ideas. So I put all that together and that was my work, uh, that I was able to use. Whatever I did, I would try to make it better the next time. You know, if it was cooking, find out more, do what you can, and I did a — served on all the Jewish holidays. I've had people who would call me back each time. And each time, it was sometimes more money because they would like the way I do things.

ROSS: Did you learn to especially cook Jewish food, or –

MILLER: They would teach you, you know. If the — you'd say to people, "Gee, I like that. I wished I could do that." Then you'd get the recipe. So all you have to do is use your head and say it in a nice manner, "Gee, I really like that food. What was that? How do you fix that?" And then they'll say, well — and they'll take special care to tell you their way of doing it.

ROSS: So you cooked kosher and regular?

MILLER: Yes.

ROSS: What do you think was the source of your strength and your pride to help you survive what had to be some hard times sometimes?

7:55

MILLER: Oh, I think the determination to make it. I think that each one of us has our strengths in different areas. Mine has been that I have never known how to let people push me around. I really and truly am against that, and I've always been able to say, "I don't like that and don't to that again. I don't like that." So, I think when you speak up, you end up having people to respect you, because they don't want you bawling them out. They don't want you to say I don't like what you just did so don't do it anymore. And I think that they go away from that little area so that you have a smoother time in working with — you know, different nationality, because every nationality is different.

ROSS: Explain some of the differences.

MILLER: Well, it's — I think in the way we think, you find more Caucasian women feel as though they are privileged, you know, but when it all boils down, they are not, because those who are running the country when they want to get rid of you, have no problem getting rid of their own.

ROSS: How did they act like they were privileged? What were some of the things that they did?

MILLER: Well, it's all right for me to downplay anything you do, you know. Oh, that's not much. We'll have, like, we'll say, like, the one woman wanted to say, "Well, Geraldine Miller's a has-been." You know. Well, housework is something that's been here for ages and it's gonna be here after I'm gone if they have houses. It's something that the average woman does. And that was my one reason for putting the Household Technicians together, was that my mother, my grandmother, all the family that I knew, had did housework. So that meant they was working for peanuts, more or less, and — to able to have enough money to take care of the family.

ROSS: Did you ever experience any incidence of violence or sexual harassment or racial discrimination as a domestic worker?

MILLER: Um, not really. As I say, once I would tell people what I wouldn't — you know, because I might just come in telling you what I wouldn't take. I'm not gonna do so and so. I introduced a lot of women to a mop, because they was used to you crawling around on the floor, and I knew what it had done to other people. It's caused a lot of women to have problems with arthritis, real problems, crawling around on their knees and, you know, not every house is that warm or that you can say, crawl around on your knees for 10, 20 years, and still be able to continue doing that type of work, you know, because people used to load their

floor up with wax, and then at one time or another, you would have to try to scrape that wax off. See now, I've been in that where I tried to get it off, and they'd have so much down there that the buildup was just murder.

ROSS: I'm going to ask you a question in a minute about the Household Technicians' Union, but how has the field of domestic work changed from where you began to where you retired from it? What are the major changes that you saw?

10:12

MILLER: Well, I think that, uh, white women, or other nationality of women that will hire you has been able to think more like you're not this little machine that they brought in, but that's a human being that is in your house to help you, and that you have to treat them better than what you did before. And I think that has gotten to — I've worked for very, very few people that have made me feel inferior. Very few.

ROSS: Did you see other women of color come into the field while you were involved in it? I know that domestic work for a long time was predominantly African American women.

MILLER: Mm-hm.

ROSS: But it started to change –

MILLER: Oh, it had already changed.

ROSS: Tell me –

MILLER: You know, let me explain. There is, I think, I used to work for a woman called Lewis on Park Avenue, and the women that did the heavy cleaning — heavy cleaning, hear me now, were Irish. And these two women would come in and clean the fixtures and little things that I wouldn't do or someone else, because of the other work we had didn't allow us to do it. Didn't have the time for it.

ROSS: Now, what time, what decade, did the Irish women kind of disappear from domestic work?

MILLER: I don't know if they disappeared, but uh, it's according to who you were working. The real rich would bring in more than one person to do something, and the women that didn't have, you know, that were well off, didn't have but sometimes that one person working for them all the time, or they might have some males come in and do something that's up high. Like the fan, clean it off, whatever.

ROSS: So what about Latino women? Did you see an increase in them doing work?

MILLER: Not at that time, no, no, not at that time.

ROSS: And the time we're talking about –

MILLER: It was — that was what? I founded the group in '71 and, like in, '72, 3, 4, and up for at least for ten years, and then if you had any dealings with groups like the Congress [National Congress of Neighborhood Women], what you ended up seeing was that the immigrants were coming in and they were hiring them instead of the African American because they were cheap labor and they could get by with it. You know, they could threaten the woman with deportation and they can't threaten us, we'd a been threatened already, and we're still here.

ROSS: So, let's go back to 1971. What was going on in 1971 that caused you to organize?

15:35

MILLER: Well, I got on the train, going upstate to work, and another woman got on and started talking about the Urban League was trying to get household workers together to see if they could form a union, and wouldn't I like to have fringe benefits. Well, those two words did it. (laughs) Friend, yes, I wanted it, and I wanted it with a passion. So I kind of like set back and waited for the other woman to move and do something. So she said, "Well, whatever we do, we'll get together and see if we can't talk about this."

In the meantime, they had a conference in New York that was another group of household workers that had been put together by a male. I'll never — Ben Lauren. And they were all from the union. Now you have to remember, there were the porters on the trains, and the waiters. I had met that man that had run that. So, we had that to think about, and how do we do this? How do we make this work? So I thought about it and I said, "You know, I'd like to have fringe benefits, you know. That's something I think I need." And the more I thought about it, the more I wanted it.

So I made the first meeting and I met the people from the National Committee on Household Employment, which was based in Washington, which was run by Eleanor — you know, put together by Eleanor Roosevelt and Mary McLeod Bethune. Had come together with some other people and pulled together this household committee, and they were having a conference, and I think '71, '72, and that first conference I went to, I was sold. I had to bribe people — in fact, I bribed some people with food to have enough people on that bus so I could have the whole bus. I was — and able to get the Bronx Urban League to sponsor the bus (laughs), and then we stayed in the hotel free. So that first year was really something for me, to see 500, over 500 black women who were household workers, who looked like they was Miss Ann herself — not Miss Ann's maids, but Miss Ann. I was so proud and it was just such a wonderful, wonderful feeling to be around

that many women that did the same work I had been doing, and suffering the consequences like I had to.

ROSS: I want to stop you and ask you about that phrase "Miss Ann," because obviously as a black woman, I understand it, but someone looking at this documentary 20 years from now may not understand that phrase. So, explain to me, who is Miss Ann and what does she mean to you?

MILLER: Well, you meaning when you say, "Miss Ann," you're talking about that person you worked for, who had the money, who was able to buy the clothes and think nothing of it. So you called them "Miss Ann" and they all were Miss Ann. Just like they would have names for us, you know, we all had to be Suzy or something else stupid, when we all had separate names.

ROSS: But they all called you by the name they were most familiar with.

MILLER: Yes. I've had that to happen.

ROSS: OK. So this was 1971. What was the official name of the group that you started?

20:10

MILLER: I started Household Technicians of New York State, but I had to do it over again because I founded a group that the women had brought in, because only two of them was my friends, the rest of them didn't like me because I was a day worker.

ROSS: What does that mean?

MILLER: I mean, I worked by the day.

ROSS: So how did that separate you from the other group?

MILLER: Those other women worked for people, rich people for all week long or how many days it was that they'd work for them. Or, some of them were caterers, because they used to fight with me and tell me that, why did I lie about saying I was[n't] a caterer. I said, because I don't know how to make everything, so I can't be a caterer. You know, I'm a good cook. Just let it go at that. So they got mad at me about that. Then a lot of them got mad at me because they thought I'd been to college and I hadn't. See, that's Aunt Retta, pushing that English language and all that into me, and to make me read, because I'll never forget. She said, "Books are your friends." And I've had a lot of friends for a long time.

ROSS: Now, you were talking about a culture that I barely understand, largely because I'm the first generation of my family that didn't do domestic work, so — my mother did but I didn't. So when you talk about the tensions between those who were day workers versus those who were

live-ins versus those who were the caterers, could you talk more about that, because there are — you're talking to a whole generation of black women who don't understand nothing about that.

MILLER: That's true. Uh, and it's because it gave them a different status, each one. It's like if you were a caterer, that gave you a little more status. If you were considered a cook, that gave you a status. If you were just a cleaning person, that put you down below the others. So I was one of those that didn't always cook in the home. I would be the cleaner. And if I was doing it by the day, instead of by the week, then that would lower my status. So, I'm the one with the lowest status of the whole group that I put together, and they tried to hand me my head almost every time we met. I did not know anything about parliamentary procedure. I didn't know there was such a thing as a *Robert's Rules of Order*. I had never wanted to be an officer of anything, and here I am, because I want these fringe benefits, I had put this group together, and my mother had once told me that anything I do, I own it. And you cannot have it.

So, I guess I put — say, got a mouthful of the group and decided I would not let go, so I ignored them and their nonsense, and just worked towards trying to make things work. You know, trying to pull it together. I noticed that we were on — what is it called, "Moving On" — Helmsley — that program that was on, "Moving On Up To The East Side"?

ROSS: Right. *The Jeffersons*.

MILLER: *The Jeffersons*. They used the term "the Household Technicians." They had met one of us on a plane, because honey, I would grab a plane — let's, and I'd put the go to it — talk to anybody that wanted to talk to me because I figured, some way and another, we got to get these fringe benefits, and another thing I'll also say is that we did not get these fringe benefits, or we didn't get underneath the Federal Minimum Wage Act by ourselves. There were women from B'nai B'rith. There were women from other different areas. I met all the big shots once I founded it. People would — women who were already somebody would say, "Come on. Let's go here." And I followed them. I met Kate Millet. I met Bella Abzug. I found out — two white women took me to Flo Kennedy's house. I didn't get there by myself. And Flo turned out to be just a wonderful person. I was told about Florence Rice, Harlem Consumer Education Council. These are the women who were there and gave me that help, kind of backed me up. I needed support and those were my supportive friends.

ROSS: [pause in recording] Could you tell me how — what techniques did you use in order to, let's say, fill that bus with women? How did you recruit them?

25:50

MILLER: Oh, to go on that first bus ride, we walked around and talked to people. We put notices in the washrooms, you know, the laundry rooms, and we would talk to other — if I could find someone to talk to, as you come in and out of the place where you worked, you'd talk to any of the other maids you'd see and tell them what you were doing and why you were doing it. And if they'd say yes — they would, you know, show up at the bus. But I had a bunch of elite, we'll say, women who considered theirselves not only household workers but caterers. So I ended up with half elites and half just plain workers and the elites really and truly were very hard to deal with. Like the one woman said, "You can't be our founder." And I said, "Well, being that you didn't start it, I wouldn't suggest you try to take it."

ROSS: So you had to learn processes of dealing with women who were suffering from what we now call "internalized oppression."

MILLER: Thank you. And that's sad, you know, instead of trying to figure out how we was going to work together. If I wanted something done, what was cute, I would say to the one that everybody liked and say, you know, "Wouldn't it be nice if we could do so and so and so and so" — and then walk away. Sooner or later, she would say, "You know what I just thought of? We can do blah-blah-blah-blah," and I said, "Ah-ah!" And it would get done.

ROSS: Now you mention meeting Eleanor Roosevelt and Mary McLeod Bethune. What impact did women like that have on your understanding of the world, your consciousness?

25:55

MILLER: Well, meeting Bethune was quite something. I was there at her college, staying in her — what do you call it, the rooms?

ROSS: The dormitory.

MILLER: The dormitory. When I was on the road, some way or another, we got hooked into that and we had to stay there. And I knew who she was, and so did the other women, so we felt privileged, even though we weren't students, to even be there. And I didn't get a chance to meet the woman in person but I was there at that college.

ROSS: But did you meet her later on when you came to that conference in Washington?

MILLER: No. She wasn't there. Now once they put it together, like Eleanor Roosevelt, a couple of times that I did see her, was not in conjunction with us — with the household workers.

ROSS: OK. Now, everybody has to deal with racism or oppression, and we find that most people kind of like melt into society. They don't resist it. So what's special about Geraldine Miller that says, you ain't gonna take it?

29:15

MILLER: I don't know if it's special. It's just, uh, I don't think that I need to make myself small. I need to stand up as tall as I can and be the person that I want to be. Or, be the person that I am.

ROSS: And you think that was Aunt Retta?

MILLER: Oh, Aunt Retta and my mother. Between — and others who was telling me that I was perfect. You know, like, my mother would look at me and say, "You know, you're beautiful." Somebody told me one day, "You know, you're not that pretty." I said, "My mother said I was beautiful," and rolled up my fist. Now, you take what my mother said. I believe my mother. You know, I can look in the mirror. I know that I'm not beautiful. But my mother said so, so I'm beautiful. And I think that has been helpful with me.

ROSS: Were you influenced at any time by the radical social movements, let's say the communist movement or the witch hunts of the McCarthy era? Were you even aware of those?

30:40

MILLER: I was aware, but never [involved] — well, I talked to people that worked within them, but it didn't make me want to be part of them.

ROSS: Smart. OK. Well, tell me about the name of the Household Technicians' Union, because that's an interesting name. You could've called it the domestic workers —

MILLER: Oh, that's cute.

ROSS: Tell us how that name came about.

MILLER: We took the name of Household Technicians because we feel that we were able to do anything with little or no supervision. And we felt as though technicians were people that did something and supposed to be great at it, and we felt as though that we household workers were great people as technicians. So we took the name of Household Technicians.

31:30

ROSS: How large did the group grow?

MILLER: Quite large.

ROSS: Do you –

MILLER: I have a listing at home of all the different cities.

ROSS: So it became national –

MILLER: – which will go into the archives.

ROSS: So it became a national movement.

MILLER: Oh, yes.

ROSS: So how did y'all meet on a national level?

MILLER: Well, see, as long as Ford was paying for it, Ford Foundation, we met once a year. Uh, I was put on the board because I threatened to quit, because I couldn't stand the women. All the women were black like me and about as ornery as they could get, you know, I was just very dismayed at the tone and the way that I had to try to get anything done. So I ended doing a whole lot of things on my own, but I was being helped from people, like, Channel 13 picked up on me, and they kind of, like, kept putting me on, you know, different programs, and then I became a — what do you call it? The first-time woman was Shirley Chisholm?

ROSS: '72 when she –

MILLER: OK. I was on with her, because she had ran as a vice-president?

ROSS: She ran for president.

MILLER: President, yes. So, there was a first. I was considered the first woman who started a major organization. And see, the women still didn't care about me. They didn't care about me being the first woman, because I was still a day worker, so I was beneath them, dog-gone it.

ROSS: Did y'all get any support or help from other organized unions at the time?

34:00

MILLER: Yes, I think so. I think that it's because of how you say, the work that was being done, uh, was not thought of as a job because housewives do it in their homes for nothing. So what they do, many times, is the thoughts go with, well all the women have to do this anyhow, you know.

But if I'm doing it for you for money, that's different, so that you can be able to go to work, or you can be able to do something else, as the reason why you would have a household worker in your house. And generally the ones — like, I didn't work for real rich people, and I didn't work for them because I liked the idea of working for the woman who needed help.

See, I was taught also to share as a child, being an only child, and I think that's very good, because I'll never forget, that they told me about

sharing and at Christmas, I got two doll buggies and two buggies. Two dolls and two buggies. I'll say it in that manner. One smaller than the other one. There was a little girl that lived next door to my great-grandmother, that I decided that she didn't get anything, so I gave her the small doll buggy and the doll. So all of my life, I've tried to share what I can.

ROSS: So you were drawn to working for more middle-class rather than extremely rich women?

MILLER: Mm-hm.

ROSS: Because –

MILLER: I felt more comfortable. I just really felt more comfortable.

ROSS: I'm going to pause this in case they want to come [pause in recording: NCNW workers coming in]

MILLER: Oh, you can.

ROSS: So why did you feel more comfortable working with, let's say, more — I don't want to say working-class, but middle-class women than rich women? What was about them that made you more comfortable?

MILLER: I don't know. I worked for a woman by the name of Anna Marie Corsetti, and uh, when Martin Luther King had that march, "I Have a Dream"?

36:14

ROSS: In 196-

MILLER: I was there. The woman sent me that I worked for. She gave me the ticket and the money and said, "You go. You got to be there." And I was in that — didn't know a soul, but I was standing up there, listening and wondering what the man was talking about, "I have a dream." And I think after that, and I heard it and really and truly heard it, I think it was on the radio, I understood what that meant.

ROSS: So it doesn't sound like your relationship with your employers was subservient at all but it sounds like it was much more of a partnership.

MILLER: Well, I think it might have been the way that I acted to begin with, to where I wouldn't let you put me down because of my race, that if I got a chance, I would really and truly jack you up, because I felt as though I had just as much right to be here on this earth as you. And I think that's what does it. I think we have to think something of our self. As there was the saying, "Be true to thine self?"

ROSS: "To thine own self be true," I think it was.

MILLER: I'm saying it backwards, right?

ROSS: That's all right. I understand. Like they say in Jamaica, "I over-stand." [Miller laughs] Now when you got back from the March on Washington, which was in August of 1963, did you discuss the march with the woman that had sent you?

MILLER: Yes.

ROSS: What did y'all talk about?

MILLER: You know, she wanted to know how many people were there and how did I like it. I was in awe. You know, the amount of people that was on that — in Washington that day was really something, you know. The devotion for King that people had. A lot of people thought a lot of him. Little people he probably didn't even know about, because he had — that was a symbol for us. He was somebody that was speaking — he was speaking what I would like to hear, you know. He was nonviolent, and yet he wanted something that I think I wanted.

ROSS: Was she Jewish that had sent you?

MILLER: Who?

ROSS: The lady who bought your ticket?

MILLER: No, she was Italian. See, so I run the gamut.

ROSS: You do, don't you. You did. But your story speaks so much of both the beauty and the challenges of interracial partnerships among women. I mean, it's just wonderful.

39:14

MILLER: It just proves that it can be done. And see, what I have done is I say — I feel as though that they don't treat me as badly as they do some of the younger women within the groups.

ROSS: And why is that?

MILLER: And that's because I don't allow you to do that to me. You know, because they say things that will, you know — if [you] accept it, OK, but if you don't accept it, then they're going to look at you differently. I'll never forget, a woman said to me one day, we were in Albany after we, the Household Workers, and Women's Political Caucus — and this little Jewish lady looked at me and she said, "You know what, Gerrie? It just makes me kind of nervous to see them people over there when they get together." I'm looking at her and I looked at them. "Hey, Hey, Beth,

where am I in your mind, honey? I am one of them." She looked at me kind of stupid like and she said, "Never thought it like that."

So now, you explain that to me, because I still don't understand it. Where was I in her head, you know? That she didn't put me with them people over there, who were African Americans, too. I'm here standing beside her as an African American woman and I'm not with them. So I don't know where I was. Maybe I didn't have no color.

ROSS: Well, you were a human being. It's hard to objectify someone you now know as a human being. But it was easy for her to objectify those people she didn't recognize as humans.

MILLER: OK, good. Thank you. I needed that.

ROSS: You know, you can't hate somebody once you get to know them.

MILLER: True.

ROSS: You can't objectify them once you get to know them.

MILLER: Isn't that something? Live and learn.

ROSS: You know that already, Gerrie.

I'm going to call for a break right now because your breathing is getting a little labored and so we're going to stop and take a break [pause in recording].

41:42

Repeat for me the name of the organization.

MILLER: The Household Technicians of New York State.

ROSS: You say it was not a union.

MILLER: The women did not want to be in a union. When they used to have the conferences, I used to get a call, from a month ahead of time to almost the last minute, Are you going to be there? We'd find out the union people are going to come, and we don't want that. And I don't know why one of them didn't speak up, but I'd be the only one who'd be telling the union people off.

ROSS: Why did you feel it necessary to tell the union people off?

MILLER: Well, I felt as though the union needed more money to buy another car with or put in their pocket, when we had not been getting that much money all that length of time, and then somebody else — we're going to give it to somebody else for him to buy hisself another Cadillac with? No way. That just did not make sense to me.

ROSS: So, did you at the time write letters or poetry or do any writing to document what was going on in your life?

MILLER: No. I am a person that I really and truly do not like writing.

ROSS: That's strange, because I get so many wonderful letters from you.

MILLER: When I do write, I think I must have thought it out in my head. I don't like long speeches and I don't like long letters. So I have to put it in a manner to where it's precise, you know, that I'm saying what I want to say, without it being lengthy.

ROSS: OK. How long did you stay with the Household Technicians? 43:50

MILLER: Well, how long did I stay? Until I guess I leave from here, there will still be a Household Technicians as the papers that went into Washington. We also have another paper that states about Household Technicians of the Bronx. Bronx Household Technicians, as you will see on the papers when I send them in, that I have papers from both. I ended up being the NOW New York State person that did the newsletter, that did a lot of other things, that traveled quite a bit. As I say, I was on all of the stations. I was on the BBC. There's another one, I can't think — is it Voice of America? it's an overseas type of thing, that everybody just looked, like, picked up and it had something to say about Household Technicians, and I think the reason was because it was a woman of color who had started it, you know, who had put it together. We had this big conference in July and by July the 25th, 1971, I put it together. In my house.

ROSS: Tell me about the struggle to get Household Technicians included in the Federal Minimum Wage Act. 45:28

MILLER: Boy, now that was something, that we really and truly needed the help of the other women who were of different nationalities to help us push for that, and that's the reason why we got under the Federal Minimum Wage. There was B'nai B'rith, who went out of its way to — and you'd be surprised at them, because I remember going to a lot of meetings with the Jewish group that met in a college and had a lot of programs, and I was invited. It's like I was invited to many things where I met Flo Kennedy and would be able to do things with them, like Flo was one who, as a person herself, was just very instrumental in me realizing that I should not, you know, pull back, but to fight harder for what I believed and wanted, and I knew that it was necessary for us to have — to be under the Federal Minimum Wage Act, so that we would have something to fight with. See, at first we had nothing and then, we'll say after that, after being able to speak with so many women from so many different areas, then people began to realize that we weren't asking for something, wasn't trying to hurt anybody, we just needed that level, and

that should be around the United States for not only the women in the North but in the South, East, and West, to be able to say that this is what we do, you know. But at this particular time, we have people who hire immigrants and have them to come in and then they find ways of not paying them and making slaves out of them.

ROSS: So what was the opposition to including Household Technicians in the minimum wage? I mean, was there –

MILLER: Oh, they thought we was going to picket. They said, If we do this, you'll be able to picket our house. And I said, "It would be kind of stupid for you to picket an apartment that was on the 27th floor." [Ross laughs] [pause in recording] This looks nice up here.

ROSS: We were talking about opposition to the minimum wage standards for Household Technicians. So you said they were afraid that you were going to go on strike?

MILLER: Well, they figured that you would picket, you know. That one of the elected officials — Well, you know, you could think about picketing my house. I said, "That's crazy." I said, "Suppose you lived on the 27th floor. I'm gonna picket your house? How'm I gonna get up there to picket? You know. Where I'm gonna walk? So how could I picket? I'd have to do the whole building." And I don't think any of us were thinking about that. I think what we were thinking of is that if there was going to be a wage, that the woman in the South — and this is what I was thinking about — who made less money and who'd be [doing] a lot more work, she would not be able to get by with that, you know. Because I had listened to the women when they'd come to the conference, and about how some of them were mistreated.

ROSS: Gerrie, you said something about papers on the Household Technicians of New York State and Household Technicians of the Bronx and you said there was some papers on you. Are you talking about the IRS 501 C3 papers that you have to file to incorporate as a nonprofit?

MILLER: No. That was done, as I say, whatever the paper was, I got a paper back. I can't remember what you call it, where they'd register the organization in Washington.

ROSS: But you have it in your archives, in your files?

MILLER: I think I have it. I just — I hope that it's in the file cabinet that's here in this building.

ROSS: Have there ever been any other oral histories or biographies done on you?

50:35

MILLER: No. The only thing is Channel 13, as I say, who was there, and did the first interviews.

ROSS: So, now we're going to switch to the women's movement. How did you join the National Congress of Neighborhood Women?

MILLER: Ah-ha. And what's that? Forty — not '40 — 1974, I think it was, or 5. There was a big meeting in East Berlin, Germany, and the National Committee on Household Employment, our parent chapter, thought that I should go. So I borrowed money and went, and it was kind of funny. The man that drove me out was a Yellow Taxi Cab driver who lived across the hall from me there, who took his time — he was, like, going to a funeral — taking me to the airport, and he got me there. I really looked up and I said, "I think that's my plane." And he would not drive any faster. He was, like, really creeping along. So I missed that plane. So I had to take — they put me up overnight in a hotel and I took the plane the next day, going to East Berlin, Germany. So I traveled there alone, and when I got out and got into the place, I walked into the door of the hotel, and they were calling my name, putting me on some committee when I wasn't even there, had got there just in time. That was an experience for me, because I really think I became more activist and — worse than what I'd been — because of the American Communists that was there, who had decided they was going to take over and just get everybody to do what they wanted. And that was really against my religion. So that there was also a woman there who had written this book on the politics of rape, who had been an extensive study on women who had been raped and put it into a book.

ROSS: Was that Susan Brownmiller?

MILLER: No, that wasn't Brownmiller, no. This was another young lady who was from England. In fact, I have the book at the house, I think, somewhere. I think I brought it. But anyway, it was really something for me to see. I had already experienced where people didn't like you when I founded the Household Technicians, and this experience was with the American Communists, who figured that they were there to run things to suit theirself. So that was a running battle of the whole week I was there. They were constantly telling you what you could and couldn't do.

There was a young Japanese woman that was there, and we had taken a liking to one another and she was there, not as — she was there as a photographer, I think, a person who was there who was supposed to be taking down and taking news back to her people. And for some unknown reason, they didn't want the two of us together. So people was constantly trying to divide me from this young lady. But we found ways to talk to one another anyhow. Didn't matter.

And of course, while I was there, I had a paper that I had tried to type up which, you know, I'm not a typist. So I had misspelled words and what have you, and sentences probably didn't make sense, some of

them. But I had did up a bunch of these papers and I had taken them with me, and there was another young woman of color who was there from California, and they were — what they were doing, they were messing with us because there was a woman from India who was from the lower caste, and they didn't want her to tell her story, and we wanted to hear it. So some of us relinquished our time to let her talk.

And so I just gave out my papers. And so this young lady who was from California, said, well — how'd she have that? "I'm going to speak for all of us, and I won't have any misspelled words." So, but then, you know, I'm not saying anything, I'm just looking at her. And she said something else and then I just lost it. You know, and I just told her, you know, "You don't know anything at all about my background. You don't know how come I'm here or why I'm here." And I said, "I haven't said anything to try to hurt your feelings, so just get off of it. Leave me alone."

So they then decided they would put me back on a list and — because my name had disappeared off of the list, and I told them, "No, you don't have to put me on the list. Just take these papers and see if you can read them." I said, "You can guess at it or come and ask me what I meant." But then, I'm mad, you know. At the same time, uh, the Africans who was in the room didn't like her being disrespectful to me, so they jammed her up, you know, and told her, you know, you don't say anything else to her. We'll getcha.

So I'm saying it's the same thing over and over again, to where you not only have different nationalities, you know, that are considered white, trying to put you in your place, you have your own kind trying to put you in your place, you know, as if to say, Well, I've been to college and you're just this little dumb child that just got off of the boat. I have found some of the people that didn't have what they call a high education schooling to be very, very smart. Very bright. And I think it's individuals, of how you look at a person and what you're hearing doesn't mean that they are a dummy. Just because they're not schooled doesn't mean that they don't know anything.

And of course, at that time, that was quite an experience for me to be around people from so many different countries and to see how they were able to live there. I was the only one that they followed. They followed me wherever I went, because there seemed to be this going battle with the people that had come from America and American Communists, that they were constantly trying to shut us up, they were trying to keep us from being able to speak about what it was that we needed to be able to tell others. So, it was — it caused me to tell a woman to leave my people alone. She used to say, "You don't know them people." I said, "Yes, I do. They're all my friends."

ROSS: So she was white? The woman you — that was doing this to you was white?

MILLER: No.

ROSS: She was a black woman?

MILLER: Yes. Married to a white man. Alva Buxenbaum. She was the head of the American Communists. And I would constantly tell her, you leave my people alone.

59:50

ROSS: So what year was that meeting in East Berlin?

MILLER: I think it was '74. Jan and them remember better than I do, because we were all there. That's what caused me to be with the National Congress of Neighborhood Women.

ROSS: It that where you met Jan?

MILLER: No, I'd met her, Ronnie Feit, and I'm trying to think of who else. I had known — I met Bella before, but I met these few people after I was — the political caucus. I was supposed to be at the beginning of the Political Caucus, [National] Women's Political Caucus, but for some unknown reason, I didn't think they meant me, and didn't nobody see to it that I got there. And I did not have the money to go for that. And Edith Sloan, who was over the National Committee on Household Employment, did not tell me I could get a ticket to go and be a part of that. But she had wanted me there. But again, it's not being able to convey your wishes to the person that you want to do something. In other words, I say that if you don't tell this person what you'd like to have done in your house, in cleaning it, then you might not get the places cleaned that you want to have clean, or what you think is necessary.

ROSS: OK. I think I'm going to stop there and change tapes because we're down to a little over three minutes left on this one, and I want to go more into the National Congress of Neighborhood Women.

MILLER: OK.

ROSS: On a new tape, and I need to turn a light on because now it's getting almost too dark to see your face. So –

END CD 2

CD 3

ROSS: OK, Gerrie. So you had met Jan and the National Congress of Neighborhood Women before you went to the conference in East Berlin. So how did you become involved in NCNW?

MILLER: Because I took up for everybody in East Berlin, you know, that the American Communists was walking around, talking about we couldn't do this, we couldn't talk about that, we couldn't do this, we couldn't do that. And I just thought it was not fair for people to do things like that. So I had a running battle with the head of the American Communists. They got so they'd stay out of my way. See me coming and walk away, because that meant that I was telling you, Leave my people alone. And I didn't care where they came from, I didn't care whether they was black or white or green or polka dot, they did not have to be mistreated by that group of women. And I wasn't going to stand for it. You'd have thought I was Simon Legree or somebody, but I just think — it's the idea of seeing women hurt each other when we don't need to. We have enough hurting us. So why should we hurt one another. That's the way I look at things.

ROSS: So when you came back to the States, did you continue to talk to Jan?

MILLER: Yes, well, that was it. They — I got a call from Ronnie, who — they had this group that they'd just — they put together –

ROSS: What was Ronnie's name?

MILLER: Ronnie Feit. Rona Feit, and we called her Ronnie — who called and asked me did I want to come to this meeting? And that was the way I joined the National Congress of Neighborhood Women.

ROSS: How old was the organization by then?

MILLER: Hm?

ROSS: When was the NCNW founded?

MILLER: I think it was a year or two before that. It seems as though they had gotten started with a meeting in Washington and then, that was the first meeting, I think they pulled something together after that, because I remember going to the first conference over here at a Catholic school here in Brooklyn.

ROSS: Here in Brooklyn.

MILLER: Here in Brooklyn, you know. And it was just — I liked it because they were neighborhood women, and uh, I also liked NOW because it meant that I could fight with them.

ROSS: OK, we're going to get the National Organization for Women in a minute, but I want you to stay with NCNW. Eventually you became the president of NCNW, but tell me what your early days with NCNW were like.

3:00

MILLER: Well, there was — one thing I liked was, we had this way of talking with people, of asking you, giving you an opportunity to talk about what you needed to talk about, and there was subjects that I liked that I thought needed to be talked about, and to where women didn't really always get together and speak on these issues. So that was the opportunity for me also to learn more, you know. And this was the group that had a lot of Italians and some blacks and they were — seemed to be trying [phone ringing] trying to get together and do some innovative things. And I don't think they really, to begin with, to figure out what it is that they wanted to do.

So as they went along, they were learning, also experimenting with different things. And then they, somewhere or another, we came up with the learning from one another with this leadership support. That was early on. And the leadership support was put together by the group, by the group of women, which was good, because it gave us an opportunity to get an insight on other people's ideas, and how we could, you know, further our own experiences and make things better.

ROSS: So, did you have a position, like were you chairing a committee or anything when you joined NCNW?

MILLER: No, just more or less listening and learning and, you know, talking about what I thought was important. because - many times we think that whatever it is that we're doing is not important. And then later on, we find out that it is and it was important, you know, and that it's a big part of us that we were able to listen to others and get ideas to do what it is that we are trying to do, because everybody has an idea, I think, of what they'd like to do, or what they feel as though that they need to do. But they don't all get a chance to do that. And I think I've been given that opportunity, like if it's — like a door opens up, walk in and see what's going on. You're not supposed to let that door close in your face. Keep it open and hope that somebody else steps in behind you.

ROSS: Do you think you were drawn to, or had an affinity for NCNW because there were women of working class and lower middle class there and how did that speak to you?

6:28

MILLER: Well, I think it was really a place I figured that, like, it was like going home, you know. Because in this neighborhood, I know, I used to know

a lot of women, by just coming over here. I remember being upstairs at meetings on the other floor. I remember being down here at meetings back there where the apartment is, before it got renovated. So this building has a lot of meaning. When I first met with them, they hadn't gotten this building then. They were down on, I think, Metropolitan Avenue, or someplace, uh, in a little storefront. And I used to go there for meetings. We used to meet in someone's house every now and then.

But it was just an idea that, what they were talking about, I think I wanted to talk about. And I see — I find so many people that are like-minded, and that we can sit down and have a conversation and learn from one another about how to get a job done. Or to put something in its place, because, see, we weren't taught — no one was taught to be a mother, no one was taught to be a servant. We weren't taught. It's the way things were. Women were supposed to be in the house and the man was supposed to be out making a living. Well, that's not always possible, because there hasn't been the type of positions for certain people to get.

So what you have is a woman out there, uh, working, sometimes not making anything, and then here they had, like, a college, they started a college program. They were able to meet with one of the colleges and they got money to run a college program. And they taught different ones in the vicinity, in the community. Came to school, and they would get their own curriculum, you know, because maybe you'd want a job doing one certain thing where you'd need to learn about how you can make that happen. So that was what was going on. And then we were finally able to get this building.

ROSS: Was it because that was also interracial work between women of color and white women that attracted you to NCNW?

9:30

MILLER: I don't think so.

ROSS: Well, what was the racial composition of the Household Technicians?

MILLER: Mostly black. And just to think about it, I had a white woman who had been a household worker who was from Georgia, and Joann was telling it one day and she said — I'd take her places, and she'd be the only white woman in the place. And she said, yes, it made her feel funny at first. But then she said she found out that they were no different from her and her people, just the color of their skin, and that she had a lot of fun, and she enjoyed herself. So when they take that step and find out that they can, then it makes a difference in all of our lives.

10:45

ROSS: It sounds like you were quite a bridge builder.

MILLER: I don't know if I was trying — I wasn't trying to build the bridges. I think I just liked certain things to happen, and I don't realize it that that's what's going on when I'm doing it.

ROSS: What things?

MILLER: I don't — I didn't realize I was building bridges. I was just enjoying me. I think I have a lot of fun in doing certain things. In fact, I kind of liked the fighting.

ROSS: So you liked the fighting?

MILLER: Mm-hm. I kind of liked the idea of getting on the elected officials' nerves. I kind of liked that.

ROSS: You know, Dr. King has a word for you, people like you.

MILLER: What's that?

ROSS: Drum majors for justice.

MILLER: What?

ROSS: You're drum majors for justice.

MILLER: Oh, I like that. [Ross laughs] I don't mind being a drum major for justice. I think that that's really right up my alley.

ROSS: That's Gerrie Miller. Geraldine Miller. Let me say that right.

So, you still need to tell me how eventually you became president of the National Congress of Neighborhood Women.

11:58

MILLER: How come — the president? I wasn't the president first. I was a co-president, a vice-president, and they had a — who was it? One of the people that was funding the Congress, was [supposed to] be for people of color to get jobs, and the young lady who was here, who was an Italian, was giving them to the Italians and whoever. And when I found it out, we had this big, you know, blow up, and they didn't know what to do with the thing, because they was going to lose their grant, and I'll never forget this — we had a meeting, and Phoebe Cottingham, who was the head of this, told me, because she knew I'd been with Ford Foundation from the Household Workers, said to me, "And you know better, Geraldine Miller." So when I said, "Oh, my God," so the next thing I know, they had made me president. So I immediately told the young lady that she was fired. She could pick up her bags and go. So she said, "And to think I tried to cultivate your friendship." And for that, I said, "You know, you need to go now. You don't have to wait till tomorrow. Just say good-bye," I said, "because I don't think you need to cultivate my friendship. If you can't give me your friendship openly, I don't need it." So that was the way I became president.

ROSS: How long did you stay president?

MILLER: I think over a year or so. Of which there was, like, there were explosive — these were women who were used to saying, "This is what I want, this is what you don't need to have, and yum, yum, yum." And it was just like — they'd be all right for a few minutes and the next thing you'd know, they'd be in an uproar, and I wasn't used to that, and I think I'd had enough with my own group to begin with. And so, I decided one day. We had a meeting in Washington, I just resigned.

ROSS: So what year did you become president? Do you remember?

MILLER: 1971.

ROSS: That was-

MILLER: No, not 1971, 1981. I'm sorry.

ROSS: 1981. OK, because that would've been the same year of Household Technicians.

MILLER: See, Household Technicians is on my brain, you know. That's my baby.

ROSS: OK. And so you're still a member of the National Congress of Neighborhood Women?

MILLER: Oh, yes. I am now at this time the president of the local, which doesn't have the college program anymore. They've got a You-Can School, where they teach those who, we'll say, they don't fit into the regular schools, and you've got some nice young people over there. It's just that they have had their share of problems one way or the other. But I've been to meetings to where they have come together and you know, some of them will come in and join you, and tell you what they'd like to see happen. In other words, we try to involve the children into their own learning like we did with the women who went to school here. Here. In other words, that underlying theme is still being played out.

ROSS: I think there's another person who is interviewing Jan and getting the fuller history of NCNW. So now, I want to move to your more feminist stuff. (laughs) Tell me first of all, who were some of the significant feminists that had an impact on your consciousness and life? You've talked about Flo Kennedy. Were there others?

16:10

MILLER: Bella Abzug.

ROSS: How did you first meet Bella?

MILLER: At a march downtown on — what's that? the Day for Women? Oh, goodness. It's in the spring, I think.

ROSS: Well, Women's Equality Day is August.

MILLER: Well, that's not the day that they march. It was one of the other days.

ROSS: Well, you're talking about abortion rights march or the ERA marches?

MILLER: I'm trying to remember. Was this Women's Equality? It could be Women's Equality Day. But I know I was — I hadn't been with the Household Technicians too long and this march came up, and I should decide — that's where I met the woman from OWL [Older Women's League]. They had OWL at that time. Maggie Kuhn?

ROSS: Maggie Kuhn. OK.

MILLER: And Bella, and all the rest of them. And there was just — and in fact, there was a large group of women that had written books and what have you — and see, I think it was *Ladies' Home Journal* who had the Household Workers down and they would, you know, try to be helpful with us, and they had this, uh, little saying on material, "Never underestimate a woman," and that intrigued me and so, of course, I kind of liked them. Of course, along with that, you know, I did my newsletters at *Ms.* magazine with Gloria Steinem.

ROSS: How did you get involved in that project?

18:32

MILLER: I don't know, really. It seems as though that there was meetings and things that would be between Bella and whatever, and Gloria Steinem was always a person that they would bring in to meet with you if you had something going. And from that, I needed a place to do the newsletter for NOW — for New York State Household Technicians, and it ended up with them saying, "Well, why don't you come down and use our typewriters?" So I did.

ROSS: OK. So what made you decide to join, and when did you decide to join the National Organization for Women, NOW?

19:20

MILLER: Well, the first award that I received came from Bronx NOW, after I'd been in East Berlin, Germany. And they gave me my first award. I had been to Westchester NOW speaking. I had spoken, I think, trying to figure out the other person, but I know I'd been to Westchester first. And then as time went on, when they got NOW New York State going, I used to go there for meetings, and I was always a guest speaker.

And the one thing that I was worried about is that I had a hysterectomy, and Helen Trias, Rodriguez-Trias, was instrumental in going to Washington and having a big conference on women who had

hysterectomies, and we found out that many of these women did not need these hysterectomies. There was whole groups of Indians and people in Puerto Rico where they had sterilized these women. And they did not know that this had happened. And so, I was one of those that was privileged to be able to hear this, and then being's that I had been sterilized, I figured, well, mine was not like everybody else's. I had probably did something to myself as a child, which caused me later on to lose the one tube and the ovary. So, uh, I didn't want anybody else to go through what I'd been through. [pause in recording]

ROSS: So how did your experience with sterilization abuse lead you to feminist activism, joining NOW?

MILLER: Well, again, I felt as though there was so much more I needed, because I had founded the Household Technicians, and I needed to know more about organizations, so I thought if I joined a couple of the groups and just kept my ears open, that I would learn how to handle the group in a better manner. And then again, I felt as though if I knew enough, then I could keep fighting for what I thought important.

ROSS: So joining groups taught you about organizational procedures?

22:30

MILLER: No, you learn as you mix in with the people and you see what they're doing and how they're doing things and what they're talking about. How that helps them in their lives. And if you listen and pick up on it, they're talking about everyday lives, about issues that it doesn't matter who you are, whatever issue is for the white woman is also for us, too. It's just that we suffer a little bit more than what they do. And that we have another strike against us when we come together as women and how can we, uh, exchange ideas and information so that we can try to better our own lives, and I think that was my main concern. And I think — after that, we came under the Federal Minimum Wage Act. That's less than four years. 1971, I put the group together. 1974 of May, we were put underneath the Federal Minimum Wage Act.

ROSS: So how did you join NOW? You said you had spoken at a couple of NOW conferences. What made the decision to join NOW?

MILLER: I think it was, uh, a friend of mine who said to me, "I think it's now time for you to join the women's movement." Again, a white woman, who then proceeded to pay my way into NOW. So then, I started going to the meetings there in the Bronx, of which I liked. Again, they were like your Neighborhood Women in some manner, but they were fighting for a different way than what the congress was doing. These were more like peer learning, learning from one another. With NOW, it was just straight fighting for the different issues that we thought were important, and I kind of liked that. It was, like, one thing was for one thing and one

thing was for another, but yet, both of them were doing something to help women.

ROSS: So what were some of the issues that NOW was taking up at the time?

MILLER: Well, one of the things was abuse, you know.

ROSS: Domestic violence?

MILLER: And it did definitely came up of — not domestic violence but the sterilization — and see, I think it was around the time that I was going to these meetings with Helen Rodriguez-Trias, Doctor, rather, I should say, and listening to what she had to say, and others. And I began to tie the two together. And again, it's the issues that I think that I was interested in. The various different issues. Plus, I wanted to be able to talk to other people, in fact, and let them know that Household Workers, regardless of what we do, was a part of the whole picture.

ROSS: When did you first started using that dreaded "F" word — calling yourself a feminist?

MILLER: Um, I began to think about — and again that's where my mind is. I'm by myself. I'm an only child. I have time to think. Plus, I think being a Capricorn, I did a lot of that. So I was thinking, I said, "Now, if I am female and then I have to be, or I should be what they call a feminist. I'm not a male. I am a female. And I have all the wants that any other female would want regardless of what race they are." So as a woman, as a female, as a feminist, I felt as though that I was a feminist.

ROSS: Did you ever have any hesitation in using the word?

MILLER: No. Never.

ROSS: Did you ever get any negative feedback from –

MILLER: Oh, yes.

ROSS: Tell me about that.

MILLER: Well, I've had people say, "You what? Ew! I wouldn't be that if I was you." Well, you're not me. I am. And so I've been, as I say, what I feel is right for me doesn't have to be for everybody else. But if I want it and I can get it, then it's mine.

ROSS: How did it make you feel when people didn't understand why you chose to be a feminist?

27:42

MILLER: Oh, well, I've had to explain it to several people, you know. I've had younger women to ask me, you know, why did I feel like I did. And like one young lady who was — went to school here, who felt as though as she was a Christian, but yet she wanted to do something for women. I thought about it when she said she was a Christian, you know, I said, well, how do I answer her. So I said to myself, I told her that beings that you are Christian, you do pray. So you are to ask God to guide you into what you should do, you know, as a woman, should you join a group like this or like any other, and see where it leads you.

And I met her years ago and she thanked me, and she was over here working with the Congress after she got through with school. And it just shows you that she needed to have somebody to tell her it was all right. But I said, "That's within you to be able to search and find out what it is and how you can be able to help with the women's movement," I said, because it is a movement, you know. It's something that some of us need to do. We need to look to see what we as individuals can do to make it happen and make things better for ourselves.

ROSS: So is that why you've been involved for 30 years? Are there times you thought about leaving the organization or the movement?

29:38

MILLER: No, I never thought of leaving, you know. Oh, I've been upset at times because I think that some women are so busy in trying to manipulate things their way or to make trouble, or whatever, that I just think that we — we don't help ourselves when we do this infighting. You know, where I got to be better than you or I'm smarter than you. That's not necessary, because there's always a man that's up high ready to knock us all down. They've already proven that they can do that. So we need to be aware of that and realize that we have to take things into our own hands and make them work for us.

ROSS: What's the difference between the National Congress of Neighborhood Women and NOW? How would you contrast those two organizations?

MILLER: Mm. These — the National Congress has not been for the issues, the various different issues, like NOW has. NOW is more political, is more political in fighting and doing what they do.

ROSS: I will ask you that question again [pause in recording]. Gerrie, what do you see is the major difference between the National Congress of Neighborhood Women and the National Organization for Women, in your experience?

MILLER: Oh, I just think that the National Congress was a place for women, working women, poor women, to get them to talk — to get together and talk about their needs, what it is that they need to be able to move forward, and especially through education and whatever. The National

Organization for Women is really more political, on different issues that they feel is important, like the ERA and other areas.

ROSS: OK. Have you ever heard of the Congress of American Women?

MILLER: Not really.

32:40

ROSS: OK. What are the challenges in being a black feminist in your 80s now?

MILLER: Ha! It's not a challenge to me. I think it's a way of life. That I think I've, uh, grown into who I am and what I am with my beliefs and what I like to fight for. Because I think it's important that women have certain things. The ERA is something that I'd like to see happen, yes. Just like I wanted fringe benefits. And so, I'm willing to fight for things that I believe we need as women. because I figured that, as a household worker, we needed those fringe benefits. Now, whether it's helping all of the women who do this work, I know that the majority have gotten something out of it, especially the women of color, who have worked so long and hard.

ROSS: Well, speaking of black women and other women of color, what have been some of the positive relationships you've had with black women and other women of color in the feminist movement? And then, on the flip side, what are some of the negative relationships you've seen?

33:41

MILLER: Um, well, I think the first thing is I didn't realize that Florence Kennedy, Flo Kennedy, would be so instrumental in doing various things for me and others. Like, if NOW needed her, even National NOW, needed Flo Kennedy, I could call her and she'd be there, you know. Here's a woman who was, in her own rights, was just a great person.

And then, I've been with her when she celebrated one of her birthdays, where it was just fabulous, you know. She had this big spread of food in a big place where you got served. Then you went across the street and we all honored her on her birthday. And that has been something very outstanding, or, to see judges and lawyers and big people talk about Flo. And I was trying, somewhere or another, had gotten on the stage and I was trying to get off and get in the audience, and she asked me, "Where you think you're going?" and I said, "Well, I'm going to go down and sit in one of the front seats so I can see." She said, "No you're not. You're going to stay on the stage and you're gonna say something nice about me."

ROSS: That's class.

MILLER: So you have to understand that I was learning from women like that who were strong.

ROSS: So what would have been some of the negative experiences.

35:45

MILLER: Well, a lot of the negative is, I think, a lot of the women might be jealous of one another, envious of one another, and they make life very miserable, because they end up putting stumbling blocks in your way when you're trying to get something done. They try to make you feel as though you don't know what you're doing, because as I say I had that to begin with when I founded the Household Workers, to where if I was doing something, they would end up — Channel 13 used to do a lot of, uh, videoing me.

ROSS: Is that ABC, CBS, NBC, do you know?

MILLER: No, 13 is a what? I forget how you — anyway, the public helps keep it going.

ROSS: The PBS station. Public Broadcasting System.

MILLER: Yes. And I just was — I really have to thank them in a manner of speaking for being there for me. They were in support of me doing what I was doing for them, to put me on that many times, because I was on — I think it was four times they put me on, and there was one time they couldn't do it because my group acted so bad. They said, We can't put that on. Because they just showed off so terrible. I don't know what all the things that they were doing, but they were not acting nice. So again, that leaves you without that coverage that you need, because their coverage is what really and truly helped us.

ROSS: And so you think that might have led to jealousy amongst other women of color that felt you were getting too much of the spotlight or what?

MILLER: Well, I think so, because they used to tell me, Oh, Ms. Miller sure knows how to get the news, you know. And I thought to myself, News? Well, I've been like that all my life. They told me, well — let's say, a bigger portion of my life, because once I found out I could dance, and when they used to tell us, When you see the man with the red light, the photographer, you be sure to pull in your tummy, push out your breasts, and pose. So I learned to do that at an early age. So I just knew. I just was there. Many times I walked in a room and I thought I was talking to radio. One day, with another group I was working with, NAN, National Association of Neighborhoods, it was a housing group, and we were in, I think, Minneapolis, the one that's across the river, more or less, from Chicago?

ROSS: St. Paul-Minneapolis.

MILLER: Yeah, OK. We were there. And for some unknown reason, the photographer came in and it was TV and I thought it was radio because

I was upset at one of the women saying the wrong thing to me. And I didn't realize I was talking on television. So a couple of people came in the next day, they said, Girl, you looked good. I said huh? huh? I had no idea that I was on television.

ROSS: Are there other organizations that you are part of that we haven't talked about yet?

MILLER: Oh, sure. I was with the [National] Women's Political Caucus. I think I didn't really — I didn't go into that because that was when we were really and truly trying to get underneath the Federal Minimum Wage Act, and that was my one reason for working with the Political Caucus. And to begin with, when they were starting, as I say, I was supposed to be there, but there was some unknown reason I didn't understand, and I was not at the beginning. But I did join the political caucus after they got back, when I found out that it was something that they expected me to do.

40:29

ROSS: Any other groups?

MILLER: Hm, what else. Oh, yes. Women United for Action. I shouldn't forget those little cute people.

ROSS: What did they do?

MILLER: They were a group — it was like a consumer group. And it's like with Florence Rice. I kind of liked being around people like that. I was learning through Florence Rice, who was Harlem Consumer Education Council, and Women United for Action, who were there talking about consumerism like the comparison shopper to find out, you know, which one had the best food and wouldn't have to pay a mint for it.

ROSS: How long were you with that group and do you remember the years?

MILLER: Let me see. That was '77, when all the capitals of each state came together for a conference and I was there with them in '75. I think I joined them because I needed to know how to figure out how I could keep myself going, because it was money all the time. It's not all the time that you had a lot of money, especially when you're into housework. And then, at one time or another, then I began doing not just housework but cooking and serving, and doing, like a small catering on a small scale.

ROSS: When did you actually, officially retire from paid work in the job market?

MILLER: Seventy-something. It had to be '77, '78. Because through the Congress, through the national Congress, we had this CETA [Comprehensive

Employment and Training Act] group. Thirty-eight women's groups here in New York got CETA slots. I came off of the board of the National Congress and had something, you know, pertaining to housework. Housework as it — you know, how we have something in common. And I have those papers, of which you'll get.

ROSS: Now, CETA, if I understand it and remember it correctly, was a welfare-to-work program, was it not getting women off of public assistance and getting them jobs in the private sector?

MILLER: Well, I'm not — I'm not sure of that. When these different groups — because the groups were on anything you could think of as far as women were concerned, and I was a part of it because I wanted to talk about housework and how we relate to housewives, and so that's what I based mine on. And those of us who didn't know how to do these grants, they found out how to do them and they walked us through the procedures and where we were able to, each one of us, do our own program. I was able to do mine in the Bronx.

I had an *Essence* magazine interview twice from just doing that. And I'm trying to get that in my head now. We had this chance to be able to talk more and why we needed this. They even sent somebody from the *New York Times* who did an article on me, which ended up in the *Times*, and I really got exposure. Because it let the people around the country and out of the country, let us know that Household Workers were trying to get underneath the Federal Minimum Wage Act. Or had been put underneath there. So that what you had was more, uh, coverage on what it was that we were doing and trying to do, which I think was very good for us.

I worked with a lot of the women with their program, and we were able to do things together. I was given a room at a college there, undergraduate college there on 42nd Street off 5th Avenue. And I was just pleased at that. I was given a room there for almost a year. And I just interacted with the other groups that were there, whether it was on legislation, you know, politics, or health. And the politic one, we just — really and truly was great. We had no room. We did one on money, where we did it with the group that had the savings group, not a bank but a savings, and uh, it was just marvelous. I'll never forget that. How to survive on a shoestring budget. And it just — we had people standing outside the room grumbling because they couldn't in.

ROSS: How are you surviving on a shoestring budget, because obviously, having spent most of your career in the domestic worker field, it doesn't provide a lot of Social Security, so tell me about your reality as a retiree now, coming from that –

46:25

MILLER: Well, Social Security. I get Social Security. I also get SSI [Supplemental Security Income], from doing housework. That's the reason why, I think, certain things have happened to me. No, it's not

enough but you make do with what you have and I think I learned it, as I say, from those that I was around how to budget, how to get what I need by comparison shopper, you know. So I have my ways and means of doing things. You know, if you want a new coat, you save up for it, or you pay for it on time, pay a little bit at a time, because you can still get what you need. But food has just jumped up here recently, to where it's out of sight. Where you used to spend $50, you now spend $100. So that alone is hard, you know. But if you budget yourself and, you know, really and truly take a look and see what's here, what's there, what's someplace else — I get the paper once a week and I look at the ads and see where's the good stuff and yet not pay a lot of money for it.

ROSS: Well, one thing I think we could certainly say is, because of your work with the Household Technicians, your Social Security is probably better now than it would have been without that work.

MILLER: Oh, yes. Because, see what it was is that we had to either find out how to get the employer to help pay for your Social Security and put you underneath that federal, in that federal area. This is something that had to be done and it was hard, because a lot of the women were working off the books. So that when it came time for them to retire, they had very little coming to them. But if you're on the books with any kind of money at all, at least you get that little bit. We all get about 600 and some dollars a month, you know. The men sometimes get more than the women, but at least you're able — as long as the rent doesn't go through the roof, which it has in many areas. It means you have to find a way of being able to find a decent place to stay without spending over your amount where you don't have — be able to buy food and a few clothing.

ROSS: You make me want to ask a question about — what were the differences you observed between men who did domestic work and women who did domestic work? How were they treated the same? How were they treated differently?

49:40

MILLER: Well, a man that does this type of work has always been treated differently. They've been able to get more money and they're not looked on in the same manner that the women are. The women were always, you know, this lowly little person that didn't need anything extra. But the man has always been able to say, And Mr. So-and-So will be here to clean. Because I have heard people say, Well, my man will be here to clean up. Not "my maid."

ROSS: But "my man."

MILLER: But "my man will be here to clean up." And see, when you think of secretaries and you think of a household worker, you listen to a man sometimes say, Well, my girl will talk to your girl. You call and my girl will talk to your girl and we'll get this straightened out. What girl?

Who's hiring girls? They hire women. They don't hire school girls. So that means they're putting down secretaries and they put down household workers.

ROSS: But they don't say, My boy will be here to clean up. They know better than that.

MILLER: No, no. My man. If you've ever been around people that have a male servant, they usually, Oh, my man will get the door, or, My man will go get you, or, He will do this. But it's "my girl." I even had one woman to say that she felt as though that the woman that worked for her could be like her auntie, you know. And I said, "You know, you got to be crazy, got to be sick." And then, we've had where we've been on interviews and things and they would say, Well, what do you people want? What do you mean, what do I want? I want a decent wage, I want to be looked at as a person, and I want to be able to walk around with my head up.

ROSS: Which is what everybody wants.

When you look back on your activism, what are some reflections you'd like to make? What lessons have you learned that you'd like to share with other women, particularly younger women coming into feminist activism?

52:14

MILLER: I'm trying to figure out what area. I'll really go back and we were in show business, and they was teaching us to do the tango. And uh, we was in this hotel learning this, and then we found out at the end that they wanted us to wear these starched uniforms doing a tango. Well, I was the only one that caused us not to do the whole program. I had learned how to tango and I figured that was enough. Then I don't have to put on no starched uniform and scratch up my body to do a tango. So I called everybody to walk out.

ROSS: You were always an organizer, weren't you?

MILLER: I was always a misfit (laughs).

ROSS: So, you passed —

MILLER: I like causing trouble.

ROSS: So how would you pass that lesson on to someone else?

MILLER: I think the whole thing is, the way I look at this, is that we — each one of us — has to figure out a way that we're going to take care of me. Not worry about others. But when you're thinking about yourself, also realize that many others are not going to speak up. There's some that, they just never will. They're too timid. They're not into saying, "Well, this is what I think or feel," and I've watched, like, some of the women

that are not, no longer with NOW, that have allowed other women to just push them out. And I don't think it's right. I think that you need to take up for yourself. Not let people run around and tell tales on you. When I was a little girl, I didn't like the idea that little girls told tales on one another, so I didn't play with them. I ended up being a little tomboy. I played with little boys. And then I learned that I could beat them up, too.

ROSS: (laughs) OK. There are some people I want to ask you about, if you are familiar with them and tell me what you know about them. Do you remember a Carolyn Reed?

55:05

MILLER: Yes.

ROSS: Tell me about Carolyn Reed.

MILLER Oh, Carolyn Reed came to us, uh, about three months after we'd gotten started with the Household Technicians, and she worked for a very rich family, her and her husband, and they stayed there on the place, and my whole group decided she should be the next president, so they tried to impeach me. I hadn't done anything, but they tried to get rid of me, and that's when I made the whole statement that I, Geraldine Miller, am the founder of the Household Technicians. Because they tried to give her the foundership, and I just made up my mind at that time, that I wasn't giving nothing away, you know. You wanted it? Go out there and do your own thing. But what I start, you leave it alone, good, bad, or indifferent.

You still have the Household Technicians in the State of New York because I started it. And because I happen to be still alive. And I'm sorry to say that Carolyn Reed and most of the group have all died off, which is kind of sad, because you think we could've all had much more than what we have now, had we used our head. Because I had really thought of letting us teach others and then having a way of doing housework, maybe two or three people have a business of it, and they thought I was crazy. And I happened to say it on television and they started off in the South. White people.

57:17

ROSS: OK. What about a Josephine Hulett?

MILLER: Josephine Hulett was just a beautiful person. See, I think she's still around.

ROSS: Did she work with you in the Houseworkers?

MILLER: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. She was our, uh, person — advance person that went around and did a lot of things. She was just a wonderful — I used to hear from her quite a bit, but since I think we both have gotten older, I haven't heard from her lately. Do you have an address on her?

ROSS: I could probably do some research and find out.

MILLER: You know, because see, I was hoping I could find her old address.

ROSS: Mm-hm. I could possibly ask somebody to look it up. But I was told –

MILLER: But she was really — she was — you know what? She could have been, instead of Carolyn, if they had made her the head of the National Committee on Household Employment, we would not have lost it as quick as we did. But it got taken to the Urban League, the headquarters, and the man that — what's his name, Brown, the one that died?

ROSS: Ron Brown?

MILLER: He was the one that we all sitting around the table and figured out that maybe the Urban League would be the one to do this. But that didn't work, making Carolyn the president. Before my time was up, before a year was up, they had a conference and here in New York, I'll never forget it, the president — and see, I didn't realize this, and her president was sitting on a stage, and I'm sitting down right in front of them, and it dawned on me, and what's his name? He sings, he had given us a song called "The Impossible Dream."

ROSS: That must be Walter Fauntroy.

MILLER: Yes.

ROSS: Because he always sang that song.

MILLER: Well, I looked up at him, he was talking, and it hit me, they are really disrespecting me. And I looked across at my friend and she said I had tears in my eyes, and I just looked up at him and I kept whispering, The Impossible Dream. The Impossible Dream. And he finally understood what I said and he just stopped talking at a certain point and went into "The Impossible Dream." I never had anything to hurt me like that did. I felt as though that they couldn't have even hit me and hurt me any worse, you know, to disrespect me. Because a lot of people know I started it. It was started in my house and the people there in the house used to say, If they ever push you up against the wall, you come and get one of us. They said, We'll have a lot of money. We'll sue them.

ROSS: So you think it was her political ambition that tried to shove you to the side?

MILLER: I don't understand what they thought, you know. I really can't figure it. What did they think they were going to get? It wasn't money that I was

looking for. I was looking for us all to be underneath the Federal Minimum Wage Act.

ROSS: OK. We're down to three minutes. This would be another good break point. I actually think if you could tolerate me, that if we do one more hour of tape, we may be able to avoid going tomorrow. Are you OK with that?

MILLER: One more hour of tape?

ROSS: I've gone through all my questions, and I could think of some other things I can ask you, but I think I can do it all in one more hour of tape, if you can put up with me, and then that way, you could sleep late tomorrow and not worry about me.

MILLER: No, I want to worry about you. Now, you're supposed to be with me for two days.

ROSS: I don't want to shortchange you, but I also don't want to exhaust you –

MILLER: You're supposed to go out and eat with me.

END OF CD 3

CD 4

MILLER: I've been able to probably say things to you I might not be able to say comfortable with someone else, so I've been comfortable. That's not that I'm uncomfortable, you know. I'm able to talk and talk freely.

ROSS: Well, I really appreciate that. I appreciate your willingness to hang with me so that we can get this done.

MILLER: Well, and it'll give you an opportunity to do something you need to do, too. Again, that's where that sharing comes in that you hear me talking about.

ROSS: Absolutely.

MILLER: You know, and that, um, the different young people that I've met, like Lynne Rodriguez, let's say, who, even her whole family said she used to be bad. But when I met her, she wasn't bad. So and then I began to pull in, I guess, and didn't realize it. She used to call me up at 12, 1 o'clock at night and talk for hours.

ROSS: How did you meet Lynne Rodriguez and how did you work with her? 1:02

MILLER: At John Jay.

ROSS: School of Law?

MILLER: Mm-hm. And after meeting her, she found out that I was the president of Bronx NOW and begin talking to me. And then, I guess I began mentoring her. Now I don't know that I'm doing this, because I do this with quite a few other people. I don't call it mentoring. I think I'm just talking. And I think many times when we talk to one another, we are helpful with one another. There might be something that you could say that'd make me feel better, or feel like I could do something, and vice versa, the same way with you with me. That we can be able to share what we know and how some of this can be so helpful with us in our walk through this life.

ROSS: Have you mentored others?

MILLER: Yes. I have another one called Espina, who's Greek. Her husband is Italian and when I first met her, uh, in '81, after I became president of Bronx NOW. She came to a meeting, because she's a manic-depressant and somebody told her that she needed to join a woman's movement. And then they picked out the movement she should belong to, and one of the other members that went to the center she did, drove her there, dropped her off at the house, and left her. And just talking to her, I almost walked her home, because she had questions. Nobody had taught

her anything. The woman had been married and had two children. And they had not let her know anything. She was just as naïve as she could be, and after that first meeting and just talking to her, she had so many questions. And I liked that, because see, that's me. My questions were always answered.

So I tried to answer all the questions that she had. And then she was like a breath of fresh air. She was like a child in a woman's body. And it was teaching that child and talking to that child, I think, what caused me to mentor her. And she was the one that called after you got there to find out what I was into and what was I doing, because we'd call each other, not on a daily, sometimes on a daily basis. But they call to find out how I am and I call to find out how they are.

And I feel comfortable, because I consider them part of my family. See, I have no family left. There's probably distant cousins that I don't know anything about, but the family I have is Sandy and Jan, this Espina, Sarah, Renee, and a lot of other women. Even some from Africa, India, you know. I feel close to them. And I think it's the sharing that, whatever it is that we have to say to one another. All that sharing is something that makes me feel very good about being me. It's just wonderful.

ROSS: Well, mentoring is often seen as a two-way street. You learn as much from the people you mentor as you have to share. What have you learned from the people you've mentored?

5:07

MILLER: Oh, goodness. I think, and I think of Lynne. I see what she was able to do. Lynne Rodriguez. See, we had the Bronx People — not Bronx People's Fair, but African American Festivals, you know, a whole day of everything. And that was something she wanted to do and so we got together and we did that. And we learned so much from it: how hard it was to get the police to let you have this, to do a march, how hard it was for the police to let you be in the park, you know. Because you're talking about African Americans, you know, and the day would be really special, where we learn from one another. People had the booths with food and things to buy, you know, jewelry, clothing, and it would be a day of gathering of African Americans and to think that they would be out there because of you letting them know what you had was — that was a treat itself, you know, to be able to look and to see your own people, be happy for that day. And I think that was one day that the elected officials followed me anyhow, and they were always trying to figure out what I was into.

ROSS: To see what other trouble you were getting ready to stir up?

MILLER: Well, no, I don't think I was stirring up trouble. I think I was being a good girl.

ROSS: OK.

MILLER: I think I was being very good. I was sharing my information and I think that's what we need, is to be able to share that information with one another.

ROSS: Now notably, you are extremely special in that you're an African American woman whose first movement was not the civil rights movement, but the women's movement. Why do you think that happened?

7:25

MILLER: Because I don't think I got — I don't think I was really paying attention. I thought it was horrible when I heard about Emmett Till. I thought it was horrible when I heard about the two young men that were killed. I think they were — they were not black –

ROSS: In Philadelphia, Mississippi?

MILLER: Mm-hm. I don't know where it was but I read about that. I don't think — it really dawned on me that was my fight. That was not my forte. That was something that hit me in the right manner. I felt bad when I heard of people losing their lives and all that. That bothered me. But not enough to make me get into anything like that. Never dawned on me that I could go South. It's just in 1949 and '50, when I was on the road, was a time of me wanting to travel and dance. I don't think I thought of where I was going and where I was until I heard people say the wrong thing.

After we had a bus accident between Greenville and Greenwood, Mississippi, and the bus turned over. And that's because Duke Pilgrim, who was the wife [husband] of Berty Pilgrim, our boss, he decided he'd drive the bus. It was raining and the driver wanted to get some rest, and he said he's like to have at least a half an hour's rest, driving in all that rain. And Duke said he wanted the bus to be in front of the theater so that we could see that we were there. And he got behind that wheel and he hadn't drove two miles before he had us almost over an embankment.

9:00

And coming up off of the hill, you know, from down where we landed, coming up, I heard these three men talking. "What happened down thar?" Said, "Oh, them niggers turned over." One said to the other, "Shh, don't talk so loud. Them's some of them Northern niggers."

Well, I was so angry at hearing that, that I could only think of saying, let me go hit him, and it happened that one of the men seen me. They said, Oh, God, get Gerrie, because I had that look on my face, determination I was going to go slap that man in the mouth. Now, I had no business even thinking like that. I'm in Mississippi, not New York, not Kansas, none of them places. I was down there behind the rising sun and let me tell you, it took me forever to figure out that I shouldn't open my mouth and shouldn't do what I thought I should do.

Because we were in one spot and they had — the man had a — I think it was still in Mississippi, one of them places, it could've been

either Mississippi or Georgia, and they had a whole line of little stores and a hotel and all this. So the man who was a shoeshining place, he came and he said, "There's somebody wants to speak to you girls." So we follow him, not one but more than one of us all the time, and we got there and the man said, "We're here to go to bed with you." And I said, "Oh, no, we can't do that. Those are our husbands in there." "So, we kill them." Guess what I said? "No, you won't. We'll kill you." Everybody went, "What is she this time? What is she doing? Shut up, Gerrie." But then I got really mad. The nerve of these men talk like they're gonna kill them. "We'll kill you." And I'm not as big as a minute. I don't think I weighed about 125 pounds soaking wet. But I just knew that I was — just big and bad. I never thought of myself as being little.

ROSS: So, you went to the August 1963 March on Washington, and you described a little bit what that felt like. Do you want to give us more details on that?

12:28

MILLER: Oh, wonderful. I really and truly, I didn't meet anybody to talk to, so whatever I heard, it was just mental, you know. And I never seen that many people before, you know, in a crowd. And that was awesome. And a lot of preachers and a lot of, you know, different religious folks there. Well, there was the amount of people that I saw, and then it was very quiet when he was doing this "I had a dream." And I was standing over and I think I was under a tree, and I could see pretty good. I had a spot where I could see good. But it never dawned on me, the extent to what that whole speech meant until I heard it years later and began to really realize how great Martin Luther King really was. I didn't get a chance to meet him, but I got a chance to hear that. That was 1963, if I'm not mistaken, right?

ROSS: Exactly.

MILLER: But I was there in Washington.

ROSS: What did you think when you heard that Dr. King had been assassinated?

MILLER: I was devastated, because I really and truly believed that he had the right way of doing things, you know. I thought non-violent was wonderful, you know, that we didn't have to do what they did, that we could be above that. But to hear that the man had been assassinated was just miserable.

I think I felt the same way about Kennedy. I was working in somebody's house and I was on my knees, cleaning, and it came on the radio. The woman had a radio on, that the president had been assassinated. And I was down on my knees and while I was down there, I prayed and cried, and so did the woman I worked for. I remember that

like yesterday. It was the feeling that we both had. It didn't matter that she was somebody I was working for. She was another human being.

And I think that's — that's something I don't think we really and truly go into and think about in the right manner. Because when we lose a loved one, or we lose somebody that we feel is good for us, we all hurt. We all hurt. Maybe some people don't want them to be alive, or some people would like to do them in, like I think other people have been done, you know. Many people have been hurt because somebody is power hungry or feel as though that you don't deserve the spots you're in.

ROSS: OK. I actually want to back up a little bit now, because we didn't really talk about your dancing career. Not in the extent that I'd like to cover it because most people don't know Gerrie Miller the dancer. They only know Geraldine Miller the activist. So, tell us more about the dancing career. Did you ever meet anybody famous while you were a dancer?

16:20

MILLER: Oh, yes. The Ink Spots. I used to think the world and all of [Bill] Kenny. I used to love to talk to him. I had an uncle, McFeels, who worked at the Orpheum Theater, and at the Orpheum Theater, I later danced there.

ROSS: Spell Orpheum.

MILLER: Orpheum Theater there in Omaha, Nebraska.

ROSS: O-R-P-H-E-U-M?

MILLER: Mm-hm. And I got a chance to be on the stage with Nat King Cole. What's my other man's little name. Oh, God. Quite a few of the different big — the Temptations, I think I met.

ROSS: Did you ever meet Cab Calloway?

MILLER: I met Cab Calloway. We didn't like each other. He thought I was a fresh little snot. (laughs) See, again, that's that mouth of mine. I don't — you know, all you have to do is, if I can feel that you are being fresh with me or trying to make me, belittle me, then that gets my dander up and I will spout off. I can't help myself.

ROSS: So, other people like –

MILLER: And Ray Charles, uh, I met. I'll never forget. They were saying that if he — what was it he was doing? Or was it the other one, uh, Billy was also a singer –

ROSS: Billy Eckstein?

MILLER: Billy Eckstein. [pause in recording]

Well, I used to have a lot of fun when the bands would come in. We'd go to the place where they stayed at, and it seems as though that my mother used to sing. So there were people that knew her, and knew she could sing, and knew that she was in show business. And I would be trying to take out the drummer or somebody in the band, and they would never get me, let me get into bed with none of them. So I'd took off all my clothes and got into bed and the man got up, put his clothes on, and wrote letters. And then I got mad and went to sleep. He won't do nothing with me. I'll just sleep here. And so, he sat up all night. (laughs)

ROSS: This is Billy Eckstein?

MILLER: No, no. This is the old drummer.

ROSS: Oh, OK.

MILLER: He was just cute as a bug there, and because my mother was an entertainer and those who knew me knew I was young, so they would protect me by telling them, "You'd better not touch her. You'd better not do this to her." And so I would get so angry, so I was able to have younger girls with me and people like Billy Eckstein all those others, they would, "Come on, honey, come with me." And I'd be sitting out in the room by myself. So that used to upset me. That meant I had to find other people to go out with, so I used to hang out with the various different people that run on the road. So that was fun.

ROSS: Well, you certainly have to have led an exciting life and you seem to have had different phases of your life.

MILLER: That's right. See, that's what I was saying. That it's not like, you know, people say, well you — what did you do at such and such a time. Well, I was into so many different things, you know. It's like, uh, dancing was fun. I'll never forget the time that we worked at this hall and they had to use the people from the city because they couldn't get another group in from out of the city, and we had brought in quite a few because we knew about it ahead of time. People that had never seen us dance before there in Omaha, came out to see their hometown people, because we were doing it to help this one young lady. It was like a benefit, because she'd been ill. And I'll never forget, the man says, "Well, you wait till next week," or next whenever it was the next big group that was coming in. "We're gonna overflow the place." Well, I went to see if they would have an overflow. They didn't. The hometown people had did it. And so, I laughingly told him — because they didn't want to pay us, and I said, "Oh, yes, you're gonna pay us. You're gonna pay us for dancing. You're gonna do that. You're gonna have to go to jail. (laughs) Or I'll go to jail." I was not going to go to jail but I was gonna put them in jail, same thing. But see, again, that was that — you can't do that to us. We're not gonna have it.

ROSS: Well, Gerrie, one thing that I realize in talking to you is that it would be horribly unfair if someone tried to do a one-dimensional caricature of you. Because you're known as an activist on behalf of domestic workers, but you are so much more. Not that that's not important, but you're a real Renaissance woman, a woman that does it all.

MILLER: Well, I just — I feel glad that I was able to meet people like some of the big bands, the Temptations. I met several of the young men that sing, and now I can't recall their names because I want to. But Nat King Cole was just a beautiful person, just a beautiful person. Louie Jordan was just really a — I thought of them like I would've a brother or cousin or something like that. They were just nice people. And it, I guess, has, uh, as you say, puts a lot in your life, in meeting different people and people with talent. People with substance. You know, when I think of a lot of the people I've met, I think they had a lot going for them. When you think of what they were able to give to me, as a person coming along — because I learned from a lot of people, you know.

I remember Helen when we — when I told you about, we had the steps and we danced up and down the steps, and I remember telling them that they need to be collapsible. And I also danced on a board on Helen's stomach. She had a board that would come from here to about here. And I tap danced on her stomach. I'll never forget the time the man yelled up at me and he said, "Oh, I can do that." And I said, "Come on up, honey." Because I know if you didn't have good balance, honey, you'd be over in the audience. And he almost broke his neck. And they said, Why'd you do that to him? I said, "Because he said he could." It just goes to show you, you know, you don't do that.

But see, we as people figure that maybe we can do what this one does. I try to figure out what I can do and be able to do it comfortably. Like, I've enjoyed cooking. I've enjoyed working in people's homes. I used to love for the Jewish holidays to roll around so I could eat their fabulous food, and serve it to them. Wash up their dishes and know that I'd made my money in a good manner, and would feel good about it. Whereas I think a lot of people would say, "I don't know why I had to go out there and do all that. I work so hard." But you're making an honest dollar is the thing that I really thought about. Making a dollar means a lot. No, a dollar's not much, but it's better than not having anything at all.

ROSS: You only mentioned religion or spirituality once when you talked about your family being AME. How has religion or spirituality influenced your life as you've gotten older?

26:10

MILLER: Hm. I don't know. I have a strong belief, personally, I have a strong belief in God. I think God is — I'm here for a reason. I think it's nothing that's different because I try to work with younger women or other women who I think that might not have had the same opportunity

to figure out things all on their own. I've had people to sit down and just talk about their problems, and then solve their own problem before they would leave my house, or I would leave theirs. So we sometimes just need somebody to listen to us. And not criticize, because sometimes you can listen and not say anything and the person will be able to help their own self.

ROSS: Off camera, you had talked about a bout with cancer. Can you tell us about that?

27:37

MILLER: Oh, yes. In 1998, uh, I had been going to a study at Epstein University for Medicine, and for women who have Alzheimer's. And they figured because I'd had the hysterectomy when I was young, and other — I think that was about the only thing, but they figured that I'd make a good study for them. While I was there, they definitely examined you, you know, I mean, you had a good examination from head to toe. So I got this call one afternoon, saying, "You've got to get to your doctor right away. You have cancer cells growing on your cervix." So I immediately went to my doctor. She immediately seen to it that I got a biopsy, and then they figured out they couldn't do it the way they should and within a month's time, I had an operation. So this all happened, like, so quick. I knew that I couldn't stay home in my apartment by myself, so Jan was always saying, "You never come to my house." So I called her up. I said, "I think I need you. I need your house. I need to be with someone else. I don't need to be by myself. So I came over here the night before I went to the hospital and her and her husband went with me and took me to the hospital, and I checked myself in and had the operation. I just think people around the country who knew me — I got flowers, cards, people were calling, people came by, and I felt as though that I had been hugged. I felt that there was somebody on high that had their arms around me. I felt like that many times. And everybody said I looked very bad, like I wasn't going to make it. But only God knows, that I'm sitting here talking to you, and they was saying how, you know, terrible I looked at that time. So I'm very thankful to know that I've been able to make it through. So no more cancer cells, hopefully. No telling what else is wrong.

ROSS: Well, we won't worry about that. Glad that you're still with us, sister. Glad that you're a survivor.

MILLER: Yes, I think so. You know, I think — again, I'm going to repeat that I think I'm here for a reason, you know. I think that whoever and what I am is that it took a lot of — how you say, it takes a lot of people sometimes, a lot of people to raise a child. And I think the child in us needs that. Because each one of us has a little child left in them.

ROSS: What would you like to think of as the legacy of Geraldine Miller? In other words, what footprint would you like to be remembered for in twenty or thirty years from now?

31:30

MILLER: Hm. I think about fairness. I would love to see that women would be able to work together without being malicious and gossipy and I know that's going to be hard to say but I'd like to see them get together and do more, because I think you help yourself when you help someone else. And in fact, you can talk to somebody that doesn't know too much and sometimes learn something.

ROSS: When I met with you earlier today, you talked about the Living and Learning houses. Could you tell me more?

MILLER: Living and Learning Center. It's where that they are trying to find how they can live together intergenerational and –

ROSS: Who's the "they"?

MILLER: The women.

ROSS: Here at the National Congress of Neighborhood Women.

MILLER: Yeah. Well, this is something they thought of years ago, and how could they, different nationalities, different ages, work together and be together. And so far, it's been hard because I think a lot of people are not ready to really and truly work together in that manner. I think it's been hard for a lot of people to figure that out. But those that were able to work with that conception have been able to make their own way in life, and be able to get certain things out of it. Because you think about it now, you're living in a house with more than one nationality, different ages, and how that can be helpful. because, you take an older woman can be able to help the younger woman, or the younger woman can be able to help the older woman. But I just think it's all in the way we think about it and how do we talk to one another? How do we voice our opinions and feelings?

ROSS: Well, I notice in your house, you seem to have a 20-year-old from India, you have certainly Jan and yourself and Jan's husband, so y'all seem to have spanned the generations. You're black, you're white, you're East Indian, and you're all living in the mix together.

MILLER: Yes.

ROSS: How is that, though? I mean, what is good about it? What's bad about it?

MILLER: Well, I think it's good. I enjoy being around various different people, just like we have the woman from Turkey, Isha, who is at one of the colleges. She's an architect, lovely person. Then you have Surangi — they're at the house right now. And then we've got Dahlia, who's Jewish, you know. We all work together in some manner. And I think we could all live in the house together, because right now, you know, there's Lily who comes from the Netherlands. She comes in and we get along beautifully. Prima from India. You can tell that at one time or another, there has been that caste, like I told you that when I was in East Berlin, Germany, that the lower class, caste, had something to say and the women from the higher caste did not want her to say it, and they tried to stop me from giving her my time. But I was determined to give it to her because I wanted her story to be told, you know. If you don't want it to be told, then don't mistreat somebody.

ROSS: I believe they call what used to be called the Untouchables, the Dalit.

MILLER: Ah-huh.

ROSS: I think what you are describing is truly revolutionary, because people often talk about doing political work out there in the streets but they don't always bring the revolution home, and have it affect their living space, and have it be intergenerational, cross-racial like you're describing. So, what's hard about it?

36:50

MILLER: Hm. The only hard thing is that I have problems with people trying to take care of me.

ROSS: They don't do it enough or you want them to stop?

MILLER: Hm?

ROSS: Do they not do it enough or do you want them to stop trying?

MILLER: Well, I wish they'd stop. You know, I feels as though you're smothering me. And I'm so used to doing what I think I should be doing, and I think a lot of people are not into that. They either look at you, once you get white hair, you're to the point where you can't think and, you know, you're senile. And that annoys me.

ROSS: Pulls out that fighting instinct?

MILLER: See, it's — I'm constantly battling against whatever it is that you're trying to tell me. We all have our bad habits.

ROSS: What motivates you to continue to do political work?

MILLER: I don't know what motivates me. We've had several young feminist conferences with NOW and we had the first one there in Ohio. I'll never forget, there was five or six young white girls that did not let me move by myself. If I moved, they moved with me. They decided that I was who they were going to talk to and they didn't let go. If I had to go home, they walked me home. And I wasn't in the hotel where the conference was, I was down about a block or so from there. And I think if they knew what time I'd have got up, they'd have been there to walk me back to the conference. But they were surrounding me at all times. The young black girls didn't come near me.

ROSS: Why do you think that was?

MILLER: I've never figured that one out. And I had a reporter to talk to me and say, "What're you saying to them?" I said, "I'm answering their questions." They had questions. They weren't bad questions, they were just questions, and I answered them. Because, remember I told you, my mother said I could ask her anything? Now somewhere or another, these little young girls felt as though they could ask me. What did I think about this? What should — what did I think about that? They were normal questions, but the idea is that I answered them.

ROSS: I want to explore a little bit more why you think the young black feminists did not see you as a model for them?

40:15

MILLER: I don't understand that at all. (both voices) It was like, you could feel it, you could see it, pull that kind of frown. Look at you. Now, I don't know what their parents had told them, but you felt as though that they didn't want to be bothered with me. They didn't come near me, because I would speak to them. And sometimes, I was lucky if I got a grunt out of them. But these five or six young white girls, I couldn't get rid of. Little blonds. I would be surrounded. They'd be all on the floor around me. And as long as I sat there, they would sit there. So the reporter asked me, "What're you saying to them?" I said, "I'm answering their questions."

ROSS: I wonder if the internalized racism has something to do with the black –

MILLER: It could be.

ROSS: – or classism?

MILLER: Oh, yes. It could be. And see, I also ran into one of the Household Technicians. I called her up while I was there, there in Ohio. because Ohio had a seven-city coalition, so when they'd have the conferences, they'd say, Stand up, Ohio. And I'd stand up with them. They'd say, Sit down, Gerrie Miller. (laughs) You're not from Ohio. So, sit down. A seven-city coalition.

ROSS: Of Household Technicians.

MILLER: Mm-hm.

ROSS: That's wonderful.

MILLER: And beings that I didn't get a chance to, I started to bring some of those figures, because we have a paper that — I went to this college somewhere or another, I got involved with this doctor, and she wanted to know what some of the things that we used as household workers, what was bad and what was good, because you can't mix Clorox and ammonia together. It'll make you ill. And then there's a lot of other things. And then I use rubber gloves, because my hands break out if I get near Clorox. I can't put my hands in Clorox water. So there's just a lot of little things that we found out as household workers. So we talked about health-wise on this paper and we filled out these questionnaires. And so I have some of those that I'll send. See, if I'd have thought, I could give you that whole pack today, and I thought about it and I said no, because, see, you've got enough to carry.

ROSS: Well, what they're going to do at Smith College is actually send somebody up here to get your papers and — a real archivist, someone who knows how to box them up and do it right. I'm just a woman lucky enough to be sitting in front of the camera with you. I really don't know much about archiving. So, they're going to send a professional up and that's really good, because one of the things that's so wonderful about this project is that Smith College has the resources to make sure that your papers aren't just stuffed in a box in a basement somewhere and forgotten, but they will be digitized. They will be microfiched. They will be made available to a universe of scholars and researchers that would not necessarily be available if they were going to an institution that didn't have their resources and so on. It's a wonderful opportunity we've been given, the Voices of Feminism Project.

MILLER: Oh yes, I just thought of this when I was looking at you. There was one thing I meant to say, that when I — after I founded Household Technicians, there was an older woman that lived in the neighborhood who came up to me and said, "You're Geraldine Miller?" and I said yes. She said, "I used to be a household worker." And it was in the Bronx and she said, "You know, down the street around the corner there on Walton Avenue, they used to — the household workers would line up in the mornings and people would come by in their cars and then raise the women's dresses to see how badly scarred their knees were, to see if they'd be good enough to go work for them." And that came out in this one book that the woman gave me. Her and her partner had decided to write about different things, you know. And it just dawns on me how things have changed, but just how bad things were in those days.

44:30

ROSS: So, tell me now. They wanted the women without the scars on their knees?

MILLER: No, with the scars.

ROSS: The more scars they had on their knees –

MILLER: The badder — if their knees were badly scarred, then that was a good woman to work for you.

ROSS: Because she would get down on her hands and knees. [pause]

MILLER: So, and I just was also thinking about Anthony Kahn — we called him Tony — who had been taking up organizational work in college. And he began teaching me about what I had to do with the group because there were a lot of things I didn't know. And he also was able to confirm that they were just standing on that corner and that the women and people would come by with their cars and lift up their skirts to find out how badly their knees were scarred. And then they would hire them. But Anthony also was a lover of senior citizens and he would just talk and tell you so much that I'm so sorry I didn't have a tape recorder because a lot of the things he would say about seniors, I'm able to use now. I just can't remember the whole thing.

ROSS: Now, what was Anthony's race?

MILLER: Jewish.

ROSS: Why did he take such an interest in household technicians?

MILLER: He took an interest in anybody that was, how you say it, not on upper level. He was an activist.

ROSS: The voice of the marginalized?

MILLER: He was just a wonderful little person. He was constantly fighting for something for the downtrodden.

ROSS: And I take it he is not still with us?

MILLER: No, he died. We've lost a lot of good people.

ROSS: Yes, we have. That's why oral history is so important.

MILLER: Yes, I understand that.

ROSS: So that even if we lose the people, we don't lose their voice.

MILLER: Well, you know, I should have thought of that, because somebody told me before that. They said, When Tony talks to you, you need to have a tape recorder. Because if I had taped all the things that he had to say — he went to some country and came back and almost gave me a blow-by-blow description of what he had did and what he saw. Now, I wish to this day that I could've taped that and then there was a lot of things he would tell you about, what seniors have to do. See, it would've been so much easier had I had information that I could remember. But see, when it's told to you and not on tape or something, then you don't have anything to really and truly be sure that you have the right thing going.

ROSS: Did you ever join or work with, like the Gray Panthers or Older Women's League?

MILLER: Hm, no, I joined OWL not too long ago. Uh, but no, I thought it was — I liked Maggie Kuhn but I thought the Gray Panthers were wonderful, but I didn't want to belong to them. I don't know why. See, I had enough problems when I founded the Household Technicians. I had almost enough problems, I didn't even want to look at another group, let alone join them.

ROSS: And definitely, you were a feminist.

MILLER: I was too busy fighting, period, for them fringe benefits. I didn't have time to think about all these other issues that we have as women.

ROSS: Why has not the subject of getting married again come up for you? 49:42

MILLER: I don't see anything out there I want.

ROSS: Not since Mr. Miller?

MILLER: I didn't want him. I think I married because they was running around, putting it in my head that I was going to be an old maid and I didn't want to be an old maid. I'm sorry I didn't stay an old maid, or whatever you want to call them, because I had fun playing around.

ROSS: But never — you never got close to getting married again?

MILLER: Never. The one man that I was going with, when he talked about marriage, I figured it was time to quit. That was in '81.

ROSS: And you've done nothing about sex or sexuality since?

MILLER: Didn't want it.

ROSS: So, you're trying to tell me you've been celibate since 1981?

MILLER: Yes, ma'am.

ROSS: Go, girl. That's all I can say about that.

MILLER: Oh, I think we all have feelings, you know, as far as that goes. But I think I want the person. I want to want that. I don't want just to take it because it's there. That make sense?

ROSS: Well, I'd like you to offer information, if you can, on how does one handle celibacy.

MILLER: I don't know. I just, uh, one day I woke up and I said, I'm not doing that no more. And now, usually when I say that, I evidently be meaning it, because I didn't do that anymore.

ROSS: OK. I'm just going to leave that one alone.

MILLER: Not too much you can do about it. I've been celibate.

ROSS: Hey, for real, for real. You might have briefly mentioned that others have interviewed you. Again, are there any oral histories or interviews of you that are available so that we could flush out your story?

MILLER: Well, it wouldn't be this in-depth.

ROSS: This is the most in-depth one, you mean, you've ever had.

MILLER: That's right. That's the most in-depth one I've let people have.

ROSS: Well, thank you. Why do you think you got so in-depth this time?

MILLER: I think because I wanted to tell my story, you know. I've been thinking about it for some time, because different ones say we all need to know about how you've been able to weather the storm. Because definitely, it's been quite stormy out there at times, you know, it's not been an easy thing. It was not something that I could just breeze through. I think I've been fighting over half my life for what I thought was right.

ROSS: When do you get to stop fighting?

53:06

MILLER: I guess when we can't breathe anymore.

ROSS: Do you fight from a sense of anger?

MILLER: No. I think I fight because, uh, I think we all need help in getting whatever it is. And we're not going to get it if we sit at home and say, Oh, God, look what's happening to me. Look what's happening to her.

That's not going to help us any. We got to let our voices be heard. We got to stand up and be counted.

ROSS: So you, again, are president of Bronx NOW. When did that –

MILLER: I've been president since 1981. I'm trying to get rid of the presidency.

ROSS: Oh, you've continuously been the president. It's not a back and forth being the president?

MILLER: Not like here.

ROSS: OK. But you don't even live in the Bronx anymore.

MILLER: That's the reason why I'm trying to get rid of it, because I can't — you know, I'm messing up, I'm not — the checks I'm not putting in the bank. They're just sitting there. I need to send them back or else, you know, put them in the bank. It's just that I don't have the area where I can — I've got to find out the cross streets to be able to get on the (unclear) A-Ride. It's only two dollars over and two dollars back, and this way I can be able to put the money in the bank.

But I'm also quite concerned about finding somebody to take my place. I don't want to just give it or let it go without trying to see if I can't get somebody to take it over. So, I think before this month is over with, I'll probably try to do another newsletter, because it means that I've got to come over here, either use the computer or find some way of typing it up, and then get it printed. I usually get it printed over in the Bronx at a school where it doesn't cost me anything. And then send it out. And just hope that people have not heard and realize before the election time comes. I can use that as a focal point.

I can use the fact that we had a wonderful march on Washington, and I mean that was wonderful. [March for Women's Lives, April 25, 2004, Washington, D.C.]

ROSS: It was great to see you there.

MILLER: I met some wonderful people and it was like my own young black women, I had a talk with about six or eight of them that just made me tremendously happy. And like a person that had — not able to walk too much, too far, I was thanking these young people for being there and then we were, like, thanking each other, you know. The beautiful faces and the smiles was just enough to really and truly make me feel good for a long time. So it's not in vain when you see things like that.

ROSS: Absolutely. I remember at the march when I saw you in the crowd and you were trying to get into the gate, I said, "I got to get this sister in here." And we got you a seat right up front. You keep me going,

Geraldine Miller. You do keep me going. There is one younger black woman that hopes I can grow up and follow in your footsteps.

MILLER: Well, I think that we — we have just about covered all the various different aspects of my life, which is not all in one little spot, you know. I've jumped around and did quite a few different things, you know.

ROSS: Is there anything else you'd like to add that we haven't covered?

MILLER: I don't think so. We were in Jersey, right? We've been in Omaha. We was in Hiawatha, we was in Savetha, Atchison, St. Joseph, Missouri. It's really truly odd how I've been in all these different places, and then I really and truly feel good about having the opportunity to go south. After I got home and thought about it, I was glad that I was able to be there, even though I was scared to death. The one time they told me, Gerrie, hurry up and get your bags. The Ku Klux Klan is marching down the street. And I'm in the room, fumbling. And they said, Look out the window. And I looked out the window and all I could see was these little bouncing white figures coming down the street. And I said, "Oh, God, it's time for me to get out of here." So in about two minutes flat, I was out of the hotel.

ROSS: What city was this?

MILLER: Oh, we was in, was it Mississippi? Alabama? Was it Alabama? I know I was in the South.

ROSS: What year approximately that was?

MILLER: Yeah, that was, uh, that was '49 and '50. You know, when I was traveling like that. See, that's before — that segregation was supposed to be ended. See, but I didn't understand that. I had no idea of what I was walking into. All I know is that I was constantly saying the wrong thing. We went into one place and I wanted to buy a pair of shoes and I have a combination-less [?] foot, so the young white boys that was waiting on me tried on at least ten pair of shoes on me, because they couldn't get over the fact I had this combination-less [?] foot.

ROSS: What does that mean?

MILLER: I have a wide front and a small heel. That's called a combination-less. So, there we were, trying on shoes. And the girls are with me, saying, Gerrie, if they catch you trying on these shoes, we'll all go to jail. Come on, stop that. I said, "I'm not trying on these shoes, they trying them on." And I was getting a big kick out of them watching me, because I knew what they were doing. They were just getting a big kick out of my foot. That they could find real expensive shoes, and put it on my foot.

And I cannot wear a cheap shoe. I had a man to tell me he had cheap shoes. He said, "You take your expensive foot out of my cheap store."

ROSS: (laughs) OK. So is there anything else you'd like to say on the last words on this tape, that we could cover?

MILLER: Well, I don't know. I think that I hope that anybody that gets a chance to hear it and what have you, I hope that they get something out of it that can help them in their life, because that's what it's all about anyhow.

ROSS: I'm sure they will. Geraldine, I want to thank you on behalf of Smith College. We actually have a little more time if you want to think about people that you'd like to name, maybe, that you wish oral histories or biographies could be made of.

MILLER: Oh, yes. I would really like to see Florence Rice, really. Florence Rice.

1:01:03

ROSS: Tell us about Florence Rice.

MILLER: Well, Florence Rice is Harlem Consumer Education Council and since 19, I think, 66, she has been trying to help people with their gas and lights and she calls the telephone company and gets them to do things, the gas company. And she's just been an all-around helpful person, plus she has good consumer programs, where she brings in professionals in to tell you about what you should do and what you shouldn't do, about anything that's in your home, plus a car, and I know that she's had some wonderful, wonderful programs. To where we gain so much from it.

ROSS: Who else would you like to see, or would you recommend an oral history be done of?

MILLER: That's the only person right now.

ROSS: OK. How about people who are no longer with us that you wish a book had been written about?

MILLER: Mm. I can't think.

ROSS: I'm sure someone is doing something on Flo Kennedy. They just have to.

MILLER: That's possible. That's possible. But you know, I met Flo Kennedy and Florence Rice about the same time. We all three were friends, but no one has actually paid attention to all the stuff this woman has done. She's helped many a person get their lights on, their phone back on. These little things. Things that are meaningful to you in your home.

ROSS: Would you have a way of contacting her if someone was able to follow up and say, how can we get hold of Florence Rice?

MILLER: Well, yes. I'll have to call to find out what's happening with her apartment, because she had to move into her daughter's house, because where she lives, that's been trying to get rid of her because she's got cheap rent. And of course, she's a senior citizen, like me.

ROSS: All right. Well, again, I want to thank you on behalf of the Sophia Smith Collection of Smith College. You are being memorialized forever.

MILLER: Well, thank you. Thank you. Thanks goes both ways.

ROSS: I love you. This is so great. Now, I'm gushing because this is such a rare treat to get a chance to talk to someone who's walked the history I can only read about.

END OF CD 4

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