

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

BYLLYE Y. AVERY

Interviewed by

LORETTA ROSS

July 21-22, 2005

Provincetown, Massachusetts

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Narrator

Byllye Yvonne Reddick Avery (b. 1937) was born in Waynesville, Georgia, and grew up in DeLand, Florida. She graduated from Talledega College in 1959 and soon married. Beginning in 1971, Avery became a reproductive freedom advocate working with the Clergy Consultation Service referring women from Florida to New York City for legal abortions before the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision. As one of the few African American reproductive rights activists of her time, she served on the Board of Directors of the National Women's Health Network and worked with the Boston Women's Health Book Collective, authors of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. She co-founded an abortion service, the Gainesville Women's Health Center in 1974, and she also co-founded Birthplace, a birthing center, in 1978. In 1983, Avery led the first national conference on Black women's health issues, which launched the National Black Women's Health Project in 1984 in Atlanta, Georgia. In 1989 she was the recipient of a MacArthur "genius" grant in recognition of her pioneering work on Black women's health issues, and that same year received the Essence Award from *Essence* Magazine. She is now the founder of the Avery Institute for Social Change and the author of *An Altar of Words*.

Interviewer

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

Abstract

In this oral history, Byllye Avery describes her childhood in Georgia and Florida, her marriage to Wesley Avery, and her early widowhood, which propelled her into health activism in her early 30s. The interview focuses on her work in women's organizations in the 1970s, her experiences working with white women in the beginning of the women's health movement, and her experiences in establishing the premiere black women's health organization in the U.S., the National Black Women's Health Project (now known as the Black Women's Health Imperative). Avery's story proves she was an early pioneer in the women's health movement, as well as the most recognizable leader of the emerging movement of women of color working on reproductive health issues in the 1980s. She influenced an entire generation of activists while working to end reproductive health injustices experienced by all women. This interview was conducted the day before she married her long-time partner, Ngina Lythcott, who also participates in the interview.

Restrictions

None

Format

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

Transcript

Transcribed by Luann Jette. Audited for accuracy and edited for clarity by Revan Schendler. Transcript has been reviewed and approved by Byllye Avery and Loretta Ross.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: Avery, Byllye. Interview by Loretta Ross. Video recording, July 21 and 22, 2005. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote example:** Byllye Avery interview by Loretta Ross, video recording, July 21, 2005, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, tape 2.

Transcript

Bibliography: Avery, Byllye. Interview by Loretta Ross. Transcript of video recording, July 21 and 22, 2005. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote example:** Byllye Avery, interview by Loretta Ross, transcript of video recording, July 21, 2005, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, p. 31.

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Transcript of interview conducted JULY 21 – 22, 2005, with:

BYLLYE AVERY

in: Provincetown, Massachusetts

by: LORETTA ROSS

ROSS: Today is July 21st, my name is Loretta Ross, I'm in Provincetown, Massachusetts, interviewing Byllye Avery, and it is 2005. Thank you, Byllye, for agreeing to participate in this wonderful project called the Voices of Feminism, which is sponsored by the Sophia Smith Collection at Smith College. How are you doing?

EVERY: Hi. I'm honored.

ROSS: It is a privilege for me to be able to interview you. I want to say on tape that you and I have a long history, a long relationship, so there's not that distance or that objectivity that's supposed to be there between interviewer and interviewee. And I also want to say that I'm going to ask you questions using the form that I sent you as a guideline, but you're in control of this interview. This is your recording of your story for the archives, not what Loretta wants recorded for the archives, OK? So, if I ask a question you don't want to deal with, that's fine. Take it to another place. If I fail to ask a question or something you want asked, raise it, lift it, because this is Byllye Avery's story going into the historical record.

EVERY: OK. I'm ready.

ROSS: So, you're totally in charge. So, Byllye, why don't we, first of all, get your full name and your birth date and your birth place.

EVERY: My full name: Byllye Yvonne Reddick Avery. I was born on October 20, 1937, in Waynesville, Georgia.

ROSS: Well, how did your family end up moving? Tell me about your parents.

EVERY: Well my mother — my mother grew up also in Waynesville. As a matter of fact, I was born in a house where my mother and her seven brothers and sisters, and I think about 15 of my grandmother's

grandchildren were all born in that house. So, we were all kind of born in the same little, wonderful house that no longer is there.

And she moved to Florida. She moved first down to DeLand, Florida, and started teaching down there, and she married her first husband there. And she actually moved there when I was nine months old. I was already born when she moved to Florida. She married Mike Reddick and moved to DeLand, Florida, and started teaching. She taught up in Parrish, Florida, for a while, and then she started teaching in DeLand, and I grew up in DeLand.

ROSS: So, tell me your parent's full name?

EVERY: My mother's name is Lou Alice Mungin Reddick England. She does not like the Lou.

ROSS: Do you know her date of birth and where she was born?

EVERY: Yes. She was born June 13, 1913, and she was born in Waynesville, Georgia.

ROSS: And your father?

EVERY: I don't know much about my real father. I know the name that's on the birth certificate is William Wyatt, but I don't know much about him at all. He was never in the picture. And the man who I grew up with, his name was Quitman Davis Reddick. And his nickname was Mike Reddick, and that was the man who I grew up with until I was about 14, 15 years old — 15 years old when he died. He was a victim of a very violent death that he also was a part of. It was quite traumatic for our family.

ROSS: What happened?

EVERY: He owned what we called a gyp joint, up in a little place outside of DeLand about ten miles called De Leon Springs. And in the back of the gyp joint they gambled. And from what we know is, gambling occurred. Somebody was probably accused of cheating. A man cut my father on the wrist and my father then got in the car and drove and shot this man's heart in two, and then drove back to get someone to drive him to DeLand. And they came by the house first and they took him to the hospital and he died at the hospital. So, both people died. So it was a really — but he was a violent man, anyway, you know? He lived by it and he died by it.

ROSS: Now, it was unusual for a black woman of your mother's age and generation to actually get an education and become a teacher. So, could you tell me the circumstances that led to that — because many were domestic workers.

VERY: Right. My mother was the baby in the family, and she was the only person in the family to go off to school and college. My grandfather sent her to boarding school at Fort Valley, and then she left Fort Valley and she got — I'm not sure — she got two years of education somewhere. I'm not sure. I'll have to check on that. But I know she ended up at Bethune-Cookman and she finished up at Bethune-Cookman.

And it was quite unusual, because my mother ended up teaching some of her own sisters and brothers and it kind of set up a negative thing in my family that kind of goes on today, and it's passed on to a new generation. They don't like it that my mother got educated and they were angry that she was educated and the rest of them were not. But I think it was not so much that she was special but I think that was when they came into the means and were able to do it. I just think they were poor people.

My grandfather was a foreman who worked with people who collected turpentine in the woods. They'd go around and slash the pine trees and drain the resin — you know, drip it into turpentine? And so, he oversaw the collection of all of this. And I think as he started to rise in stature and get a little bit more money, that's when he sent my mother off to school. But it really has set up a negative thing that still continues in our family.

ROSS: Do you think there is an anti-education bias in the family or just biased against those who get educated?

VERY: I think this was bias against those who get educated. And it's very selective. I mean, you know, when they want something or want information or whatever, it's OK. But just the other little things, you know, honorific kind of things, you just see it. And once, I just confronted my cousin who is closest to me, and said, "What is this thing? What is it?" She said, "Well, first Auntie Alice got to go to school." I'm saying, "So, you're going to hate her for the rest of her life because she got to go to school?" But it's sort of irrational.

ROSS: OK. So, did you have any siblings, brothers and sisters?

VERY: Yeah, I have two. I had a brother, Quitman He was named after his father, Quitman Davis Reddick. He died. He died in the last day of '91. He had multiple sclerosis and he suffered with it for a long time, a long time before it was ever diagnosed. And then I have a brother who's still alive who was adopted, David Earl Reddick, who was Mike Reddick's brother's child. And I first met him when I was, like, seven or eight years old — went up to South Carolina, on our very first trip to South Carolina. And Uncle George had what I thought was this big farm. I later learned he was a sharecropper. But it was a huge farm, I mean, just as far as the eyes could see, full of everything — corn, beans, watermelons, et cetera. And his wife had this new baby that was, like,

three or four months old. And I just really glommed on to him there. I really liked him. We had a nice time.

I remember one of my most favorite memories, childhood memories, of just pure delight, was being on the farm and they would come in on the buckboard full of watermelon, and Uncle George tell us, Drop your watermelon on the ground, burst it, take the heart out and eat it, and throw the rest to the hogs. Oh, it was just exhilarating. I mean, it was just something that gave me such a wonderful feeling. I just loved [it] and I remember [it still] today.

So, Aunt Earline died about five or six months after we got back home that year and my mother went to the funeral. And when my mother came back from the funeral, she came back with this baby. And so, she raised him. And she said that when she was there with Aunt Earline that they made an agreement with each other that if anything happened to each other, either one of them, they would take each other's children if it was necessary. So, that's how I got myself a brother.

ROSS: All right. But you were the only girl?

AVERY: I was the only girl and I was the oldest.

ROSS: OK. So that's both a position of responsibility but also a position where you could possibly get spoiled.

AVERY: Right. Well, I didn't get spoiled much. I got handed a lot of responsibility. I grew up as a work child, so that I was constantly working all the time. And you had to be busy all the time. There was no time for me to sit around and do nothing, you know. My mother would tell me on her way out, when I come back home from school, to do — we're going to have fried chicken. And that meant I had to catch the chicken, I had to kill the chicken, I had to clean the chicken, and I had to cut the chicken up, and I had to cook the chicken and have it ready. And so that was the process of how you got chicken to the table. So, we worked.

ROSS: So, you're describing a quasi-rural or a very rural life — I'm not quite sure.

AVERY: We were in DeLand.

ROSS: Describe DeLand.

AVERY: DeLand, Florida, is a small town of about five thousand people and we lived two blocks from the main street but we lived in a section of town called Africa. And you know, it wasn't that time when we had pride around Africa. We were all upset because we thought it meant we were all wild and didn't know how to do anything. You know, this was the 1950s when I grew up, the '40s and the '50s. But on our property was a

house and then we had a little café next door. But in the back, Daddy had rental property with rental houses. And then on the other side, we raised hogs and chickens and geese and ducks and everything. It was a little farming area all right down on the same property, right — one block from Main Street.

ROSS: So, you're described kind of like a merchant family, a farming family, an educational family, all in one mix.

EVERY: Sort of entrepreneurial kind of mix and match, kind of thing. I never thought of it that way, but that's the way it was.

ROSS: It's very special. So, your mother was a teacher and she continued to teach?

EVERY: My mother taught for 35 years. She was an excellent teacher.

ROSS: OK. And when Mr. Reddick, was it —

EVERY: Uh-h m.

ROSS: — who died in the altercation, did your mother remarry?

EVERY: Yes. My mother married a man named Lonnie Ingram. And he lived in Jacksonville, and so she married him and we moved to Jacksonville from DeLand. She moved there the year I went away to Talladega, actually, the first year [I was there]. She moved there in 1955.

ROSS: OK. So tell me about your educational background. Where did you go to school? How were you as a student?

EVERY: I went to school in DeLand, went to Euclid High School — Euclid Elementary and then Euclid High School. They were all on the same grounds. We walked to school every morning. It was only a mile, however, as children, we thought we were walking five or ten miles to school. And we had to walk all the way through town, every day, me and my three brothers. We walked to school. We walked through town every day to get to school. And the ironic thing is, we walked right by DeLand High School, which was the white high school, every day. So, I went to Euclid High School — finished there in 1955.

I was a pretty good student. I was very interested in a lot of stuff. I tried acting. I liked sports. But my parents — my father was very strict, and while I could play basketball as long as I was at school, I couldn't ever go for any games or anything, because he wouldn't let me go off anywhere at night. So, you had to be on a team — if you really can't play, you know — and so I was kind stilted as far as what I could do, due to his being so strict on me. But I tried my hand at everything and I ended up graduating third in my class. Sometimes I still feel a little

disappointed at that. There were only 19 in the class. You could have thought I could have edged up a little closer. But me and another girl, Earline Nichols, actually were tied. We had the same grade point average. And Woodrow, who was my good friend, he was clearly number one, and she and I were kind of tied. And so, I don't know why I took the third, because I think we both were tied for second. So, I may need to change how I say that. But anyway, I felt I was number three.

But anyway, I then left — when I was in the eighth grade, I decided that I wanted to go away to Talladega College. *Ebony* magazine did a story on Talladega and I read about it and I liked it, and that was what I was going to do. So, I didn't really go off and visit any colleges or anything. They just took me to Talladega when that time came.

But in high school, I also played in the band. I played the clarinet. I loved that. I loved being in the band. That was fun. I was a majorette for a little while. I kind of stuck my fingers in a lot of different things.

I went to Talladega College in 1955, and going there was very interesting, because the first day that I was to be there was like a Monday. Well, my mother couldn't go with me on that Monday because she started her new job teaching in Jacksonville on that Monday. So they took me to Talladega the Saturday before. And here I am at Talladega, it's raining, I'm at Foster Hall, this big dormitory that will sleep 300 and some-odd people, and I'm left there by myself. And I can remember crying. I was homesick. I had never really much been away from home in my life, and here was something that I desperately wanted and I had and it wasn't happening.

And I remember wandering around the dormitory a little bit, scared to be in this big place alone, and decided to walk outside and look at the campus. And I remember walking across the campus and I saw these two guys, and so I met them at the steps and they said, Hey, girl. Hey, girl, what's your name? What's your name? I told them my name. They asked me where I was from, and what was I going to major in. And one of those guys ended up being the man I married, Wesley. I met him that very first day.

ROSS: Wesley

Avery?

EVERY:

Wesley Avery. The very first day I got there. Life at Talladega was wonderful. I enjoyed the freedom. I enjoyed being away from — oh, the way I got out of that staying in the dormitory: the president's daughter came over and spent the night with me, so I didn't have to sleep all night in that dorm by myself. But Talladega was wonderful. I loved it. I loved the freedom. I thirsted for knowledge.

I did real well there except I knew no math. It was sort of like I learned almost no math going through high school. And Wesley was very good in math, so I ended up spending four hours a day just studying math, just in order to get a C. But I pretty much made A's in everything else. I had like five A's and a C or something like that. My

first semester, I had five A's and a D. The next time I did bring my grade up to a C in math. But other than that, it was good. And –

ROSS: What was your major?

VERY: Well, I went there to major in English but I changed it to psychology. I changed it to psychology. And I got to Talladega when it was still in its heyday, when it still was considered the Harvard of the South. What had happened, that I learned later, is that there'd been a lot of Jews who left Germany, and a lot settled in the South from the universities and everywhere. They all came to the United States, and a lot settled in the South, and formed around the American Missionary Association, which seeded Tougaloo, Talladega, a whole lot of these colleges that were in their consortium. And these professors were all there, along with several just very fine black professors who were there — Dr. Hopson, Dr. Brathwaite I mean, it was just a wonderful school. And there's just so many things that I learned that I wouldn't have gotten anywhere else.

I still was in a somewhat protected environment, because Talladega's not a big town at all, and our campus was our entire life. But we touched on the civil rights movement. I remember when Autharine Lucey integrated the University of Alabama. They brought her to Talladega for safekeeping. I remember when she was on our campus. I remember Dr. Bross, who was our psychology professor. He was white, but he was the first one who took us over to Montgomery and showed us, you know — I'm trying to remember the name. Is it Ebenezer?

ROSS: Ebenezer Baptist Church?

VERY: In Montgomery?

ROSS: On 16th Street.

VERY: In Montgomery?

ROSS: Well, Birmingham is –

VERY: No, no, the church in Montgomery where Martin Luther King was the minister. He showed us that church and showed us how close it was to the capitol. It was just, like, you could throw a stone from this church over to the capitol. He took us all to Tuskegee. He gave us, like, a whole Southern tour, which — we think nothing of that today, but in the '50s, it was something for a white man to be driving around a whole bunch of black people in a car at that time, especially when the racial tensions were starting to build, you know. It was the rumbling that was starting to build — it was just really an incredible thing.

And they took such care for each of us, so that most of my classes had, like, seven people in [them]. I had one class that had, like, 30

people in it and we hated it because it was just too big. But we got used to more individualized education. And all of them, all of the professors there took such good care of us and made us feel just a little sense of pride. About 90 percent of Talladega graduates go on to get advanced degrees, so it was really was — I'm so fortunate I got to be there during that time.

While I was there, I became a Delta, and that was also great — the first time I'd ever been called a woman in my life. The women of Delta. And I was a chapel checker. That was my job on Sundays, was to go to chapel and check to see who all was there.

ROSS: They actually monitored who went to church?

VERY: Yeah. I was the monitor, right, and they would all check with me to see if I was going. If I wasn't going, they didn't bother to go. (laughs) But it was really something. I've had some memorable moments. Martin Luther King came and spoke, and I remember the title of his speech. He talked about the Three Types of Love — erotic, platonic, and redemptive love. And he was just an incredible speaker.

I remember Dr. Gray, Arthur Gray, was our president. And on the morning of our graduation, we were all assembled for our picture and he said something that really stuck with me. He said, "Look around you, because this is the last time that all of you will be here together." And I couldn't believe — how could he say that? I was just thinking, How could he say that? But before the year was out, one of our classmates had already died. So it really makes me — whenever I stand to take a picture with a group of people, that thought runs through my head. And most of the time, it is the only time we get to do it, because for some reason not every single person would ever be able to get back again. Something will happen. They're having a baby, they've got other priorities, they didn't get the message, but something will happen to keep that [from happening]. So, it just made me feel a lot of gratitude for those moments, or that time of being in that moment.

ROSS: Now, you spoke of racial tensions in the Deep South arising during the mid 1950s. Of course, we had the Montgomery bus boycott and Rosa Parks refusing to give up her seat. So, did those racial tensions affect you at Talladega?

VERY: Well, we were all black, and the only way it affected us was that when they brought Authorine to the campus, we heard shouts from the cars: Authorine's got to go, Authorine's got to go. And the fact that it was right there in Alabama, you know, and Birmingham was not that far away. And a lot of the students at Talladega came from Birmingham. As a matter of fact, most were from Birmingham, upper black middle — well, black middle-class, pretty much upwardly mobile. So therefore we were real tuned in that way. We knew that things were going to continue to get much more volatile. We knew that that was the beginning of it,

and we knew that students were already — from Birmingham, a lot of students were already signing up to be part of the sit-ins, to be part of the marches in the park in Birmingham. We began (unclear)

ROSS: So what impact did this have on your developing political conscious?

VERY: At that time — it's really weird how things settle into your head. I was aware of it. I knew all about it, but I think I was scared. And so, when I got back to Jacksonville, while there was some happenings in Jacksonville, I know that my stepfather, Lonny England, went to the March on Washington. He went to represent our church, and I remember how he was hesitant at first and then he came in and said, No, I'm going to go. I don't care what happens.

ROSS: Was this the 1963 march?

VERY: Yeah, the 1963 march. And so, he went for that. At that time, I was having babies and trying to settle in to be married and doing a lot of that. And I went to a couple of the rallies and all that they had in Jacksonville, but I wasn't sitting up on the front row screaming and hollering. I was really thinking about babies and that kind of thing.

ROSS: Tell me more about Wesley Avery.

VERY: OK. Wesley Avery was an interesting man. He grew up in Ketona, Alabama, which is outside of Tarrant City, which is outside of Birmingham, and he was one of six children. He was the oldest boy. He was a very, very smart man. He went to college from the eleventh grade. He got a scholarship from the eleventh grade, so he never really finished high school. And the only way he could be at Talladega was he had to work. And the reason I saw him there so early was because he was a waiter and he had other work duties, and he had to come in early to work. So his scholarship allowed for him to do that. He majored in biology and made the dean's list all the time. He was just a real smart guy. A nice man, who also, at that time, understood the politics of it but wasn't so much inspired.

It was just real interesting how things hit you and when they hit you and everything. The thing that we had to do, though, after we got married, we traveled back and forth between Jacksonville and Birmingham all during the riots and all while that was happening. And just to travel alone on the road was risky, because they would stop you and search the car and make you get out. And we always saw lots and lots of police on the road. But you could tell when there were marches going on, because we would go all the way and not see a policeman at all. They were all, you know, downtown around the marches and all.

ROSS: When did you get married?

VERY: I got married in 1960 — June 1960, June 25. And Wesley and I had about ten years together. He died in 1970 of a massive heart attack, November 27, a massive heart attack. And his death, I think, politicized me more than anything.

ROSS: OK. Tell me about your kids, and then I want you to address why you –

VERY: We have two children — Wesley, who was born August 27, 1961, and Sonia, who was born in '66, February 20, 1966. The kids — I wanted — I got pregnant with Wesley sort of by mistake. I was trying to practice birth control but I really didn't know what I was doing, and I ended up being pregnant. I had absolutely no idea I was pregnant until somebody told me I was pregnant at a Christmas party. One of the women looked at my eyes and said, "Gal, you're pregnant. Your eyes are mighty white." And I thought, Oh, that probably is why I'm feeling bad. I was feeling so bad. I was sick to my stomach. And we hadn't thought about it. We thought maybe I ate something and all, but I was definitely pregnant. Finally the doctor that I was going to see to ask about birth control was a Catholic, so what do you expect.

So then I had that baby, I had Wesley, which was a wonderful pregnancy. My girlfriend Delores and I — when I went to tell her I was pregnant, she was telling me she was pregnant. So we went through pregnancy together. It was great. And she had her baby and I went to see her at the hospital and left there and went right over to the hospital and had my baby.

ROSS: What's Delores's full name?

VERY: Delores Daniels. She still lives in Jacksonville. And so, I had Wesley, which was a long labor but a wonderful birth, and just a nice — he was a very hungry baby. He could just eat everything in the world, but he was a delight and I didn't know what I was doing. I had all the usual angst of first parents. And then (gap in tape, 29:46–29:55)

ROSS: Tell me a little bit more about Wesley.

VERY: OK. Wesley and I got married in 1960 and we lived for a while in Jacksonville. We lived several years in Jacksonville — about ten, almost, eight or nine [years] — and then I went down to Gainesville, Florida. I got a fellowship — there was only one given in the state of Florida — to go and study special education, get my master's in special education. And so, I went to Gainesville first and spent that year getting my degree and Wesley was staying in Jacksonville, took care of those two kids, the whole time that I was gone.

And while I was down there, I found out how could he get down there into school. And he got — he ended up getting a scholarship to go to study educational research. And so, soon the both of us were living in Gainesville in married student housing, and he was going to school and

I was working. I started teaching. So, we spent two years there, and we were beginning the third year.

And in November that year, Wesley had a massive heart attack. He was 33 years old — never really had been sick a day in his life. He died. He was hypertensive. We didn't know it. He had had a couple of exams earlier that should have let us know. But you got to understand, this is the time before we started learning about high blood pressure being the silent killer. And so, he was about to be inducted in the Army, which he didn't want to go — he really didn't believe in war, he was a pacifist. He had his blood pressure — they took his pressure and it was high, and they laid him down for 30 minutes and they took it again and it was normal. But he didn't go because I was threatening a miscarriage with Wesley and he got a hardship deferment. And the second time, he went in to see the doctor and the doctor told him that his pressure was high and that he needed him to exercise and to diet to bring his pressure down. But that was all that was told to him. It wasn't put into a way that he would have known that it had the dangers that it carried. And so, I guess probably some eight or nine years after those initial exams, he had this massive heart attack.

And it was truly a radicalizing experience for me. Here we were, two young black people, already got our college degrees, already got the two kids. We were really ready to take on the world. We were thinking about where did we want to live. He kind of was partial to the Pacific Northwest. He wanted to go to Oregon. Fine to me — I just wanted to get out of the Deep South. I was ready to go and be someplace else. And that was taken away from us. And I realized it doesn't really matter how much formal education you have. If you don't know how to take care of yourself, you're still basically in a state of ignorance. And all of that happened.

I went through two full years of deep grief, being 33. I felt so young, so alone. There was really no one for me to talk to about being a widow. All of a sudden, I felt left with the immense responsibility of raising two kids, making all the decisions by myself for me and for them. The one thing that saved me is that I had — my family just put their arms around me and provided support. My mother has always been a bedrock of support for me.

And then I had an excellent support system in Gainesville. I had just started working at the Children's Mental Health Unit that September, and he died that November. And the Children's Mental Health Unit also provided an incredible base of support. This particular unit was headed up by Paul Adams, who was a pacifist and a Quaker and he didn't believe in living in the present. He lived in the future. And so, all his whole staff got pulled into the future.

And Wesley's death was still very much full on my mind. You know, I had all kinds of questions. How could a person who was so bright, who had so much promise, who had so much to give the world, be taken away so early? And I started learning about the importance of family history, and what diseases run in their family, and if there's

something you can do to avoid getting those diseases, that you really need to do it.

At the same time, I looked at Wesley's family. They were all smart. I mean, all the sisters and brothers got Masters and Ph.D.s and they breezed through school and they were all just vibrant. But they were sick. His father died at 57. His brother died at 40. His sister — they have a lot of diseases. They have diabetes, they have cardiovascular diseases — just a lot of what we now have learned could be prevented. That has a lot to do with how we're reared, what we eat, what foods they love, what habits we're into, how hard they are to break — how change is just very difficult.

And also, I looked at other things about how we make decisions about our life. Like, one of the things that Wesley often talked about was, his father worked on the railroad and they wanted to promote his father to a higher position but he would have to move to Chattanooga to do it. They were going to move him, the whole family and everybody there, and he didn't want to leave his [Wesley's] mother. His father didn't want to leave his mother. So he turned down the position and stayed in Ketona. And Wesley used to often wonder, I just wonder what would've happened if my father had moved. We would have made more money. We might have had a different place to live and some things might have changed.

I miss Wesley. He was a joy. And I was so glad that I got to know him, like, for 15 years — four years of college, one year mother demanded that I had to wait before I got married, and then the ten years of marriage that we had made 15.

He didn't necessarily want children right away. He was not that interested in having children so soon. I just got pregnant. And then, when I got pregnant with Sonia, I remember telling him that I had prayed to get pregnant with Sonia because we had all been working up at Macclenny, Florida, at the state hospital, the mental institution up there. And pretty soon, there was, like, four of us in a car going from Jacksonville to Macclenny, then it got to three, then it got to be two. And when Wesley left, that left me driving by myself. He got a job working in the Jacksonville police department. He was a policeman for 16 months before he started teaching. So, I would have to drive up there by myself every day, and I hated that, so I prayed that I would get pregnant.

He said, "Oh, my God. I wish I'd known you were doing that. I would have told God, please don't listen to her. Please don't listen to her." (laughs) I ended up miscounting my cycle and getting pregnant with Sonia. I mean, I got up and checked and still miscounted and it ended up being Sonia.

ROSS:

Tell me, now — it seems to have been unusual for a woman back in the early 1960s to assert her reproductive freedom. I mean, you were talking about trying to use birth control, which had just been legalized for married couples. How did you know to do these things?

AVERY: I just knew. I mean, first I had a diaphragm that, I think he didn't fit me properly for it, because it hurt real bad when I put it in, you know. The birth control methods I only used were barrier methods, and I used the diaphragm. And I just knew that I didn't want to be pregnant right away. And also, before I got married, we'd been pretty good using condoms. We were real good condom users. As I told you, Wesley didn't want children, so he was a very active participant in making sure that birth control happened. (laughs) Now, I don't know what happened with it, how Wesley the son managed to get here, but it wasn't because somebody wasn't trying to prevent our early pregnancy. He just thought we should — he wanted us to wait ten years before we had any children.

ROSS: Well, why don't we continue the story of talking about little Wesley and Sonia so we can put on this tape a lot more details about your personal life.

AVERY: Oh, yes. So, Wesley was a great little baby and he was the first grandchild and so my mother — our mothers just spoiled him totally to death. And he was also a very respectful child. He was not one that took advantage of being, you know, just so overly loved and have things lavished upon him. He really sort of took it in stride.

But I do remember one pleasant story — that my mother is a great fundraiser for the church, and they would have all these kings and queens contests and teas. I still can remember how you make so much money on tea. They can make, like, ten thousand dollars on a tea and all that kind of thing, and she had just done this king-and-queen program. And I remember Wesley was about four years old. He looked up at Gigi and said, "Gigi, make me a king. Gigi, make me a king." And she said, "All right, baby. Next year, I'll make you a king." And the next year, he was the king. It was just so great.

And then, I wanted the children to be, like, four years apart, so I wouldn't have to try to pay for college for both of them. You know, I'd have one leaving and the other one going. We always try to plan the future. No one knows what's going to happen. But then, about four and a half years later, Sonia was born, in '66, and she — such a different baby from him. She was, like, the total opposite. Where he ate a big — you know, he wanted eight ounces of milk before he left the hospital, Sonia would just drink two or three and she was fine. Wesley never slept during the night. He would cry all night and go to sleep early in the morning. She slept all through the night. So the two children were, like, total opposites, all the way from the beginning.

Wesley was always very, very protective of Sonia and was someone who took care of her. And he took his role as the big brother seriously. Sonia, on the other hand, was always a little headstrong. She always had her way of doing things and you never could really tell her anything. She just had to experience it and you'd just have to hope that she gets some of that sense from her experience, because she certainly doesn't

pay any attention to what you're saying early on. So, she was that way all the way from the beginning. But they were wonderful.

I was so glad I had them after Wesley died. I really don't know what I would have done without them. They then really became very much the center of my life. And I remembered Wesley had been dead about two years. The year prior to his death — a few months before he died, he and I went to — he had a friend who was selling Amway products and he was interested in us doing Amway, and so I looked at the Amway stuff and I thought, Well, this would be a good thing for poor people. This is one of the ways that they could get out of poverty, is become Amway distributors. What an idea I had.

So I go around, try to get all these people who were low-income people to sign up to be Amway distributors. What was wrong with that is that people would buy products from them but they wouldn't sign up with them to become distributors, and the only way you made money was to get people to sign up. It wasn't in the selling of the products. They could sell the products. Oh, they could sell a hundred dollars' worth of products a day, think nothing of it. They could sell two hundred dollars' worth a day, think nothing of it. But they could never get anybody to sign up, and it was just such a lesson for me. But nevertheless, I became a direct myself. After Wesley died, I did it — that's how I worked out my grief in those two years, was to become an Amway distributor, direct distributor. I learned from that. It was the first place that I'd done any public speaking, and I started to tell my story about how I got into Amway, and it was because I told the story about Wesley and I'd gone to this meeting and then he died, et cetera, et cetera.

Then there was a guy in Amway who was, like, their number-one person. And I remember he saw me in the airport after my first time speaking. I think we were in Kentucky at a meeting. He came over to me in the airport and he said to me, he said, "I want you to know, you got moxie." He said, "Has anybody every told you that you should be a public speaker?" I said, "No, I've never done anything. That was the first that I've ever done." He said, "You've got moxie and you need to continue doing it." And so that kind of little lesson stayed with me. I also learned that I could sell, because I not only sold Amway soap, I got distributors. And so that kind of carried over with me as one of my stepping stones and lessons that I was able to apply later in my life.

So, after Wesley died, I started getting closer to the people around me and really a lot closer to people who worked at the Children's Mental Health Unit. And one day, Paul Adams, who was the — he was the chief in the division of child psychiatry — he said to me, to Margaret Parrish, and to Judy Levy, that he wanted us to make a presentation at the next didactic seminar on reproductive health — women and reproductive health, and talk about what was going on in the reproductive — I think he might have called it reproductive rights, reproductive health. And I'm thinking, Oh, my God, how are we going to do this? I don't know nothing about this at all. And then — but I

knew he wanted us to talk about abortion and I was scared to talk about abortion, because what was my mother going to say?

ROSS: What year was this?

AVERY: What would my mother think of me? This was 1971. This was '71. And so, Margaret and Judy and I put the presentation together. We talked about what was going on then — you know, the whole court cases and where abortions were legal, et cetera, et cetera. We did our presentation. And after that presentation, the three of us got identified as people who could help women get abortions. Well, we didn't know how to help women get abortions.

But I remember a white woman calling Judy and asking her about where she could go to get an abortion. And so, we got on the phone and called up — located Clergy Consultation [Service] up in New York and talked about how she could come to New York and get the abortion. They gave the woman the information. We're done.

Then, we got calls from other women. A black woman called, and we tried to give her the phone number and she said she didn't need no telephone number in New York. She didn't know nobody in New York. She didn't have no way to get to New York, you know. She didn't have no money for New York and all. And that woman died from a self-induced abortion. So we really understood that it's not only just having it available, it has to be accessible.

And so, from that experience — women in Gainesville around that time started doing CR groups. And since I was running around with this whole bunch of white women, I was doing what they were doing.

ROSS: Your consciousness-raising groups.

AVERY: And so, we did consciousness-raising groups. I went to several consciousness-raising groups and I thought it was pretty interesting. And it made me think back to before Wesley died — we would come home from work and I would get busy with making dinner, getting the diapers washed and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, and he'd go sit out and look at the TV or he would read. And I used to get mad at him because I wanted to be reading, I wanted to be relaxing, and I was working. And so, there was one book that he had that he kept telling me, Byllye, you need to read this book, you need to read this book, you need to read this book. And so, the only way I could spite him was not to read what he wanted me to read.

And so, as we got to doing all this CR, I went back and looked at what that book was, the special one that he was talking about. It was *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan. That was what he wanted me to read, and I am so sorry that I didn't have that conversation then, because he was the anti-whatever that was — he was not being a participating person. He was the kind that we were really going after, you know. So I hated [that we] never got to have that conversation.

But when I read that book it really opened my eyes, and I could not close them again. And working within the Children's Unit, right in the hospital, and doing the reproductive health work, and looking at the beginnings of the women's health movement around reproductive health was where my political consciousness sunk in. And I say to women all the time — they say, Well, why don't we know about it? — I say, Well, why don't we do this and why don't you do that? I say, You never know what is going to strike you, and you never know when it's going to strike you, but it's going to strike you when you're open to receiving it, you know.

And so, that really was an incredible awakening for me. And we would spend — we spent months and months just reading every single thing, every single book that came out — and sit around in Judy Levy's kitchen talking and dreaming. And it was there that we started dreaming about opening up an abortion clinic in Gainesville, and we had to think back and be very careful of how we did it, because we knew that the Alachua County Medical Society had refused Planned Parenthood when they tried to open up a clinic. And so, we didn't want that to happen to us.

So what we did is we got a medical director, who was Max Souter from Jacksonville. We got our facility that was owned by a woman who was a psychiatrist over at the Alachua Teaching Hospital. It was located right across the street from Alachua General Hospital, and it used to be the health department. So we were able to get that building, and we then needed to raise money to open up the clinic. And so, what we did is we got some people who gave donations, like a couple of thousand dollars. I think it only took us about eight or nine thousand dollars to get this whole thing started.

But when we got ready to furnish it, we each then had to look among ourselves to see what resources we had. And so, I remember I had an account at Sears, and so my job was to get the furniture. This was 1974, and so the furniture we got was the denim low-slung furniture that we had. That was good. I remember getting the couches, two couches and two chairs and then two recliners for the recovery room. So that's what I went and put on my charge account. And I remember Judy borrowed money from the credit union to help pay for the machines that we bought from Clergy Consultation that came — the aspirators. I remember Joan Edelman got the shag carpet. She said we just had to have shag carpet. She got the shag carpet for the room. I can't remember what Margaret got, but everybody stretched themselves to make this facility happen.

And we opened in May of 1974, and the Alachua County Medical Society learned about it when everybody else did in Gainesville. And our business started. It was just incredible. It was such an eye opener for me to really understand how important the ability to make reproductive health decisions — how that ability is so important in the life of families.

And I really didn't think that many black women got abortions until we opened the clinic, where they would be more than 50 percent of the patients coming in, or the clients coming in for abortion, while we were only like 20 percent of the general population. And it was amazing to see parents bringing their daughters in, to see husbands and wives coming in, wearing their crosses around their neck and coming in — people from all walks of life coming in. It was a very interesting procedure. Of course, we taught the women everything in the world they wanted to know or didn't want to know about their bodies. We were not passing up this opportunity to educate. We did wonderful education. We took care of them exquisitely.

And we also did the well-woman GYN Clinic. We ran that at nights. And I was very disappointed because I really wanted to see more black women coming in for that service and I really didn't know how to reach black women to get them to come in. And we did the regular things, like leaflets and put that information and stuff in church bulletins and all of that. We still didn't get the population coming in. What happened is the young white women from the University of Florida used it as an alternative to their health center. And they were coming and getting all the information. It was fine for them to get it, but we also wanted other folks to get it, too.

Another thing that happened while we were there, we ran these educational workshops. We ran body sex workshops. We wanted women to learn about sexuality. Betty Dodson had written *Liberating Masturbation*. We brought Betty Dodson down to Gainesville. She came down, taught us all how to do her naked workshops, which were good. She had us all looking at our vaginas and looking at each other's vaginas and I really didn't — had never thought about the fact that everybody's whole vaginal area looks different, just as our faces look different. And none of us knew that ours was so beautiful. And those of us with dark skins, the colors are just beautiful as they go from dark brown to kind of rosy pink to light purple to so on and so — and we also learned that you could also look in your vaginal area and tell if you were pregnant, because it's kind of blue. And several of us had that experience when we checked that out.

We had a lot of fun. We learned about our menstrual cycles. We kept a big chart in the hall and everybody put down when they were on their periods, and we watched as all of our periods came together, as they will do in an all-women environment. That was a great experience. We did yoga. We learned massage. We just really sort of gave ourselves permission to learn who we are, to explore who we are to our fullest. And it gave us such a sense of pride, who we are. And it really ended up having a lot of carryover into other areas. So that was us in Gainesville.

We had our sisters who were in the Federation of the —

ROSS:

Federation of Feminist Women's Health —

VERY: Yeah, the Federation of Feminist Women's Health Center, and some of them were in California. The ones we knew best were in Tallahassee, though, and that's where Brenda Joyner and several of those women were, up in Tallahassee doing similar work. But they were a lot more hard-nosed feminists than we were. They were very — you know, stuck to the rules, and you could only use a certain size cannula for the abortion, and they had very strict rules. We sort of did more of a blend of things that we thought were good — we kept them and some of the others.

But the one thing that we all connected around was menstruation. Women in the Feminist Women's Health Center started menstrual aspiration, where you could just remove your whole menstrual period in one sitting and not have it. We in Gainesville didn't think that that was the right thing to do. We didn't know whether you would pull off some of the lining or whether it should not be — and our whole approach was we were making peace with our menstrual cycle. We didn't want to get rid of it in one quick thing. We wanted to know how to live with it in harmony and deal with the fact that some of us have bad cramps, some of us have other things that make it not so positive. But we were more interested in turning it into a positive experience. So there was a lot of work done around that and that whole menstrual experience led me to *On Becoming a Woman: Mothers and Daughters Talking Together*, which I will talk about later.

I remember in '74 — no, '75 — the Boston Women's Health Book Collective put on the first Women's Health Conference in Boston. Five of us went from Gainesville, and I remember at that time, Carol Downer was there, Lorraine Rothman was there, and I remembered them from when they came to Gainesville before we opened up our center.

I'm going to backtrack a little bit. Before we opened up the Gainesville Women's Health Center, Lorraine and Carol came down. They'd been traveling around the country, organizing women, getting women to look at their cervix, and to talk about reproductive health. And they'd traveled on the Greyhound Bus with a box marked "toys" that had these speculums in them. And they were all larges, you know — heaven help you if you needed a smaller one. All they had was large. So they had this meeting and we went and they got up on the table and had us come. They put in the speculum and had us come around and look at their cervix, and showed us how to do it with a flashlight and a mirror, and that we needed to make sure that we knew what the doctor was looking at and we needed to know how to take care of our bodies. And in some ways, that act sort of gave birth to what I call the women's health movement — that it was an act that would get you — that is one of the things you will remember where you were. You will remember when you did it. It was of that importance.

So they were at this conference. And it was also the first time I attended a conference that had anything to do with lesbianism. And so, this woman Pam Smith and I had decided that we were going to go to the lesbian workshop, but we were going to stick together because we

were real scared. We didn't know what was going to happen in there with these lesbians. And now knowing what we looked like, sticking together — I mean, that had nothing to do with it.

So we get to the workshop, and so Pam and I are sitting right next to each other, and we're in the room, and the room becomes very crowded. I mean, it's like, full. And so people came in and said, We're going to have to break this up into two workshops. There's going to be two of us presenting, and so what we're going to do is we're going to divide up, and each of us will take half of the group. And we want you to count off. So that meant Pam and I had to be separated. And we just talked about how afraid we were, we were so homophobic until the homophobia just takes over your breathing, your everything. It really is a real fear. And we didn't know how we were going to survive it, but we survived it, obviously, very well, and everything went on. But I remember that was a thing.

But I was also impressed with the medical knowledge that people had at this conference and what they told us. And I still can carry parts of that and those relationships with me today, and really — I came back a very changed person.

END TAPE 1

101:55

TAPE 2

AVERY:

The Boston Women's Health Book Conference had a definite impact on my life, my thinking, and a lot of those relationships I still have with those people today, and a lot of the people who went on to form the Boston Women's Health Book Collective have been very helpful in helping me get from point A to point B and provided a real good way that you help sisters. And I was also able to pass that forward, and that's a nice legacy that I remember from them.

When we were at the Gainesville Women's Health Center, another thing that happened was women, white women, suddenly started taking interest in their birthing experiences. And when they started looking at childbirthing, they started raising questions about doctors, about how they were treated at birth, about where should they have their babies. And in this questioning period, a lot of them decided that they wanted to have their babies at home, with midwives. And so they came to us at the Gainesville Women's Health Center to ask us, could we connect them with midwives — after their babies were born, will we have our doctors who are residents who were doing their abortions, could they look at their babies to see if they were OK.

And so, we picked up on this and since our original dream was to have a birthing — a reproductive health experience that was a total experience that showed that we have certain needs at different stages of our lives and certain decisions make sense then, et cetera. And so, we got interested in birth and we started — we had our first meeting, I remember, [in] northeast Gainesville over on the duck pond and we were at a person's — just regular three-bedroom house, and the word went out on the ground that we were having this meeting and we had over a hundred people show up.

And we knew that people were interested in birth. So we started putting together the Birth Place. And as we started to work on Birth Place, there started to arise within the Gainesville Women's Health Center a conflict and a division among people. And some people were very upset with Judy leaving, who, while she was a very bright woman, had a sort of brusque way of doing things, and had a real impatience for any kind of ignorance or any kind of inability to do anything. She just had no patience for that. And she alienated a lot of people, and a lot of people were angry with her — the things that happened then.

And so, it really happened that the Gainesville Women's Health Center had a split, and the way we resolved it was, three of us — me, Judy, and Margaret — ended up doing the Birth Place and we gave up the Gainesville Women's Health Center and gave the Gainesville Women's Health Center that was forming and doing real well to the board. We got off the board and took the Birth Place with us. Aching from that and feeling very wounded and hurt, and to tell you the truth, I can't remember a lot of what all happened during it. All I remember, it was painful. There was a lot of crying, a lot of us feeling real bad. It

probably was power and not understanding how to handle power — power struggle.

And so, the three of us went to do the Birth Center. So we used some of our old tactics of how we were going to open up this center, but we knew that we were going to have to come before the Alachua County Medical Society, because they had said to us at the Gainesville Women's Health Center that we were supposed to come and get permission from them, and we said, Oh, we didn't know, we didn't know. You know, we acted like we were dumb women and didn't ask them. So we knew we'd have to ask them this time, so we had to work out a strategy for that.

And how would we raise money to be able to open up this facility? And what should it look like? So we found this big two-story, turn-of-the-century house in northeast Gainesville that had been a Methodist parsonage, and it was absolutely perfect. It had a huge living-room area that we made into a library and that's where we could teach our childbirth classes. It had beautiful rugs on the floor. We went around and begged things. We got things from antique stores. We asked people to lend us stuff out of their houses. And we had a playroom downstairs. It had a fully equipped kitchen, and upstairs we had two birthing suites, one with a big brass bed and the other with a four poster bed. And then the midwife had her quarters. We hired Nancy Redfern, who was a midwife who worked down in the southern part of the state, Fort Myers. We brought her up. She became our midwife. She was absolutely just gifted, very gifted, in the whole midwifery thing.

And in November of 1978, we opened up Birth Place. And the first baby that was born there, her name was Amanda. Her parents wanted her name to start with A. And I remember, by the end of that year, we had had 30-some-odd, 30-some babies — not by the end of the year we opened, by the end of the following year, we had some 30-some babies born at Birth Place.

And one of the families used to make costumes for Six Flags. And they made this wonderful quilt called "The Woman in the Shoe," and it had the big boot in the center and then around the outside of the quilt, they had little squares for all of the babies with their names and all that were born there in the first year. And I remember a woman named Harriet Hardigan, who is a photographer who lives in Michigan. She sent us portraits for our wall that showed the birth of a baby all the way from crowning all the way through all of the stages of birth. That was wonderful. Another woman sent us pictures of daddies and babies. So going up the stairway, we have daddies with their babies and all. The Birthing Center was just a pure delight.

ROSS: How did you all finance it?

VERY: We asked people to lend us a thousand dollars and that we would pay them back, I think, 8 percent interest quarterly, just as whatever they would get from a bank. And we raised, like, \$16,000 in one afternoon,

and that was enough to get it started, what we had. Of course, none of us got paid for a little while, but you know, it paid Nancy, because she had to get paid. And then, later on, we got to where we could pay me and pay Margaret and pay Judy. We worked it. We were the staff. We worked it. We made it all happen. And my job was, I did public relations and education and I was the one who every Tuesday night, I did the orientation, and we would have couples come and most Tuesday nights, everybody who came signed up. So it was really nice.

ROSS: You were an effective salesperson even then.

AVERY: Right, right, right, right. The thing that I couldn't do that people recommended — that we go into the high schools, and I just could not do that. It felt like that was encouraging young women to have babies and I wanted them to get their education. I mean, they'd say, A high number of these young women, next year, will be having babies. You're not going to encourage them by talking about it. But nevertheless, I couldn't do it. It was against my principles. And so, I was unable to go in the high schools.

ROSS: Now, eventually you found out a strategy to go into high schools.

AVERY: Right, right, right. That wasn't the way. I had to go in another way. So that was just delightful. I participated in about a hundred births. And I understood a lot — there's that thing called women's intuition, and speaking without words. I remember, once we had a birth in which we were having problems, and Nancy looked at me and I came back with a Gelpi retractor. I have no idea what you do with a Gelpi retractor and she said, "That's just what I need." She never said a word. And then, I remember, Nancy would say to me, "Oh, we're going to have babies today." And I said, "Oh, really? How do you know?" She said, "You are nesting." I would have gotten up from my desk, gone upstairs to the birthing room, not thinking, just straightening up things, tidying up, making sure that everything is in place that needed to be there, and she said, "That's nesting. We're having a baby." And sure enough, we'd have babies.

I remember one night, we had two babies born in one night. That was a lot of hard work. And I remember being so tired by 5 o'clock that morning, until I remembered I'd never wanted to be a midwife for the rest of my life. Doing it in a little while was fine. Many women had their babies on their husband's birthday. A lot of women had them on their birthday. Children were at the births, so they didn't have to ask the question as to where babies came from.

A lot of women had labors exactly like their mothers, so we would always ask them, Find out, what was your mother's labor like? A lot of women couldn't deliver in the bed. They needed to get on the floor. They just needed to have something firmer. So she'd put all the sheets and stuff on the floor and the woman would sit on the floor the baby

would come. Some women couldn't deliver in the lithotomy position, that is, laying flat on their back with their legs open. Most of them delivered on their sides with their leg up on the midwife's shoulder. That was a much more comfortable way to deliver.

And then, one birth we had from this couple who came from Alaska, Redwood and her husband, and they were from Skagway, Alaska, and they did Tantric yoga all through the labor. And I remember Margaret took pictures and you look at the photos and you could see the energy in the photos between this couple and she delivered her baby standing. It was pretty incredible, pretty impressive.

ROSS: Did anybody request a water birth?

VERY: We didn't have — no. You know, what would happen — no, no water requests. We didn't have that kind of facility at that time. We didn't have a hot tub, a tub or anything. But she would have women take tub baths until their water broke. And after their water broke, we couldn't — we didn't do that. We also had several emergencies. We knew that placenta previa was the worst thing we could have. That is where the placenta comes out before the baby. And we had that happen. In that case, the midwife had to just keep the cord and all from wrapping around the baby or harming the baby until she got it to the hospital, which meant having her hand literally in the woman's cervix about 15, 20 minutes until she could get there and get some help. But we were able to do it and didn't have a death.

And then, I remember the first time we had a baby that was born with the cord wrapped around its neck. Nancy had taken a nap and she told me to stay with the woman. She was going to go to sleep. I said, "Nancy, I don't know about being by myself." She said, "You'll be all right, and I'm right in the next room. Just call out if anything happens." So she took like a 20-to-30-minute nap and I was taking care of the woman in labor. And she woke up, she said, "Oh, I dreamed we had a baby with no neck." And I said, "Oh, my gosh." She said, "No, it don't mean anything. It just means that I need to watch out and pay attention." And so, when this baby was born, it had the cord around its neck, so she then made a practice of always checking to see if the cord was around the baby's neck and sometimes she would just pull it off before the baby came out. That became a part of our routine procedure.

I learned a lot from her. I learned a lot from that experience and really, really enjoyed it. But then, as business kind of changed and the Birthing Center really needed another midwife more than they needed another talking type like me, so we had to make a business decision. In order for it to survive, one of us had to go. And so, I took leave and I started — I'd heard that they had a position open at Santa Fe Community College, working in the CETA Program — Comprehensive Education and Training Program. And they were looking for a personnel and workers' liaison. And so, I went and made an application for the job, and I got it.

ROSS: Santa Fe, New Mexico?

AVERY: Santa Fe Community College in Gainesville — in Gainesville. And I got the job and I really didn't know what I was doing or what I was going to do, but I figured I'd figure it out because they seemed to think I could. And so, I went in and I totally changed the program. What they had, they had a program where they had all the CETA students kind of off together, away from the mainstream, and I did not like that at all. And they had these CETA teachers and all that kind of thing. It did not make sense. If they were going to be going to the community college, they needed to be going to college, you know, and get what the college had to do.

So I integrated them into the system and it proved to be really — I made a lot of changes with the programs. I got to do something that ended up being real important. I got to spend a lot of time with the young black women who were in the program. And I really found out more about their lives, because I was concerned about the amount of absenteeism that they had. They were being paid minimum wage to come to school, and I thought, "God, I would have been so thrilled if somebody had paid me to come to school." And I couldn't figure out why that wasn't incentive enough, or what was getting in the way. And it was really through talking to these women that I then got to look at the lives of black women. And it was there that the idea of working with black women and black women's health was born in my mind.

ROSS: What year was this?

AVERY: This was in 1980, 1980 that I was working at Santa Fe. And um, when I talked to these women, there was one woman who was 19 years old and had like three or four children, and I'm saying, "Explain this to me. How did this happen? Do you know?" And she said, "Well, my mama had me when she was 12 or 13, and so, I wanted to get out. I was taking care of her children. I wanted to get my own place. So the way to get my place was to have a baby." And then she had two, and it was three, et cetera. And so, whenever any of these kids got sick, or any of these kids had a problem, she couldn't come to work — she couldn't come to school. I found out that they had a lot of health problems, that they were diabetic, they were hypertensive. They just had problems at such an early age, much earlier than I thought we get things. And so, that was very eye-opening to me.

At the same time, I was still involved with the National Women's Health Network. I was on the board of the National Women's Health Network. I remember being in Ann Arbor, sitting at a board meeting, I think it must have been in '81, '80, '81, and Norma Swenson was sitting next to me, and I said to her, "I think I want to do a report to the Network on black women's health." Because I've been coming to all their meetings and nothing had been put down on black women's health.

And there were only two black people on the board, me and Pam Freeman. We were both on the board at the same time. So, I said, "What do you think about that, Norma?" She said, "I think that's a fabulous idea." And so, I asked Pam, what did she think about it? She thought it was good, too.

And so, I went back to Gainesville and I started researching black women's health issues. And I remember Frances Hornstein had told — Frances Hornstein was with the Feminist Women's Health Center in California — and she told me about *Health United States 1979*, which was a book that had all the health statistics in it and that I should get that, and that would give me health statistics. And I remember going to D.C. for some reason, and I actually went to HHS to get this book, and not understanding where I was, or not understanding how they are organized, it took forever for them to find out where I could go get this book. It must have taken them at least an hour, hour and a half, to find out, but I was determined not to leave there without that book.

And I came back with it and I started looking at the statistics and all. And the one statistic that bothered me the most was for black women — this was in 1979 — for black women that they surveyed on the NHANES test, which was this big comprehensive, like 16-part test that they give every so many year —, I don't know whether they say for five or ten years — that black women ages 18 to 25 rated themselves as living in psychological distress, and that they rated that distress greater than white women of similar ages who were diagnosed mental patients.

So I was wondering, What is this distress that we have? So, I wrote my first proposal and Belita Cowan, who was the director of the National Women's Health Network, was going to take me around to see if we could raise money, and the Network was going to be our fiscal sponsor. So we got a proposal together and I remember sending it to June Jackson Christmas, who was then the president of the American Public Health Association, to ask her, did she think — she was a black woman, she was, like, the first black woman president — I asked her, what did she think about this? And she thought it was a great idea. She thought it was just the thing that we should do. So I'm so glad she answered me. And so, I say to people, You really need to ask some people, because you never know what influence they [are going to] have in your lives.

And so we — Belita and I got the proposal together. They dressed me up, got me in a suit, little pinstriped suit that I remember, little shoes that hurt my feet, and we went to New York. And I remember she took me to the Ford Foundation. That was the first place we went. So we walked out and I said, "Oh, I think he liked what we are doing. I think he will give us some money." She said, "No, he won't give us a penny. But I wanted you to come here because you need practice before you get to the real people who are going to give us money." And I remember we went to the Ms. Foundation. That was the last one we went to. I was so glad when we got to the Ms. Foundation and saw their carpet was slightly torn and I said, "Oh, good. Can I put on some comfortable

shoes?” She said, “Go put on anything you want that’s comfortable while you’re here. You’re fine.”

And so, we also went to the Joint [Center for] Foundation Support and there I met Adisa Douglas, and she — I’d also met her earlier at this funders’ briefing. We met with her. She really liked what we were doing. And when we got to the Ms. Foundation, we met with — I can’t remember who we met with, but I remember being introduced to Julia Scott, and Julia was actually the person who wrote about our program there. So somewhere between Adisa and Julia Scott, they gave the Black Women’s Health Project their first money. Both of them claim it. I think it was kind of was a tie. I think the thing they came in (unclear) on the same day, but we just let both of them on it.

And that started our whole thing of the Black Women’s Health Project. I remember being at Santa Fe one day and Adisa calls me at Santa Fe and she said, “Byllye, guess what? I’ve just raised another \$16,000 for you.” So by this time, we had, like, 20 to \$50,000 all raised and everything, so I thought, It’s time for me to do this full time. But I really couldn’t do it in Gainesville, because I didn’t have people around me that could make it happen.

And so, I moved to Atlanta, because I’d been up to Atlanta on several occasions and I had a lot of friends there. None of them were black at that time — they all were white. But what I learned how to do is to say, the Creator presents you with certain things, and it is up to you to have that thing help you get to where you need to be. So I started asking the white women, Do you know any black women I can meet? Do you know black women I can meet?

And that’s how I met Lillie Allen. She was introduced to me by a woman who was on the board, Judy Lipshott (sp?), who was on the board of the National Women’s Health Network. And when I met Lillie, Lillie sort of just started doing some work with reevaluation counseling up in North Carolina, and she was trying to come up with a special workshop for black women, and so she had a lot of stuff that she was thinking through. And I’m trying to start this whole thing. I’m trying to do a conference, so we were all trying to figure out how to get to black women.

Another white woman, who writes for *Essence* magazine, introduced me to Eleanor Hinton-Hoytt. And Eleanor had put on one Saturday conference, that was all she had ever done, but we were saying, Fine, none of us have ever done this, you know? So we got to all get together. The first thing I did was organize a planning committee meeting of people who came together from around the country. And I got them the same way — through the Network board members. I had a group of about 20 women who came, and we met for two years to plan the conference that we were having in ’83. And during those two years, Lillie was able to work on her workshop with us, the planning committee. So as she was working on how we would do this workshop, we were trying to pull the conference together and we kept saying that our one rule was, we want a conference that we want to come to, that we

want to come to. Faye Williams gave us what we should use as our theme song — Fannie Lou Hamer, “We’re sick and tired of being sick and tired.” Just so many wonderful things were just dropped in, just dropped in.

We planned the conference and we thought we’d have one or two hundred women come, and we had close to two thousand. We didn’t know where they came from. Registrations would go out on white paper, they would come back — I would go to the post office and I would pick up an envelope and it would have 50 registrations in it — 50 registrations. It was incredible. It was just incredible. Billie Jean Young brought a bus load of people that started a bus in Mississippi and went through Georgia and then came on to Atlanta. Buses — I think we had buses there from Philadelphia, buses from Washington, D.C., and buses from New York. It was just incredible. Women were organizing all over the country. It was just wonderful. So we had —

ROSS: I can explain one of your buses.

VERY: Oh, yeah?

ROSS: Because Faye Williams, Linda Leaks, and Ajowa Ifateyo had come to Washington from Gainesville, I believe it was, where they had learned cervical exams. And in 1981, they started the Black Women’s Self-Help Collective, to learn cervical exams, and so Nkenge [Toure] and I were involved in the anti-rape movement at the time, and so we got pulled into the cervical exam movement and then, when the announcement came about the conference, we said, We gotta go — absolutely. This is the meeting we’ve been waiting on. So we began organizing in D.C. to get the bus from D.C. down there. But actually, we came in a van, but it was because of that Florida–D.C. connection that introduced the black feminist community in D.C. to cervical exams.

VERY: Right, right, because Faye was down there with all of the — she was into black power movement down there.

ROSS: African People’s Socialist Party, as a matter of fact.

VERY: Right, right, right. Yeah, she was. Oh, my goodness.

ROSS: So I can just explain one of your buses. (laughter)

VERY: Absolutely. It was magnificent, because we transformed Spelman College campus and made it so that it can be what it is today. We absolutely changed the lives, the administration, and everything changed after that meeting. And it was just incredible. I had all that energy, and so many black women came from all over who had never been South before. Many women from California had never been South before. Many women had sent their daughters there who didn’t even

know it existed. And we did all of that with very little support from Spelman. We had support from several top people, but not the faculty. A lot of the students didn't even know it was going on. That's because they weren't in tune to paying attention to what was happening around them. But that was truly a magnificent weekend in the lives of everybody who attended that meeting.

ROSS: Well, one Spelman student, Dazon Dixon, came to the conference, because she wasn't even — she cut class to come to the conference.

AVERY: Right, right. She did. (both voices) There's a picture.

ROSS: Yeah, but that's where she dates her activism.

AVERY: Right, right. Yep, yep. She was ahead of the group. She was ahead of the group. But not like you would have thought that there would have been students there, you know, they didn't do it. There was so much that we did at that conference, just through uniting people. And it was really there that I learned that black women's health is about intergenerational health — because I remember taking a picture of four generations of women who were there. And people came and brought their mothers and their sisters and their relatives. I had never been to a conference where people brought their family members. People just go themselves. But everybody understood the seriousness of it, so it was really great.

ROSS: Why do you think they did that? And what message were you giving out as conference organizers that encouraged people to do that?

AVERY: To tell you the honest to God truth, I don't remember. It certainly wasn't conscious. It wasn't like it was a strategy. It's just something that kind of makes sense to us — and we know health is about us and our family — that other people don't get. I don't know — that's such a good question. I'll have to think about that. I'll think about that some more and see if I can come up with any specific thing we did.

ROSS: Well, 20 years later in the HIV/AIDS work that Dazon embarked upon, we would have these healing retreats for women who were HIV-positive and we asked them to bring their most significant person who was helping them cope with the disease, and that's when they started bringing their grandmothers, their ministers, their children. But that was an explicit ask that we probably learned from the Black Women's Health Project.

AVERY: Right, right, right, right.

ROSS: That we all learned from.

VERY: It just kind of magically seemed to happen. It — *my* mother was there. You know, *I* wanted my mother to be there, but I don't know what — I don't know. It was one of those blessed things, you know what I mean, one of those things that kind of — it was to be. It was really to be.

And so, at that conference, Lillie got to introduce her workshop. And I remember we were going to have it in a classroom and the place was packed, and they tried to close the door and people were taking the door off the hinges. So next, Lillie moved it up to the big area, outside area, in the big hallway, in the walk path. So it was huge.

And it was really there that I think we really started to understand that we are the ones we were waiting for, like June Jordan said, and that the answers are in our stories, and it's in the process of telling our stories that can set us free and put us on the right path. So it was such a gift, and it was such a wonderful way to learn about our health issues, to learn about how much violence that we were living with — be it domestic violence, be it sexual violence — to know that so many women have been raped, that so many women have been victims of sexual abuse, and have had no way to talk about it, to heal, and how when women do it in isolation or when it's done to us in isolation, we think that we're the only people having it happen, that nobody else in the world is having it happen.

But what we learn in the presence of other black women, that this is happening, we understand that we have an institution of sexism that's going on in our lives that tends to oppress us, and that the only way we can get out from under it is to learn how to unhook. And that was the gift that Lillie brought to the black women's health movement, is how do we unhook, and the value of storytelling. (five-second pause in tape)

ROSS: I'm ready when you are.

VERY: OK. The Black Women's Health Project was just the most wonderful thing in the world that could ever happen to me. It was my everything. I loved every minute of it — even though there were some bad, painful moments. I didn't necessarily love them but I learned from them. And I'll talk about some of them in a minute. But just being able for years and years to develop friendships with black women all over the world, and to watch women come and be together, talk together, learn from each other, then go home and totally change their lives, was just exhilarating. And it was life changing for all of us who were doing the work. We were changing as we were working. And I remember several years, for about four or five years, almost every Saturday, there was something going on around the country around black women's health. People were making changes. People were being aware. It was truly a wonderful, wonderful time.

ROSS: Could you back up a little bit for me, though, and talk about the transition from the conference on black women's health issues to the founding of the Black Women's Health Project?

VERY: Well, after the conference, I thought, Oh, my God, now what do we do? I realized that we had something going on here. We didn't know that we could get that much attention. We didn't know we could get that many women involved. We didn't know how high the interest level was.

And so, we thought about people forming Self-Help groups. And we first started to think about what these groups should look like, and we first came up with the idea of it being like study groups, where they would get together and study about certain diseases, but we found out that wasn't really what people wanted to do. People wanted to get together and talk to each other.

And so, we started organizing Self-Help groups around the country. And the way the groups were to happen is that I would be invited to speak and I would speak and meet with a group of people afterwards who would be interested in forming a group and meet with them, bring their names back, and I would give them to Lillie and Sharon Gary-Smith and others who were working in Self-Help and then they would be the team that would go out and meet with people in their home towns and do work with them and help them get organized.

And then, four times a year, three times a year, we would go up into the north Georgia mountains for our task force meeting, where we would all come together and we would spend Friday nights doing Self-Help, and sometimes Saturday morning, and then Saturday afternoon, we'd have an educational where we would talk about a chronic disease or some issue more in depth. And then we would — Saturday nights were always wonderful. We would have this thing called "In Celebration of Us," and that's where we got to see the talents and the other side of people that you wouldn't know about. I mean, you wouldn't know that person over there could sing like a bird. You wouldn't know that that one was a poet. You did not know that this was a writer. You didn't know these things and so you got a chance to see the other side of people in this very informal, very warm, encouraging kind of session that we would have. And then we'd leave on Sundays about noon.

And we did that for many, many years. As a matter of fact, the place where we went, we grew that place. Every time they were — before we'd come back the next time, they would have to have enough room for us for the next time.

ROSS: Forrest Hills in Dahlonega, Georgia.

VERY: Yeah, we grew it. That was wonderful. Then, as we started to form the chapters, then we realized that first of all, we were part of the National Women's Health Network, and that we needed to be our own. And so, I said to the folks at the Network that we needed to be our organization. We needed to have our 501C3 and we presented to the board that we wanted to do this and people agreed. And we became the Black Women's Health Project. I remember Sybil Shainwald was so upset

because she was not at that meeting. She said, "If I'd been at that meeting, that project would've never left us. That was the most important thing we had, was the Black Women's Health Project." (Ross laughs)

I'm saying, "But we want to be independent. We want to have our own board. We want to do our own thing." And they said, "Well, we never put in any — we never, uh, put any structure on you. We never made any condition." No, you didn't, no, you didn't, but you could've.

ROSS: Well, the thing that Sybil probably forgot, that I'm interested to hear that you've forgotten, is that there were 1500 women in the Sisters Chapel that said to you, What're you going to do for us, Byllye, because we don't want to be with these white women." I was right there in that room, (laughter) I remember. And you were blinking so fast, you had — really. It was about — so you were responding to pressure coming from the ground up.

AVERY: Yeah. I didn't even remember that. I just blocked it, I guess. I just blocked it.

ROSS: Yeah. I remember (both talking) –

AVERY: But I also knew it, too. I also knew it, too, you know what I'm saying? They were right. They were absolutely right. And so, we went on to form ourselves in 1984. So that's why you get conflicting things. We started work in 1981 but we were a part of the National Women's Health Network. In 1984, we incorporated and became the National Black Women's Health Project. And we moved from being the Black Women's Health Project to the National Black Women's Health Project.

And it was really good. There were some things we did very well and some things we didn't do very well. Board and board development, we didn't do very well. We never got that straight. For a long time, the board felt that the staff had too much power, that we were doing everything, and we were. We were absolutely doing everything. And uh, we never had a board doing what boards are traditionally supposed to do, and that is, raise money, do fiduciary –

ROSS: And set policy.

AVERY: Yeah, and set policy. We never had that. All of our board members wanted to be program people. They wanted to talk about what the program was and all. So that was one of the things we didn't do very well. The other thing that we did that was very significant was started the Center for Black Women's Wellness in Gainesville. We always made a commitment to –

ROSS: Mechanicsville?

VERY: Yeah, Mechanicsville, yeah, I'm sorry — in Mechanicsville in Atlanta. What we always wanted to do was to make sure that the voices of sisters who lived on lower incomes were articulated. And we did that very well, so much so until I had women who said, Well, I'm middle class. Can I join your organization? I didn't realize that just by articulating their position, people felt that they were not included. Our idea was, you look at the positions of the people who were having the hardest time in society and you help change that. And when you change that, you change things for everyone. So a lot of women felt that their voices were not heard because they were not low-income. But the reality is, when you sit in a circle and no one knows what you do for work, we all have the same issues.

ROSS: Let me ask you a question that just occurs to me, since I am relatively familiar with this history. One of the things that most moved me at the founding conference was the tremendous voices of low-income women. I mean, women like me, women who'd been on public support, women like Nkenge who grew up in the projects. I mean, this changed our world, because we'd never been to a women's conference that had so many low-income voices — and then the founding of the Center for Black Women's Wellness, which provided a structured place for those voices. Do you think that in many ways, it could've possibly created a brain drain on the Project because the Project became more and more middle class and less and less representative of low-income women, because we had the two institutions?

And then, it never occurred to me until hearing you tell that history, because at first, it was everybody. It wasn't just low income or middle-class women, there were some rich black women there, too. It was everybody in the mix.

VERY: Oh yeah, it was everybody.

ROSS: And then, as the institution to formally represent the voices of low-income women emerged, could that have possibly created a brain drain on the mother ship so that the mother ship became more representative of the middle-income and the upper-income women, while they had a home and a voice in the Center for Black Women's —

VERY: Well, it could've. A couple of things could have happened. Um, one was that we did tremendous, tremendous amount of outreach to make sure that low-income women were at that first conference. And I used to tell people all the time, it takes a lot of money, a lot of energy, and a lot of time to organize and get low-income women to where you want them to be. Because it's not just giving them a piece of paper and saying, You all come. It's not just giving them the money and saying, You all come. We sent scholarships with that. We sent letters out to people in rural Georgia, telling them that they had money to come. We had a way to get there. They had transportation and all.

And then we didn't hear from them. After the conference, I called them and said, "Why didn't we hear from you? Why weren't you here?" — these were women I'd been doing Self-Help with. I remember [they were] down in Montezuma, Georgia. I called, and I said, "Didn't you get our letters?" And they said, Yeah, but we didn't open it because we knew you were telling us you didn't have the money.

So, after a while — I think what probably happened in hindsight, not being conscious of it, is that it takes so much energy to get people there until, as you start trying to get people there and your numbers are filling up, you only got so many spaces, you got your spaces, so probably some of the work toward making sure, probably, had some slippage. You're probably right.

ROSS: But I'm not talking about the conference. I'm talking about —

EVERY: I'm talking about the rest of the work.

ROSS: Right.

EVERY: The rest of the work of our membership. Yeah, I'm talking about the rest of the work on the membership, not just for that. Because then, when we were getting them to the task force, it means — and I'm certainly not saying that it's not worth doing, it's just that you have to be prepared to have the money to do it, which is just also — when we ran into a lot of fundraising around the Black Women's Health Project, because funders were saying to me, Why do I have to give you money to keep doing Self-Help, to keep having that as your core, to keep bringing these people in and bringing them in? And I said, "Because it is very expensive, when you get ready to organize low-income people, because they don't have any of what is in place. People's lights get turned off. They're not going to leave home with their lights turned off. People need child care. You know, you have to pay for child care. They can't come and bring six or seven children. But you're trying to reach that person." So, you see, it really gets real kind of difficult.

I also felt that we needed also to reach out to middle-income women. I also felt a little guilty and bad when women would tell me that. But then, as I look back at the membership, most of the people in the membership had college degrees.

ROSS: Oh, absolutely.

EVERY: Yeah, they really had college degrees, and as quiet as it was kept, there were a few of the people who were living on low income who also had some college degrees. We found many people over in Mechanicsville who had college degrees and didn't feel like they could go out and do things. And so, I think that it probably — oh, that is something else that I need to think about.

- ROSS: Explore it in your book. I'm not trying to sniff your book out.
- AVERY: Yeah, but it's good. I'm looking back 20 — it's good. (both voices)
Because I need to think about what were those things that happened and I hadn't had anybody to talk in depth about it, you know, in a long time.
- ROSS: Well, I mean, you know, I do the work, still trying to get my first college degree, so I'm very conscious of —
- AVERY: Yeah. Did you finish yet?
- ROSS: I haven't finished yet. I'm still trying to be sufficiently empowered to do it, and I keep postponing it, so that's part of my problem.
- AVERY: When you postpone it, you ain't going to get it.
- ROSS: No, I'll finally get this done.
- AVERY: Bite it and do it.
- ROSS: Yeah. I just keep putting priorities first like these oral histories and SisterSong and —
- AVERY: And this videotaping and anything. I understand, Honey. I understand procrastination. I'm the queen of it — the queen of it.
- ROSS: Well, because the Project in my mind not only seeded a movement, but it seeded a whole way of thinking about the relationship between empowerment and health. (pause in tape)
- AVERY: Mm-hm. You know, we worked very hard during those days because we had a very small staff, and there were lots of demands on black women having conferences, having meetings, and we had to meet them. But we had to learn how to work — that it's just not a good thing to work seven days a week, that you really need some time off, because whenever we would do those seven-days-a-week stretches, then somebody would be sick during the work week when we needed them to be at work. So I started saying to people, If you work the weekend, you have to take Monday and Tuesday off. You're not allowed to come into the office and still work.
- So it's a thing about balance in doing this work, because this is very difficult work. We're talking about people's lives. We're talking about their stories. We're talking about traumatic things. And it can really take a toll on you, more than you sort of recognize. So we were able to make us not work so hard, because you can work too hard doing something you love. It's not just because you love it. You can be stressed out totally from doing what you really love, what you really felt you were put here on earth to do.

But those of us in the Black Women's Health Project at that time, we felt we were put here on earth to do this work, and it was just so wonderful. We started organizing chapters and we did pretty good along that way for a while. And local people — we had to try to work out how could local people be independent. Should they be independent, have their own 501C3, or should they come underneath the Black Women's Health Project? And when it's all said and done, the ones that survived were the ones who became independent, the ones who got their own 501C3 status and started doing their work. (pause in tape)

The first five years of the Black Women's Health Project were absolute bliss. We were on an upward curve. We were attracting everything. We were attracting women. We were attracting funding. We were attracting people around us. We bought a house, a home for the Project. I remember visualizing that we needed a place, we needed a home. Our first office was over in the King Center. That was right across from Ebenezer Baptist Church on Ashley Street, and it was really — was it Ashley Street?

ROSS: Auburn.

VERY:

Auburn. Avenue — Ashley was in Jacksonville — Auburn Avenue. And it was great, and we had never had to buy toilet paper or paper towels or anything. We got this idea that we needed to move out of there and we needed to have a home. And so, we started visualizing it. We started going around with the real estate agent, and I remember the rule that you have to look at about 25 houses before you can find one. And I remember going up and down Abernathy Avenue and I see this house that sits back up on a little bit of a hill, and I said, "Now, that would be the perfect place for us. If only those people in there would move out."

And then, one day, our real estate agent called to say, "Guess what? That house is on the market." I said, "Which house?" She said, "The one you want." And we met her there. I remember it was me, Julia Scott, and Angela Davis. The three of us went in there, we looked at the house, and by the time I walked up the steps, I said, "We'd fit in this house. How much does it cost?" She told me the price. I think it was like \$110,000. And then I had to figure out how we were going to get that.

And earlier, my friend Betsy Randall David, who I'd known from Gainesville, told me that she had met this woman whose family had a foundation. And I said, "Well, who is the woman?" And so she told me. Her name was Lucinda Bannen. And I said, "What's her family's foundation?" She said, "The New Orleans Foundation." I said, "I know them. I've asked them for money, they've given me money before." And so she said, "I'll introduce you to Lucinda." And she invites me and the three of us go to Buckhead to Lucinda's house and I meet her and I tell her about her cousins who also have another foundation, some other people that I've met. And she said, "Oh, yeah. I haven't heard from that side of the family. I didn't realize they had a foundation," et

cetera, et cetera. And that was Eve Stern who had the Stern Fund — but they were in spend-down, so they were not operating much anymore. And we had a delightful time.

And so, after I got this house, I called Lucinda and I really called her to ask her if she could help me figure out how we could get financing for the house. And she said, “Well, let me come see it.” And so, she came over to the house and she walked around, so she really liked it, and then after that, she wanted to go up on Auburn Avenue and eat barbecue ribs. So, we go up to this little hole in the wall on Auburn Avenue and we ate ribs together. And I remember the one thing she did that I thought was a bit interesting. She reached over my plate and she got my bone and started chewing on it. Well, I like to chew my own bones and I was kind of surprised at that bit of intimacy. But I also took that as a good sign that she really liked me and that she would be able to help.

And shortly after that, her sister died and her sister had breast cancer, and she — then the family decided to give us money for the house. Her sister’s name was Phoebe Lundeen, and she asked us to give her — she wanted to make it as a contribution for Phoebe and that we would call it the Phoebe House. And so, she gave us, I think, \$30,000 for the down payment and then another \$10,000 for moving. It hadn’t occurred to me that the move would cost — or exactly what it would cost. I’ve never done a business when you have to do things as a business. It was much different.

And so, we moved in and we made a mother house. We made a place to say to black women, This is where you come. This is your house. And the times that we would have a task force meeting in the north Georgia mountains, we’d have sisters come in from California on the red eye and they would come and we’d take them over to the mother house and they would — we’d have futons and mattresses on the floor. We’d cook grits and eggs and all down in the kitchen for them and they would eat and they would go and sleep until we came to work about 9 o’clock that day and got ready to make our day happen. But it was a place that had just the welcoming arms.

The city of Atlanta also embraced us. And they would send over lots of people from other countries to come, to look at the house, to talk to us about what we were doing, our program. The State Department would send in these people who would come through. So that was also nice. And then, when we wanted to get it renovated, because it had some structural problems and some things, we were able to get a grant, a block grant from the city. I remember Myrtle Davis was very helpful in helping us get money so that we could renovate the house, so that it really could be handicapped accessible, that it could have proper plumbing, and everything that brought it all up to code. And we had a driveway so we could stop parking in the front yard, which we did for many years, and just made it into a wonderful, wonderful facility. So Atlanta was very, very, very, very good to us.

In 1985, we all went to Africa. We took a delegation of 25 women and one man to Africa to the Women's Conference, and that was — just getting people there and back was an experience in itself. But then the conference on top of that was just incredible — and to have it in Kenya and to have those African women with their congas made special for the conference and to have all the hundreds of workshops and the daily newspapers.

And a film was made of us called *It's Up to Us* that was made by a woman from Connecticut, Bea Milwe. She followed us around and we found this women's group out in the rural part of Nairobi and they raised cows and we went and spent a whole day with them — dancing, learning about their lives, us telling them about our lives, and learning how different our lives were. And then, not a whole lot that was very similar, that they really lived very different lives from what we had. It made a lot of us a lot more appreciative of our lives.

And then, in a lot of ways, they had things that were a lot better than what we had — that we introduced the word incest to them, that they had no word for it. But we were trying to explain incest to them. And explain rape, which they had kind of vaguely heard of rape happening in Nairobi, but certainly not where they were. And then for incest, they had to do a translation. There was no one word for it. And I sort of was sorry we introduced the term. But then, on the other hand, there was such a reality in our lives to leave there without having them understand that, I think, would've been not being our true, authentic selves. We also collected money and we bought two cows for them and left them with two cows, which was really, really good. I think about those women sometimes and wonder how much has changed, you know, in these years between their lives and our lives.

ROSS:

One of the impacts on Kenya has been the explosion of the women's movement, and I mean, Wangari [Maathai] just got the Nobel Prize. That was the year I met her, at the Nairobi Women's Conference. But at the same time, concomitant with that, that the government repression by Daniel Arap Moi's government just totally increased, trying to keep down the burgeoning feminism of the women, the gender consciousness of the women.

There was a wonderful story in the *Washington Post* last week about a women's village that has been established in Kenya. These women were — this one woman was — I think she was escaping with her daughter, from her daughter being forced to marry a much older man. And so she decided to just start a farmstead, her and her daughter, by herself. It's grown into a women's village because they make great handicrafts and they're near a game preserve. It's become a huge economic engine. And the men, after being very aggressive and trying to shut it down —

VERY:

Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

ROSS: – because it became a mecca for women escaping violence, escaping husbands with AIDS, escaping husbands with four and five wives, becoming child brides — it's just become a mecca for women trying to escape the patriarchy.

And yet, it's become a hugely successful economic enterprise. So the men were trying to shut it down for a number of years and finally, they've gotten co-opted by it, and this one man was quoted as saying, "Well, we consider the women the neck of the body and the man the head and whoever listens to their neck?" And finally, at the end of the interview, he said, "Well, maybe we should start listening to our necks sometimes." (laughter)

AVERY: Good for him. At least he came around. At least he came around.

ROSS: That's where those ripples in the pond that you don't know from that came from that '85 conference to 2005, that 20-year span. Women's lives have been changed in that country.

AVERY: Absolutely, absolutely. That's why you have to have these things in places, because you never know what it leaves in place. And you know, you would think Daniel Arap Moi, he allowed the conference to come there. He had a chance to say, No, don't come. But he didn't have any idea of what it would be. He thought it was just a bunch of women, you know? And it ended up being *a bunch of women*. Right. What a great story. What a great story.

So that was really good. I remember women there were talking about female genital mutilation, and I remember that was the first time I heard the women say, You western women, let us handle this. We need to handle this. We will do this. We'll do that. So that was also a great meeting. That was a great meeting for hooking up around the world, a great meeting for hooking up with people right here in the country. And I was so proud. There must have been two or three thousand African American women there. I have never seen black women go to conferences like — go to that international conference in that form. So it was really great.

ROSS: I like to think that we've played some small role, because Nkenge and I spent five years going around the country telling black women they needed to be there.

AVERY: I remember when you came to us and I remember when you came to us, talking about it, and got people knowing about it. And that's what it takes. It takes people being committed to being able to do it. And that's one of the things I was saying that is so wonderful about you, that you stay steady. I get tired. You stay steady. You know, well, you ain't 68 yet, so you stay steady. But you stay steady and know that organizing is about going to where people are. You just can't organize people from where you are. You got to go to where they are, and that was one thing.

ROSS: But I've always done the work with balance. I play as hard as I work. I've always had that commitment, too.

EVERY: Right, right. You have to do that, yeah.

ROSS: So, the first five years sounded magical. When did the things begin to change for the Project?

EVERY: When I got the MacArthur in 1989, and that was a wonderful year for me. I got the MacArthur Award. I got the *Essence* Award. It was just really incredible. And neither of these had I ever spent two seconds thinking about, or anything, so it was truly a real surprise. But I noticed it really caused problems in terms of power shifts within the organization. Not from everybody. Most people were really happy and celebrated and were really glad.

But it really started an outward conflict happening between me and Lillie, which was very harmful because the two of us together really made the magic. And without each other, the magic, sort of, was something different. And it isn't that anybody's to blame. It's just that we didn't know how to handle that kind of thing. And you don't get much preparation for it.

And so people started taking sides and going to one side and sort of forming little cliques and little groups, and that was not good for us. And we tried to use our process to work it out, but in order to do the process, you got to have somebody who's outside of the process to help with the working out. You can't have people who were involved in the issue involved in the process. And tempers got out of hand, words got out of hand, we got out of hand.

And I remember distinctly the task force meeting in which Louisa Tisch was there, and we were up in the north Georgia mountains and all of a sudden, in the middle of the day, up came this horrible rain storm. And we were having a discussion about who is a black woman. And there was some parts of me that couldn't believe that we were actually having that discussion. It should have been a discussion, but we should have had it conceptualized in a different way. What we were really dealing with were, politically, who considers themselves a black woman, not necessarily ethnically or racially. And somehow the two things got all convoluted and involved with each other. Because one of the key –

END TAPE 2

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ROSS: At the end of the last tape, you started telling us about the change in yours and Lillie's relationship.

EVERY: Yeah. Our relationship started to really noticeably change on the outside. Maybe it started to change and I wasn't aware of it after I got the MacArthur Award, and we really, uh, it brought a certain amount of attention and notoriety. I was getting awards, and I always tried to be inclusive and say that it was not my work alone, it was the work of many women who worked in the Project. And after a while, it happened that people started forming cliques and started whispering and negative stuff started to happen and we started to try to sit down and work it out. But when you have the chief people who are involved in a process being the people working it out, it doesn't work. And so, we were unable to get past that. And it ended up causing a divorce, which is the way the women in the Project describe it, is their parents were getting a divorce. It wasn't a split. They called it a divorce.

 Together, Lillie and I made a special magic at a special time. And apart, neither of us have been as magical. We still both have a certain amount of magic, but not the magic that we had, and we were really together and we were really were able to put our creative juices together. And the way that I have come to understand it, in all of these years that I've had time to think about it, is that that was what was supposed to happen at that time, and that's all that it was. It was supposed to happen at that time. It wasn't made to extend for the next 30, 40, 50, 60 years, as we all wanted. It was only made to be in that time. But what I do know is that we made a large enough ripple that it covered the pond, and that the ripples still go on, and the seeds are planted, and things are happening. And you know, we were not put here to answer all the problems at one time. We addressed it. We created not only a place for black women to come and talk about their issues, but we were able to pass along to sisters of color.

 I remember Luz Martinez, who went with us, traveled with us, everywhere, all over, everywhere — Africa, Barbados, everywhere. And I said, "Luz, you got to go do this with your sisters. You've got to go do it with your sisters. You can't hang around us all the time." And so, I remember I was instrumental in helping her get her first money, and she thought we were going to be the fiscal agent. And I said, "No, I want you to find somebody in California to be your fiscal agent so the money can be right there, right where you are." And we kind of cut that cord and Luz went off.

ROSS: To found the National Latina Health Organization.

EVERY: And the National Latina Health Organization is doing very well. I remember Charon Asetoyer, who I remember meeting her at a

conference, and she'd been invited to come to speak. She lives in San Andes, which is, like, three hours away from Lake Andes airport.

ROSS: Lake Andes [South Dakota].

VERY: Lake Andes, right. Lake Andes. She'd been traveling all night to get to there, to get to the airport. She hadn't had any sleep. So I said, "Well, you have to tell people what it takes for you to leave your reservation to come and do this work. And then you have to have them make allowances for you, because when you come to these meetings, you need to be feeling good, in form, and you can't do it if you're half asleep. You can't do it." And then we went on to introduce her to some funders that helped get them settled in a whole new way.

And then the last person I met was Mary Chung, when she was wanting to start the Asian Women's Health Organization. And we met with her, met with her group, and spent a lot of time talking to Mary and strategizing. So it really makes me feel good to look and see that I was able to share with our sisters of color, and say, "Hey, just the way we've done it."

And I think that probably the one thing that I've done in my life was when I said, "What's the difference between black women's health issues, white women's health issues, Native American women's health issues, Latina health issues, all of us together, and what makes that different? And to understand that when you put black, Native American, Latina, Asian American, whatever, in the front of health issues, then women know you're talking about them. There is no question. And that was a big contribution.

ROSS: And each of those women went on to become founders of SisterSong. So –

VERY: Continue to work, continue to work, continue to spread it out. Continue to do the work –

ROSS: So, what changed for you after 1989?

VERY: After 1989, that whole thing happened with the big split in the Project, which really wasn't a big split. It really wasn't that many people. I think it was the idea of a fracture that was a lot painful to me. And I also got in touch with how tired I was, how tired I was in getting to places. It was a time for airplanes and making speeches and going all over the place. And the organization started to grow.

And the thing that I didn't know how to do was management — eeewww. Before, we're all together and making all the decisions and all things, got it together, quasi, you know, but then it called for something that needed a structure, and I was just not liking that idea very well. I didn't like the idea of it. There were certain rules that I didn't know. I would violate rules that I didn't really know I was violating rules, just

because I didn't know. I hadn't had — I didn't know the elemental — I mean, I'd been a special ed teacher, for goodness sake. That's where I got my formal training in. So, the basic things you would learn in a book about management I didn't have. And it got to be too much for me to handle.

And so, the board decided that either I needed to go somewhere and learn this management and stuff, or we needed to hire an executive director. And I said, "Well, let's hire an executive director." What I didn't realize is that I was totally removing myself away from that, and I didn't realize how much of the success of the Project revolved around me. I had no idea of what my personally not being there, the impact it would have. I just had no idea of it.

And so, I had the MacArthur Award, which afforded me financial — money, I could pay all my bills at one time. I could travel. And so, I did a lot of traveling. And I did a lot of being and thinking and resting, et cetera.

And meanwhile, the organization had started a decline, and we were never able to get back up to the pitch of where we were in the '80s. We just never were able to get there. It had started to evolve and become an organization that had a formal board that made decisions, that had structures in place, et cetera. And it started to have difficulty raising money to continue the Self-Help part of the work, and I felt that the organization was the Self-Help part, that you could talk about most subjects, most things around Self-Help, no matter what the health issues were. But we lost a lot of the people who believed in Self-Help the same way we did, and they saw it as being, you know, whatever. Even though we still practiced it at our board meetings and we still used it, there wasn't that commitment to doing it out in the larger world.

Some of it came around — some issues — around legal structures. What if we got sued? What if this happened? People started thinking that way, which there had not been in our earlier thinking. We had not. So, you know, when you start thinking about issues of being sued, et cetera, it really takes away from your ability to be creative and think about changing people's lives. So, I watched the organization just slowly change into a different organization. And then, at the last board, the current board decided — the board before the current board decided — that we'd get a new ED. And then part of what happened was with the hiring of that ED, there was the decision — by this time, most of our chapters were gone. The only parts of the organization that remained were the groups that had their own independent status.

But during this time, we had wonderful things happen. We entered into a program with the American Heart Association, Walking for Wellness, and we did walks in major cities that really drew as much as three thousand people in California. I think it was 27 or 2800 in Atlanta. And Columbus, Ohio, they also had high numbers. So we did these walks all over the city that were really, really, really kind of fun. It was really nice. Detroit had a huge one. So we did some good things. But we never had that coming back together.

ROSS: The magic.

VERY: The magic was not there. And so, I watched this slowly evolve. After we hired the last executive director, Lorraine Cole — who is now president, actually — there was this move to change the name of the organization. And at first, it broke my heart and I was just so upset. And it took me at least about a year to even deal with that idea. They didn't make the change quickly. I mean, let's talk about it for a year.

ROSS: Another strategic mistake. Trust me.

VERY: And so, I was just too upset. But then, finally, what I came to realize — what it was evolving was not the National Black Women's Health Project. The National Black Women's Health Project was what we had, not where we were going. And I also think it was a mistake, but since it was a mistake that was made, that's the way that I've been able to make peace with it — that it wasn't what we were originally doing. So when someone sees National Black Women's Health Imperative, they know that it was not what we were doing in the '80s and the early '90s.

ROSS: Well, from my perspective, which is admittedly a biased one, but I'm also seeing it from a marketing point of view. You all pioneered a successful name, a successful brand —

VERY: Everything.

ROSS: — instant name recognition — that logo is like, everything. I mean, and so, you took a winning formula and changed it to something that years later, people are still trying to figure out what you changed it to.

VERY: I know, I know.

ROSS: People keep saying, The Black Women's Health Imperative? What is an imperative?

VERY: I like the way they started doing it. They started writing National Black Women's Health Project/Imperative. That's the way they write it — Imperative/Project, or something like that. I said, "Well, that's an interesting way to do it."

ROSS: It's like an elephant designed by a committee. It just doesn't work.

VERY: No, it didn't make sense to me. But you know what I also learned? That be ye not fooled by what power you have, because I was in every one of those meetings, and I remember there were other people around the table who had equal amount of votes as I do, you know? And I could not change it.

ROSS: Did you try?

AVERY: Oh, absolutely. What do you think I was doing there? I wasn't just sitting over there crying in a corner. I'm fighting for my life. This was my life. This project was my life.

ROSS: So how did you handle that, because there are founder transitions that go on. I could tell you briefly of two. Luz's board, after 19 years, asked her to step down as executive director, with no notice, because she'd been there for 19 years and they felt that they needed to reorganize the National Latina Health Organization and did not want to hear from the staff on that. So there is a board-out-of-control story attached to that.

I recently, after ten years, stepped down from the National Center for Human Rights Education. I am actually in the fight of my life with my new executive director — not around running NCHRE, but around the feeling that she feels to establish herself, she needs to obliterate me from the history books. So much so that after, like you said, making it your life, I'm existing with no money, no health insurance, and a battle of lawyers.

AVERY: A sacrifice that you have had?

ROSS: And a battle of lawyers, because it's my lawyer and their lawyer and all kinds.

AVERY: Oh, you're dealing with lawyers.

ROSS: So it's really ugly. So, I'm saying all of that to say, how was the founder transition for you? This is what we need to give to the history books.

AVERY: Yeah, very difficult. Yes, very difficult, very difficult, because you get accused of having the founder syndrome. But you know what? I look at Mary England. She never left.

ROSS: Neither did Dorothy Height. You know she's not the founder.

AVERY: She's sitting there in the room with her hat on, in her office, with a space. They never left.

ROSS: But is that a good thing?

AVERY: Sometimes it is. I don't know about whether it's a good thing at NCNW [National Council of Negro Women]. But it seems to still be a good thing at Children's Defense Fund. I don't know. I'm not aware of inside of either of those organization now. But it's interesting how people who become board members, they get to sit around and talk, they get to come and interact and be there for terms which are limited. But they can make

a decision that can grossly impact on the life of someone who's committed their total life to this, without even thinking about what they're really saying, or what they're really doing, or is there another way that this could be worked out.

So, I'm thinking back to the '90s, when I decided I was going to step down as being the founder. What could have happened with a thinking board, a seasoned board, a board that understands how things need to happen? We should have sat down and worked out how we could save Byllye within the organization. Somebody there should have recognized that if she walks away, this whole thing is going to change and melt away. Nobody there recognized that. Nobody had that kind of insight to do that kind of thinking — ought to say, This is serious business. We need to bring in some outside people to help give us some guidance along that way, instead of people use their power that they had then to make the decision they think is the right decision. In the case of Luz, if Luz walks away from that, that whole thing might just be the end of it. It just — if they push her out, you know?

ROSS: Well, they have, and the offices are closed.

AVERY: And so, who won on that one? Who lost on that one is a better question, not who won.

ROSS: All the women they were serving.

AVERY: All the women they were working with. All of the women that she can bring in. All of the years of the networks that she has established. All of the people who look at — there's just so many things that end up riding them, that that kind of thing has to be carefully worked out, carefully thought about. And none of us had the resources, the forethoughts or anybody sitting on our boards. So it brings me down to one of the most important things you do. Avery Institute still doesn't really have a board, because what I realize is that I still have to learn how you get a board of people who can make these larger institutionalized kind of decisions, and not these little bitty things right around here, because what you need are people who have experience and foresight.

ROSS: You need visionaries on your board.

AVERY: You need visionaries, right. You don't need ballerinas.

ROSS: Well, what I did is listen to your advice. I don't know if you recall you made a site visit to us and said, Well, the first thing you need to do is strengthen your board. So we did that, and at first, we had a great working board who were drawn to the concept, the mission of the organization, but they weren't doing much around fundraising or policy, which is the classic thing, but they were drawn to the vision of the organization. So then, they began to get replaced by people who could

do fundraising, and people who could do policy. The problem is that these people who could do fundraising, they were good at selling products, they were good at raising money, but they weren't good at sticking to the mission of the organization. And so, they became structuralist about what looks good in a fundraising pitch, what looks good in a foundation pitch. What looks good on a balance sheet, versus how are we still serving the people. So that then –

AVERY: Right. All of that's got to jive.

ROSS: So they were more about serving the organization instead of serving the people, so that instead of the organization serving the movement, the organization began to serve itself. At that point, I thought it was time for me to get out, because I was like you, not that structuralist, that manager, that person who really could do that. And so, I hired a woman, had a nine-month transition, so it wasn't an overnight thing. Everything worked out well until the day I actually handed over the power, and then I found that I hired someone who did — (pause in tape)

So, Byllye, let's start talking about your transition out of the Black Women's Health Project and what led you to future endeavors.

AVERY: Yes. Well, making the transition from the Black Women's Health Project was, as I said earlier, a very difficult process. It was almost unthinkable, unimaginable. I had all kinds of feelings that I'd let millions of black women down because I didn't stick with it and ought to be there, like, 50 years to see us get totally — all of us get from our ill health over into full wellness, when I had to realize that that was not going to happen. And how would I make the transition? I went through years of mourning, just as you would mourn the loss of anything. I missed the good old days. I missed the relationships. I missed the women. I missed the stories. And I had to think of how do I put myself together again? How do I sort of come back with another structure, or with another way of being? How do I make it?

So I thought about it for a long time. I remember being in New Orleans at one of our board meetings, and there were several board members who sort of gathered around me, and I remember we were walking through the French Quarter and Peggy Alfred said to me, "Byllye, I think what you ought to do is create something, create some sort of institute or something." And I said, "Well, you know, that was a kind of a dream we had a long time ago with the Black Women's Health Project — to have, like, an educational kind of institute. I never thought about it." She said, "No, I'm talking about something totally different. Why don't you create something and call it the Avery Institute?" I said, "I don't know if I can do that kind of thing." She said, "I think it would be — you just think about it."

And so, they really got on the phone with me, about three or four of them. They kept calling me and they paid special attention to me and got me to thinking about doing something, so I let the idea just kind of

like settle on the ground and just kind of sit there for a while. And then, 9/11 hit New York, and, like may people, it signaled some sort of change.

ROSS: Were you there the day –

EVERY: I was there. I was right there in New York, in our apartment, when it happened — watched the whole thing on TV. It was just an incredible experience, and I remember I took Ngina to work and had to go get some money. She said, “I got to go to school in case the kids — you know, people need something at school. The students — [I] have to make sure that they’re all safe and we don’t know what kind of emergency’s going to be happening over at the hospital,” et cetera. She said, “But you go get some money. Go on and get as much money as you can.”

So, I go down to 125th Street, that’s usually clogged with people. There was nobody on the streets. The banks were not open, but they were not closed. People were in there. You couldn’t go in the bank, but you could go to their ATM machine. And one thing I learned was that they decided it was very important to keep the money flowing. Let people get as much money out as they can. And I remember, I walked catty-corner across 125th Street, went into the bank and withdrew my [money], and I came out and I was standing outside, and a woman said to me, “Oh, my God. I wonder about my husband, because he worked up at the restaurant that was on the top of the World Trade Center, and his job was to go in early to get everything straight.” And she said, “I just know he’s not coming home.”

And then, I remember walking in our neighborhood in Harlem and somebody put up posters that had Osama Bin Laden and had “Wanted: Dead or Alive” [on them], when Barbara Ann Teer and I were going for our walk that morning, but by the time we came back, somebody had torn them all down. And everybody was all out in the streets talking to each other and holding each other and trying to think about, What do we do, you know, do we prepare? Do we get water? Do we get food — and get into all the preparedness stuff.

And people from Florida — I called my mother and I called my son, Wesley, as soon as it happened. I said, “Wesley, somebody drove an airplane into the World Trade Center.” He thought it was just a prank or something and he kind of got me off the phone because he was on the truck, working. And then, my mother, I didn’t know that she had been — I called her and told her I was fine, but I didn’t know that she had been trying to call me all day and they couldn’t call into New York, and I didn’t know it. But it was real turmoil.

And then, after that, all of the organizations that I was scheduled to speak, all my speeches just got canceled. All my work got totally canceled. And I thought, Well, I really got to rethink what I’m doing and how I’m going to manage, you know? And so that took about a month or so to start rethinking things. And then, one day, I got a call

from Sharon, and she said, "Byllye, what are you doing?" And I said, "I don't know. I'm just sort of"—

ROSS: Which Sharon?

AVERY: Sharon Edwards, who was the chair of the board of the Black Women's Health Project. And she said, "Have you thought about — what about that idea of an Avery Institute?" And I said, "I don't know. I just don't know if I want to start something else, you know?" I said, "Just watching the Project and I'm just watching, you know what I mean? Do I want to do this again? Do I want to go back through this again?" And so, she said, "Well, you go through it a different way. You go through it real different."

So, anyway, I started thinking about what could I do with the Avery Institute. And so, I remember talking to Nikki Finney on the phone and I said, "I'm thinking about forming a new organization, the Avery Institute. I'm not sure exactly what I'm going to do." She said, "Well, first, you've got to deal with the name, because there's an Avery Institute in South Carolina." And I said, "Oh, there is?" And she said, "Yes." And I said, "Yes, you are right. I remember there's an Avery Institute that deals with cultural things and it's also black and it deals with things in South Carolina." So, I said, "Well, OK. Maybe I'll call it the Avery Institute for Social Change." And that's how it got its name.

And then, I started thinking, what do I want to do? I was really unclear as to what I wanted to do. But one thing I have learned is that you don't have to have all the answers right in front of you at any one time. That you can take time to figure out, and see what strikes your fancy. You know, with black women's health, that was very clear cut — very unmet need. But there are a lot of things out there now, and I've also changed a lot.

So, the Avery Institute sort of started to form in my mind and the first thing I thought I would do is bring a group of people together who could talk among themselves, and that as we talked among themselves, I would then get some idea as to what the direction of this would be. So, we put together the very standard articles of incorporation, the boilerplate things, that — you know, educational — that gave us a wide range to be able to develop.

And so, the first thing I did was what I was most comfortable with: I brought a group of black women together to talk about black women's health issues to see what's changed over the last 20 years. And what I realized was not a whole heck of a lot has changed, [but] that we have a lot more awareness. A lot of us know each other. We've come together. We've done quite a bit. And we were able to get Johnson & Johnson to videotape it, film it for us so that we have wonderful material from that first meeting.

And so, when I came out of that meeting understanding was — what stuck with me was a presentation from a sister who came from Puerto Rico, Palmira Rios, and her words just hung with me. And they were

also your words. And she said, "I don't understand why in the United States, you all won't deal with health as a human right. I just don't understand it." And Palmira's words stuck with me. And it was just most incredible, how that worked that way.

So, I got to thinking about health as a human right, what do they really mean, and trying to understand it all. So, I put together the next program for the next year, to deal with health as a human right. I looked at who I wanted to invite to it, and I didn't invite all the people. That's why I told you I wanted you to come another time, because I wanted you for the next layer. I wanted you for the second layer. Because I wanted to learn what it was so that I could be a lot clearer about what we were doing. So I brought in a group of folks who talked about health as a human right in the second year. And we also experimented with the idea of doing a town meeting using health as a human right. And so, we had this — oh, let me go back to the seminars.

The way we conceptualized the first seminar and somewhat the second seminar series that we have here on the Cape, is [that] we work for a half a day, and then the rest of the day is free. And the reason I do that is because what I learned over the years is that most of us activists, we just kind of work ourselves right down to the nub, and we never take time to rest. We never take time to just relax and to be. And so, we go to these beautiful places and all you get to do is sit inside of a room. You don't get to see anything, you know — no sunsets, no beaches. You don't get to enjoy anything. And balance is, like, very important.

So, we start at nine and we work till one. And then you have the rest of the time off. And we'll have an evening activity that's optional, if you want to do it. But if you don't want to do it, that's fine. You don't have to show up for anything but the nine to one. And so, the first meeting we had, people would say to me, "What do I do? What do I do now?" I said, "For you, you go sleep." "What do I do?" "You go to the beach." And so, people just did it. They just couldn't believe that they had time to just go and sit with somebody and to network and to talk. And so that became an integral part of it.

The second year, we used that same model for the seminar. We talked about health as a human right, and I tried to get different kind of perspectives. And then, the third one — I mean, no, and then we did the town meetings. We did the first town meeting with Jocelyn Elders, who was one of our speakers. Nancy Snyderman was our moderator, and Mike Dukakis talked about the presidential candidates and we had like nine Democrats and one Republican. What were they proposing about health in their platforms? And then Allan Rosenfield from the [Columbia University] School of Public Health also was on the program to talk about health as a human right and as a public health issue. So it was really, really quite good. It was really very good.

And so that kind of let me know that yes, these town meetings could fly, that I could do them in other places. And so, after that, I did two more town meetings, one in Harlem in December of last year. Yeah, I think it was December of last year. The first Saturday in December, and

we had about 250 people come. I brought Jocelyn Elders in again and then we had several local people there talk about health as a human right, and a lot of what was going on in local organizations around organizing and hooked that up pretty well.

And then, the third one we did in Gainesville in March of 2005, and in terms of outreach and organizing, that one got really at the height of what we've done. We were able to get over 40 cosponsoring organizations, all the way from the League of Women Voters to the NAACP. We were able to get a lot of the really wonderful activists going there. I just got an e-mail yesterday from Randi Cameon who was the organizer down there, telling me they have a solid inner core group of 30 who come regularly. And then they have the other people who are another 30 who are there whenever they need them for anything. So they really got a group of 60 people who are still working, and they're working on dual eligibles, they're working on keeping a lecture at General Hospital open. So they're really working on health access, and it's really happening. They got a listserv. They got a web site. They're just doing really, really well. So that model worked real well for Gainesville.

And the next seminar, the one that I'm planning for 2006, I want to talk about how — I want to invite women of color, leaders of organizations, to come to learn how they can integrate health as a human right into their curriculum. And that's the thing that I want to ask you to do, because that's the piece that I was kind of saving, because I think that's, like, real hard. Because I'd asked somebody else to talk about how they integrated health as a human right into their work, or how do they integrate human rights into their work. And I don't know, they didn't really do what I wanted, but anyway, that's fine.

ROSS: [How to turn] theory into operationalizing.

VERY: Yeah, they just couldn't quite do what I wanted. So, that's what I want you to do. And the other piece that I think is real important is that we talk about how we keep reproductive health issues in health care reform, and how they need to be involved in health care reform — how we involve reproductive health. See, I think that whenever we get around to doing health care reform, that that piece is going to be left off. They're going to want to leave off abortion. They're going to want to leave off access to abortion. They're going to leave off access to a lot of things that conservatives have problems with.

And you know, you get can some crazy people who don't think you should have a heart transplant. Or you can get some people who think you shouldn't have a whole lot of things, but technology marches on. And all this stuff about stem cells and implanted eggs and cloning and all that stuff is not going to stop because people have whatever they think. But I want to make sure that we are able to maintain that, so —

ROSS: Can I just give you a piece of historical data that you may not be aware of?

EVERY: Yeah.

ROSS: In 1994, the Illinois Pro-Choice Alliance had a conference. And we formed a black women's caucus at it, because — you know, like we always do at the white women's conferences. We formed this group, which no longer exists, called Women of African Descent for Reproductive Justice, and that's where the term "reproductive justice" was first coined. But that's not the point of this story. We also put together a campaign to ensure that abortion was included in Clinton's health care reform plan. And we purchased a signature ad in the *Washington Post*, with six hundred black women's signatures, on keeping abortion in Clinton's health care reform. Toni Bond has a copy of that ad and the campaign. So that's some of your historical legacy that you need to infuse, because what you're all doing is right on time, and I wanted to connect that historical —

EVERY: That's great.

ROSS: Because first of all, black women had never raised \$27,000.

EVERY: Was I in that? I must have been in that.

ROSS: You must have been.

EVERY: I must have been.

ROSS: Yeah, because you would've been the first one we would have called. But we raised \$27,000 in two weeks.

EVERY: Julia must have done it through the D.C. office. Julia would've been there.

ROSS: Right, right, and got that signature ad in the *Washington Post* around keeping abortion —

EVERY: Great. That's wonderful.

ROSS: — and reproductive rights in health care reform.

EVERY: In health care reform. We needed — that's exactly the route I want to go. And I want to do two things. I want to bring in women of color, and I haven't decided on who and all, but I do decide on who all I want to speak. I want to have you. I want to have Terry McGovern, because I'm doing some exciting work with her in Florida that I talk about. I want to have Faye Wattleton, because Faye has done a lot of surveys.

ROSS: She does great research.

AVERY: Some great stuff. And a lot of people don't want to believe it — that Black women are more feminist than white women. And they don't want to believe it. They say, I don't believe her research. We don't trust those polls. Well, you know, it's because things that she's been predicting are happening. So, I want to have Faye. I want to have Brenda, because I want to keep her — Brenda Joyner — keep her within talking about keeping the diversity thing. She's got a position at Planned Parenthood where she's got some power. So let's try to keep, keep, keep that going. And I want to have her. And then, um, oh, my goodness, there's another woman — I can't remember her name. She's written this book about *Eyes Not On The Prize*. [Carol Anderson – ed. note]

ROSS: *Eyes Off The Prize*.

AVERY: *Eyes Off The Prize*.

ROSS: Yes, that book is so fabulous. I use it to teach from.

AVERY: Yes, yes, yes, yes. I want to have her come to the –

ROSS: Because she's going to talk about why the civil rights movement abandoned the human rights framework.

AVERY: Human rights fight, so that they couldn't use it, so that they couldn't use it. And how they've been set up. So, I want to have her. So that's the summer seminar that I have in the back of my head for 2006.

ROSS: Well, that's going to be a mammoth jam.

AVERY: That's what I want to have and that'll be nice.

ROSS: I hope you document it.

AVERY: Yeah, oh, yeah, I will, I will, yeah, I will. And so, that's the summer seminar. So that's the second thing that we'll be doing. The third thing that we'll want to be working on is I want to convene a meeting of women in the women's health movement, leaders of organizations, to come together so we can get our common language of how we're going to talk about reproductive health as we talk about health care reform. Several organizations, like the National Breast Cancer Coalition, the National Women's Health Network, the Collective — several of those organizations have decided to make health care reform one of their program priorities.

And so, what I want to do is for us to have a language that we can all use, rather than us trying to sit over here and figure out how to talk

about it. We want to know what it is. We want to come together, have a meeting, have the proceedings from the meeting that we can send out to people, put them on a web site, e-mail people so they can download them so they can have them on a — widely distribute it to everyone. So we'll have that one-day meeting in Washington sometime early next year.

And then, also, I want to do a town meeting, at least one town meeting in 2006, and I haven't really figured out where. I'm thinking about Chicago for some reason, but I'm not quite sure yet what I'm going to do. But that's what we're doing.

In a way, we've sort of made our commitment to health care reform, and our new tag line is "Educating people of color on health care reform. The Avery Institute educates people of color on health care reform." It's a very hard subject, because it's not one that people are willing to talk about. And there's a silence around it like you wouldn't believe. And because we have all these special interest groups that just have big stakes in this and nobody wants to touch it.

The Gainesville meeting was very interesting, because Blue Cross/Blue Shield was there. They gave me money and I gave them a place on the program, because I thought, Why just have a feel-good meeting where we could come and preach to the choir, and say, Yes, we all want single payer? Let's bring these people in and let them defend themselves right in front of the group and pay to be here. And they paid to be there and they came and they were very scared. They were very frightened. The woman who ended up being on the program said she'd never do anything like that again. But she presented herself, not in a positive way, [as] I work for an insurance company. This is what I do. This is it. Bring your position. She sort of presented it as, Well, I sold out. You know, so she came defensive, and berating herself, which just gave the room to further pounce on her. But I thought it was good to have her there, and in some ways, it makes for a much more interesting meeting. I didn't think I would ever be saying this, because I'm the one who don't want to know what the other people think, I only want to know what I think, and people [who] think like me. But it really made for a much more interesting, provocative type of meeting, hearing from the opposition, hearing from them.

So, this work, um, is very different from doing the Black Women's Health Project. It's very important, but it doesn't feed my soul in the same way.

ROSS: Well, let me ask you another question. Since you mentioned the Nairobi Third World Conference for Women, what other kind of international work have you done since 1985?

AVERY: I did work in Brazil with a group called Geledes, and really enjoyed that a lot. They were an organization that was working on civil rights. I was asked to go to talk to them about working on reproductive health as a part of their agenda. And the first thing I did was make a presentation.

And, you know, Portuguese uses a lot of words, so translation between presentations take quite a while. And when you're in a new country, you don't know who you're talking to or who the people are.

And so we did the presentation, and one of the things I talked about, of course, was black women's health issues and reproductive health, et cetera. And the next day, in the *Sao Paulo Times*, which is, they let me know, is the equivalent to your *New York Times*, there was a front-page article about the presentation and about the issues raised, about counting the statistics of black Brazilians different from white Brazilians, which they had never done before, and which they put in place. Also, I didn't know that people hadn't talked so openly about abortion until the article also mentioned that there was an open and frank discussion about abortion, and that was engaged.

Some of the most rewarding work was the Self-Help work we did with women in Brazil and learning their stories and learning about life in *favelas* and learning about things that were the same as ours and the things that were a lot different. Just — women's stories are so intriguing. I remember one woman told a story of how she stopped her brother from murdering her mother, and the way she stopped him was she murdered him, and then she escaped to a *favela*. And she lived there for years and years and years. And that's what people do. They go underground. That's the way they go underground. And most of the women we worked with had lived in the *favela* either as political refuges or because of poverty. The poverty part of Brazil I found was very difficult to handle, especially with the (unclear) that are almost next door to the skyscrapers, of people going cleaning for them. But what I love about the Brazilian women, their politics are so right *on*. They are crystal clear around issues. They are so wonderful and so loving. So, I really loved the work that I did there in Brazil.

Then, I also was on the first advisory committee for the International Leadership Program for Leadership Fellows of the Kellogg Foundation. And so that took me to — we went to Latin America, we went to South Africa, and we had people here in the U.S., and I was the U.S. advisor. And that was about five years of not only great travel but going to visit these countries and people in the countries. I remember being in Brazil and visiting the birthing centers that were just tiny little houses, you know, and little hammocks inside. We would go in and the woman would be laying in the hammock with her baby and to see their birthing chairs, and just to be with people, was just really, really wonderful.

I remember being in Fortaleza, in Northern Brazil, getting up walking early in the morning and seeing things that I wish I had not seen, like girls who were nine or ten years old, who were prostitutes on the streets of Fortaleza out that early in the morning. Some things were not always pleasant. But that cross-cultural experience was great.

ROSS:

Well, I found myself in South Africa training a group of women on black feminist theory, and it turns out — these were women lawyers that were in this Women and Law Association — it turns out they had been

trained in Self-Help by Byllye Avery. So all this black feminist theory went out of the window when they insisted that we do a Self-Help session.

AVERY: All, right. Oh, wonderful, wonderful.

ROSS: And so, could you tell me about your work in South Africa?

AVERY: Oh, South Africa was incredible. Kellogg Foundation asked me to go and take down a group of women to work with people, to do three conferences. And so, we went, first to Johannesburg. We started in Jo'burg, and we taught the women the Self-Help. But we asked the women — it was very interesting — we asked them to get us a cross section of women. We didn't just want the ones who were the professionals, we also wanted the regular women, you know. Of course, the Johannesburg people only brought in the professionals, because they didn't think the other women were ready. So, we trained them in Self-Help. But what was so wonderful, one of the women, Mankubo Manelepe(?), lived in Lenenye(?), in the Northern Transvaal of South Africa, and she was a smart woman. She brought a band of 16 women from Lenenye to the Johannesburg meeting. And so, they were there. They were rural women. They were there among the training that we did.

We taught them Self-Help, we talked about our issues, we focused in three areas. These were the areas that were identified by the women in South Africa, and each of us — there were five of us — and each of us were paired with a South African woman. But the areas they identified were domestic violence, sex abuse, and HIV/AIDS. Those were the three areas they identified that they wanted to talk about. I think it was HIV/AIDS. I think it was.

ROSS: In South Africa, it probably was.

AVERY: Yeah, I'm thinking it was HIV/AIDS. And so, we then paired, all five of us, and Barbara Love went along with us, and we taught Self-Help and we talked about the issues, et cetera. And then we left Johannesburg and we went to Durban, to the Valley of a Thousand Hills. And there, the Lenenye women were in Durban. And so, we did the same thing there, the same meeting. I remember in Durban, when we were telling them to go back to do Self-Help in their communities, one woman said, "What if the chief says no?" And I remember, I was up talking, and I'm looking around my U.S. colleagues — Help! Somebody help me. I did not know what to do. What if the chief says no? And they didn't have any answers either. I could tell by the blank stares. (both voices)

ROSS: Self-Help the chief.

AVERY: I asked the group, I said, What do you think they should do? They said, Talk to the chief's wife. So that was the answer. Talk to the chief's wife. (laughter) But people have stories. I remember one woman at the break. She went home and brought back a young person. And she brought this young person over to Ngina Lythcott, who was with us, and said, "I want her to meet you because you are an expert, and I want her to see an expert, and I want you to tell her how you got to be an expert and I want you to tell her how you knew to come to Botha's Hill." And those were the questions, you know? I remember us writing out about Self-Help, the questions, how you go through it. And I remember a woman sitting on the floor, nursing her baby, and writing on a pad of paper all at the same time. I remember them not being afraid to question anything.

And you got to know, we went to South Africa during the time before Nelson Mandela had been released. And the time was of some turmoil, when people were being asked, Are you in the ANC [African National Congress], or are you in — what was the other group?

ROSS: PAC [Pan-Africanist Congress].

AVERY: PAC.

ROSS: Or the BCM [Black Consciousness Movement].

AVERY: Yeah, you had to pick. And so, they were going to anyplace where there was a group congregated, and I heard this when we first got there. We first got there and we were at a meeting. The U.N. was convening in the township of Alexandra, and so we sat in on this meeting. And all of a sudden, we hear someone say, "Get the children in. Get the children in." And we looked, and up come these big tanks with these youngsters, with these guns. And they come rolling up in to the township. And oh, my God, I'm thinking, Oh, my goodness, I'm here in South Africa and we are — I felt so responsible for the people who were there and everything. And it turns out that the U.N. sent them out to protect us. That's why they were there. But, you know, they were concerned because nobody from the township would come to this meeting and we're saying, Well, that's why. They don't know what's happening. You know, they got these big tanks rolling in. Of course, nothing happened to us, obviously. But they were sent to protect us.

I remember being in Durban and I'd forgotten about the group coming together, et cetera, et cetera, and we were all doing In Celebration of Us. We were all singing and dancing and carrying on. And all of a sudden, we heard this sound of footsteps, many, many footsteps outside the door. So, I went outside, see — big, brave me — I went outside to see what it was. It was a big group of men coming. And I just knew that we were going to be asked to pick what side or just what. So I went up to them and I said, "Who are you looking for?" and they said, Is Luiguili here? and the mere fact that he mentioned

Luiguili's name, I knew that they were friends. They were a group of men who came to sing for us. And they came to sing, to do this –

ROSS: In boots? Oh, my goodness.

VERY: And that's what they did. It was just so wonderful. It was just so wonderful. So we left Durban and then we went up to Lenenye, up in the Northern Transvaal. Remember, the 16 women who came to the Johannesburg meeting, they've gone through about eight days of Self-Help, four in each place. By the time we got to Lenenye, they ran their own meeting. They led their own Self-Help groups, and they were trained better than anybody, because they had done all conferences.

They must have had at least five or six hundred women who came to that meeting. And of course, they talked about every single thing that there was to talk about. They talked about their lives of women making bricks. They talked about the lives of women who sewed just little pieces of fabric together to get a little bit of money, how their husbands go away and sometimes they come back and take that money away from them, when they need that money to pay for the baby, to get milk, to get food so they can nurse the baby that they were carrying. They talked about the men constantly having businesses where men can go and have fun and play and has nothing to do with the family. So they were really talking about the pain of their lives.

And one of the things that I wanted to do was, these women were so beautiful inside and outside, I was really concerned that I saw no flowers growing there in their yards. And I really had this notion of sending back seeds so that they could grow flowers but I realized flowers weren't what they really needed, you know? We gave them what they needed — a way to free themselves.

So, the story you were telling me yesterday about the women doing their businesses near the game preserves, you know, and I'm thinking, I'm wondering if any of those women spread those stories around, learn how to talk about them, so that the women could escape some of the violence they were living with, so the women could escape the scourge of AIDS that was starting to come, and so that they would know that it was OK. They felt empowered enough to save themselves. So that was a glorious experience.

ROSS: But I'm surprised, because SisterReach never really got off the ground like we had envisioned.

VERY: No, it didn't.

ROSS: It sounds like you would love to fulfill that dream. So, it may be the international program for the Avery Institute.

VERY: It could be. But that was fun. That was wonderful.

ROSS: It's also where you will rediscover the magic.

VERY: Yeah, that was great. It was great.

ROSS: Because I'm telling you, I go around the world and I feel like I'm walking in your footsteps, because the minute I say Self-Help, they say, Byllye Avery. And whatever our agenda was (laughs) it's not happening that way anymore.

VERY: People need it, people want it, people need it.

ROSS: It's amazing how well Self-Help works across all the cultures.

VERY: Absolutely.

ROSS: All cultures.

VERY: That's what's powerful about it. It is so powerful. It really is. And it's so needed. And it was just — I know we had some funny stories — this one funny story that needs to go down in history. We were in Johannesburg and we were catching — or maybe we were in Durban, I can't remember. Anyway, we were trying to catch the plane to go to Lenenye. So we get to the airport, and they tell us the plane is gone. And we said, Well, how is the plane gone? Because we are the whole plane. There were seven of us, because we took Maria, and Barbara took her daughter. So there were seven of us for the plane. And so, they said, Well, the plane is gone.

And so, we just couldn't believe it. So these white people, there were two white people who were going to Lenenye, too. So we understand racism, so we're going to hang with them, because if they go, we're going to go. The plane was out on the runway. We wanted to bring it back. The plane wasn't taking off, it was just out on the runway. So, we knew they were going to bring it back for the white group. So what they did is, they not only got a plane for the white people, but they brought our plane back. So we went, like, in two planes.

ROSS: Apartheid.

VERY: So we get to Lenenye. When we land, the people tell us, the plane only goes on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Your flight leaves at 4 p.m. and we are not bringing the plane back for you. So, it meant we were there like at 2 o'clock because we wanted to make sure we got on the plane.

ROSS: OK. We're coming to the end of this tape, so, I'm going to shut this down and I'm going to continue asking you questions about Byllye Avery's future.

VERY: All right.

END TAPE 3

TAPE 4: July 22, 2005

ROSS: Tell me the influence that religion has had on your life.

AVERY: Well, I grew up in DeLand, as I said earlier, and I grew up in the AME church. And my mother was very active in the church and so therefore we went to church. I played the piano. I sang in the choir and, you know, recited poetry and did all the things that young people do in the church. And um, after I went away to college, came back home, I still participated in some church activities. But over the years, I sort of became sort of disillusioned, disenchanted, with organized religion, sort of, and moved away from the church — but moved more toward spirituality. And I do believe in a god within us. I do believe that we have spiritual powers — and started moving more towards spirituality. And I think the way my spirituality probably is best manifested is in the book I wrote, *An Altar of Words*, in which I think that words are so important in our lives, and I think that spirituality is so broad. I didn't want it to be narrowly defined spiritual words like hope, faith, charity, et cetera. I wanted to show the spirituality in words like boogie down, the spirituality in words like sisternomics, the spirituality in water, et cetera.

ROSS: Sisternomics?

AVERY: Sisternomics. Sisternomics is a term that was coined by Akua Watkins and it really spoke to ways that black women make a way out of no way when it comes to money. (Ross laughs) And what I did with that word is I wrote about a woman who I met who was a maid at Swarthmore College. And she had four children, and she always worked as a maid at the school, and all of her children — the last one was getting his Ph.D. She had put all of them through to terminal degrees. And she just was so, um, representative of those women who have that force, that drive, that dream, who give it to their children, who back them all the way, who tell them every single morning that they're wonderful, and this is something that they are expected to do, and that they can do it. And so, I wrote about her life around that word. So many of us do make a way out of no way.

ROSS: So, how did your book come about?

AVERY: The book came about — I had a hard time trying to write. Writing is not one of my strongest skills. I have a lot to say, so I really need to move it further up, so I made this attempt. But for years, I wanted to write and I would start every summer with my laptop. This is the summer I'm going to start on a book. So finally, after about four years of false starts, I decided that this had to be it. And I remember, we were up at Mountain View Lake in New Hampshire and I was out with Ngina and she was saying, "Byllye, I know you can do this, and that maybe what you ought to think about doing, just speak it into a tape recorder, and see if you can

do that. Or, get somebody, talk to someone, and let them help you with the writing of it." And she said, "You don't have to write every single word yourself. You have to talk it out and then you can get someone to help." So, I thought, Nah, I still want to do it.

And so I went back and I started trying to work, and ran up into a woman named Wendy Sanford, who is a minister. And so, she said, "Why don't we do a little ritual and see if we can help you get some of those voices out of your head that are telling you that you can't write?" So what I realized was that I was listening to my ninth grade English teacher, who told me I'd never be able to write. And here I was, 60-some years old. I said, "Why am I listening to something somebody told me when I was in the ninth grade? And if I found her and asked her, you know, Do you remember saying this? She's not going to remember ever saying this. So why am I giving it such power in my life?" And so, we also asked for that voice to go away.

And also, the editing voice — because whenever I wrote a sentence, I then went to edit it to death. And I couldn't move onto the next sentence. So we asked the editing voice to step back and let the other voice come out. So, I remember, Ngina and I were out in the car, and I said, "I think this is the way I want to start the book." And I started off talking about what it was like to fall in love. And I kind of made a line: falling in love in the most wonderful thing that could happen in your life, or something like that. And I kind of like spewed out a paragraph. She said, "That is it."

So I went back and I was at the house of Judy Norsigian, who was a member of the Boston Women's Health Collective, and they started to do everything, still, very collectively. And so, everybody knew that I was sitting at that laptop writing that day. So that night, when we got ready to have dinner, they asked me, How did the writing go today? And I said, "Well, I wrote three words." And they misunderstood me. They thought I only put three words down, but I meant I did three passages around three words. So, they kind of let that fall in the air.

And so, then, after dinner, somebody said, "Well, would you read for us what you wrote?" Oh, my God. Oh, my God. Perspiration. A big bead of perspiration went right down the inside of my leg. I hadn't had that happen to me since I was a youngster in church, getting ready to recite something. I was so nervous. And I read the first passage, and they were ecstatic. And I read the second and I read the third. And they gave me the confidence that I could do it. And that's how I was able to get that book out.

And so, I guess I took eight or nine months to do it and it took a lot of discipline. But it wasn't that hard to do. I would get up every morning, I'd go for my morning walk, and I would think about what word I wanted to write about that day. And I'd work on it while I was walking and I'd come back and I would sit at the computer and I would put down my thoughts for that day, for that word, and then I'd go back and work on the one that I started the day before, and finish it up. And that's how I did it.

I traveled around, speaking at conferences and I told them that I was writing a book and I told them what it was about, and I needed them to suggest words to me, because I didn't want to have the regular, traditional words in there. And if I used their word, then I would give them a credit in the front of the book. And I did that for about five or six different conferences, and people gave me wonderful words. And so, I included a lot of them. I remember Barbara Love gave me "boogie down." And it was just really — so now I've been asked to update it. They want me to add about ten or 15 more words and then it wants to be republished, so I'm going to do that. And I also made an audiotape of reading about 70 of the words, and so I want to also — that's my next project to do, to start on later this year.

ROSS: So you have many more books that you're going to write, eventually.

EVERY: Absolutely. I have to do my life's story, and I've taken a couple of classes up here in Provincetown at the Fine Arts Center to get myself going, but I still need to take some more, you know. I like taking the classes because, you know, there is a technique and there is a lot of stuff to learn. And it also helps build confidence and it gives the discipline and the structure for writing, because if you take a week-long class, you have writing assignments and that really is all you can do during that week, is really be in that class — go to class and do the writing. And I like the discipline of it. And that's what I need.

ROSS: OK. So, there are other oral histories on you that have been done, or is this the first?

EVERY: This is the first that has gone into the depth of the full body of my work. Others have been more documentaries, just around certain parts of the work. What's the reproductive health work? What was it like in the '70s — et cetera, et cetera. But this is the first one that's taken the whole body of work.

ROSS: OK. Well, hopefully, its transcript will provide the skeleton for writing your biography.

EVERY: Absolutely, absolutely.

ROSS: Every little piece builds upon itself. So, are there other organizations that you're affiliated with or work with, or —

EVERY: Well, I got started with the National Women's Health Network and so, I still do some work for them, like advisory committee, or, you know, we do some collaborations. I was on the board of the Boston Women's Health Book Collective for a while and we still have associations and do work there. I was on the first advisory committee for the Office of Research on Women's Health, Vivian Penn's office, and that was really

nice, where I got to meet people and to be an advisor in a different kind of capacity and to make sure that the real research needs of black women were being addressed, which is not an easy thing to do.

ROSS: Well, one of the things that we did early on at SisterSong, and now I'm hearing you might have had a role, too, in that, was urge them to publish that *Women of Color Health Data Book*. Were you involved in that?

AVERY: Mm-hm. Oh yeah. Vivian always wanted it. I must say, when she first got in office — she hadn't been there a week — we went to her and said, We want you to make sure that women of color issues are addressed up front, loud and clear. And she was ahh, so good. She also did the same thing during the Clinton administration around gay and lesbian issues. She made sure the lesbian health issues got before the Institute of Medicine, and they put out a whole book on lesbian health issues. So, she was really good with looking at the issues of people who were in the margins. So she wanted that *Women of Color* book.

ROSS: Where is she now?

AVERY: Vivian Penn? She's still there.

ROSS: Oh, I just assumed that the Bush administration would've gotten rid of someone so progressive.

AVERY: No. Well, they all got to tone themselves down.

ROSS: So that they can survive.

AVERY: So that they can survive.

ROSS: Under the radar.

AVERY: Right, right.

ROSS: So, those were the other key organizations that you've been affiliated with. Why don't we go back to telling the story of your children — where are they now?

AVERY: Oh, OK. My children are fine. My son, Wesley, lives in Gainesville, Florida, and he's married to Angela and they have a son, Wesley III, who is the light of our lives, who is quite wonderful. Wesley works for UPS. He drives a truck. He is a very interesting young man who can talk freely on almost any subject, who doesn't understand why I do the work that I can do because he says at the end of the day, he needs to know that the truck is empty, and he's delivered all his packages. He doesn't know about this work that has no end — has no beginning and no real end. He wants a beginning and an end. He's a fisherman. He has a boat,

he's a captain, and he loves to fish. That fishing is his life. And I'm real glad he's got his captain's license and he's real careful and real good. But he can take people out on fishing tours and all.

He's also very good about his health. He knows that his father died of a massive heart attack that makes him at high risk, and he goes to the doctors frequently. He doesn't let anything happen to him for one or two days or hang around. He is in there seeing about it, no matter how little it is or whatever it is. He's a vigilant health person. He's just got himself a new Bowflex machine and a Stairmaster. So he's, like — really, really, really, really, exercises a lot.

My daughter, Sonia, is doing very well. She's living with my mother in Jacksonville, which is really good for all of us. My mother needs her there, I need her to be there, and she needs to be there. She's now working at the University of North Florida in sponsored research and just got a promotion to being a coordinator of grants and development in sponsored research, which is a new position for her. She's a bit nervous about it, but she's doing real well.

And she's also just becoming a breast cancer survivor. The first mammogram, she had some positive, I mean, a biopsy that proved that she had ductile carcinoma. So, she's undergoing radiation now, and becoming a cancer survivor. So I'm real glad, though, that she — she did quite a bit of work at the Feminist Women's Health Center early on, she is my daughter, so she knows about her body and she knows how to take care of her body. She knows how to advocate within the health care system to get things. And so, she's a very responsible person and she knows everything that's happening to her. And she will ask questions and she gets answers and she wants good service. She does.

ROSS: She's not only a beautiful woman but she always has a remarkable amount of self-confidence.

VERY: Absolutely, absolutely. I mean, she's really — yeah, she is. She's quite a beauty.

ROSS: Well, it's good to hear an update on Sonia. Were there significant people that you could name in your past that had a profound influence on your thinking and what you did?

VERY: Probably the person who influenced me the most is my mother.

ROSS: Tell me about your mother.

VERY: My mother is a woman who — she's a can-do kind of woman, and she has always done and always been there. I remember when my mother retired from teaching for 35 years, the very next Monday, she started working at St. Paul AME Church as a volunteer, and she volunteered another 20 years there before she stopped. She's now 96 years old, and she's only not been working at the church about five or six years.

So, I have a person who has always been active. She just got back yesterday from being down in Orlando, Florida, at an education meeting for AME church. So, she is still moving. She's still active with a real good attitude, who values education. And she would tell you quickly, There's nothing wrong with So-and-so, they just need to go to school. Her idea is, You need to go to school. You *have* to go to school. If you go to school, everything will work out OK.

She's quite concerned because she said, "Sonia doesn't have anything behind her name. She needs to have something behind her name." And Sonia said, "Well, I got a B.A. degree. "No, no, that's not enough. You need to have a master's degree." And she keeps saying, "Sonia, I want you to get your master's degree while I'm here, so I can help you." And so, she really values education and, like, primo, primo on me. We grew up knowing that that was what we had to do. There was no question, no getting around it. So, she's just been a wonderful influence.

She's a woman who wears hats. She has at least 50, 60 hats, and they're all big and gorgeous and wonderful. She has at least three hundred pairs of shoes. She's a shoe horse and a clothes horse, and — wonderful clothes. I had to get out of trying to compete with my mother, to out-dress her. I just couldn't do it, so I had the good sense to let her have that one.

Another person who influenced me life was a woman named Judy Levy, who we founded the Gainesville Women's Health Center and the Birthing Center together, and she died in '87 from breast cancer. Judy was a very bright woman who was a very complicated woman and not everybody liked her and not everybody could, you know, jive with her, but somehow we did. We connected, and she was very influential in helping me think about reproductive health — helping me work through things about rape, about abortion, about a lot of the hard issues and things that I really had never talked to anyone about. Not that I'd even spent a whole lot of time thinking about, you know — I just hadn't. But she provided a real, wonderful education for me. And she also taught me how to read the *New York Times* and to work crossword puzzles and acrostics, which I still do today.

ROSS: Didn't you tell me that Robin Morgan or someone just sent you —

AVERY: Oh, Kate Clinton.

ROSS: Kate Clinton just sent you crossword puzzles.

AVERY: While I was sick, yeah. She sent me crossword puzzle books. She sent two of them.

ROSS: Well, one of the things you've done through most of your career is to bridge between black and white women, so that it seems rather seamless in your work. Could you talk about how that came about?

AVERY:

I think when it started, it was around the issues that I was interested in. It really sort of started when I got down to Gainesville, because when I was in Jacksonville, I didn't know that many white women. It was before desegregation, you know, and it was the time of segregation, and so you didn't pal around with anybody white. And when I started teaching was the first time in Jacksonville that I got brought together with white people. And I was kind of amazed at how people — you know, it was, like, one day it wasn't OK and the next day it was OK and people were sitting next to you and talking to you and inviting you into their homes, just like it was no big deal. And we were going just like it was no big deal. Before I knew anything, I'm sitting in this woman's house and I'm just amazed at all this Christmas decoration that they had around. And there's little kids dragging blankets, which I had never seen that except in the comic books. I certainly had never seen a black child dragging a blanket around sucking their thumb. I mean, I said, Oh, my God. So that does happen, you know. It was amazing to me how quickly that happened.

And then, when I moved to Gainesville, I became interested in the issues. When I first went to Gainesville to school, to the University of Florida, there were only 30 black people on the campus. And so, if you were going to talk to anybody, you had to talk to white people, because they were the ones around you, and I became friendly with the people who were in my class at the school of education. And then, after that, I started working over at Shands Teaching Hospital, and most of the black people who worked there were the people who took care of the kids on the unit. There were not very many black people who went into any kind of administrative positions. I think there might have been one secretary, et cetera. And so, then my colleagues were all these white women.

Well, then, I became interested in women's health. And the issues that I was interested in, the white women were the only ones talking about them. The black women weren't. But I was always trying to find what black women were, you know, and this woman is a nurse over here, could I talk to her, et cetera. But you got to — I have to admit, during those times, I was avoided by a lot of black women, because they didn't know what they thought about these issues and they didn't want to talk about them, and also because of the whole stigma in the black community and the taboo around we do one thing but we don't talk about it, and it's OK as long as you don't talk about it. You don't flaunt it. And here we were, talking about abortion, opening up an abortion clinic and doing all this stuff. And they didn't know what to do with me. They didn't know what to do with me.

What I later learned is that they admired me. They were glad I was there, but they just didn't know what to do with me. I felt alienated and isolated, because they didn't know what to do with me. So, slowly but surely, one or two black women would come into town, who would be open to talking, you know, et cetera. So, I guess I sort of learned how to

move back and forth between the worlds. And then, out of that I create a larger world, which is what I was able to do with the Black Women's Health Project, and still move back between the worlds. A lot of my friends are — a lot of white women still are there. So, somehow, I was able to do it.

ROSS: So tell me about your relationship life, post-Wesley.

VERY: Relationship life post-Wesley. Relationship life post-Wesley was really quite interesting. I went into a couple of years of mourning, deep mourning. And then I came out of that. I started to try to do the dating process, but I was looking for Wesley in every single person. And I found out that men, at that time, the ones I met really only wanted to have dinner and go to bed, and I wasn't interested. The dinner part was fine but I wasn't interested in going to bed with all of them. Plus, I had two children, which they also somehow thought that I was looking for someone to help me rear the two children, which I was not at all.

And at one point in my life, I had to start being true to the inner feelings that I had, and it was inner feelings for women. And I didn't know what to do with it. I didn't know who to talk to about it. It wasn't going away. And as the women's movement started to grow, I started hearing about this woman's a lesbian, that woman was a lesbian, and I quite frankly was afraid of lesbians. But still, I had these feelings inside of me, and had these strong urges and all and I didn't know what to do with them.

And then we went to that conference in Boston, and some of us had begun to talk about our feelings a little bit. We hadn't acted on anything, but we were talking about them. We went to the conference in Boston when I related the earlier experience, how afraid I was. I came back and I remember, I went out to the lake one Saturday to visit some friends. And I met this woman, Marge, and we fell in love with each other, and she became my first partner and we had, like, about a five-month relationship. It was really wonderful and very romantic and quite loving. And then I had a couple of relationships after that one, with Ann Gill, who lasted for about seven years.

But you know, you learn a lot with each relationship. Ann was such a wonderful money manager. She really taught me a lot about managing and having money, so we were financially in great shape as long as Ann and I were together. And she also, kind of, in a lot of ways, helped move me up in my thinking, from right here to another point, which was really quite, quite good.

That relationship got real complicated toward the end and we had a very difficult breakup. I think I cried for almost a year. And I remember my son telling me, "Mama, you've got to stop crying. You've cried long enough. You have to stop." And I knew that if he could walk in and say that to me, that I needed to listen to it and move on with my life. And so I moved away from Gainesville and moved to Atlanta.

And then when I moved to Atlanta, I met Sheryll Dahlke. And Cheryl was very interesting. She's from Iowa and what was really nice about Cheryl was, I got a chance to learn about the Midwest, to learn about Iowa and to go home with her, to meet her family, and see how people lived there. She was also a very easy person to be around, very easy. She was a CPA. She's a CPA. She was very easy to be around, always amenable to almost anything, which became a problem. But she was a good person. She was a good person. She also handled all the money affairs very well. She was an accountant. She did all the taxes. She paid all the bills. That was nice. I didn't have to worry about none of that. All I had to do was put my money in the bank, put my half in. You know, she had it all set up, you know, nicely. So that was real good.

I remember going to the Iowa State Fair with her. If you are ever in Des Moines, and the state fair is going on, go to it! It is incredible. You really understand America. You know, it's like the America that we don't have, but it's the America that you want to dream about. And everybody there from Iowa wears Iowa on their clothes. If you look back through Black Women's Health Project, you will see, there's one person in there with an Iowa tee-shirt on. If they come from Iowa, they got on this shirt that has Iowa on it. People wear it. People are proud to be from Iowa. They call themselves the State of Minds. They are very bright with a high emphasis on education and there're just some gems in Iowa. And Cheryl sort of brought Iowa to me.

And then I met Ngina, and when I met Ngina, I remember thinking, Oh, my goodness. I think I've met the person that I want to spend the rest of my life with. And it's just been wonderful. It's been — it's been a lot of hard work. We've had some rough, rough times, but we worked on them. I didn't really know you had — I knew you had to — I kind of thought you had to work on a relationship, but you know, we get taught that you're going to meet somebody, you're going to be happy, and you're going to spend the rest of your life, and it's going to be easy. Well, it's not like that. You're going to meet somebody, you're going to be happy for a while, then it's going to get bad, and then you've got to *work* on that relationship and figure out how you are going to live together. And what I realized, the easiest thing to do is to leave. And that's what people pick up and do quickly — they leave. That's easy. The hard thing is to stay there and work.

And I remember when we got into really deep trouble, when Ngina said to me, "I don't want to go to therapy to learn how to break up with you. I don't think we need to go pay money to somebody to tell us how to separate. I only want to go to therapy if we make a commitment to stay together, that we're going to therapy to stay together." And that's what we did. We went to therapy to stay together. We were in therapy for several years. And we had a long therapy session, because our therapist lived an hour away, and then we would have an hour session with her. So we would have an hour there, an hour-and-a-half session with her, and an hour session back home. So therapy days were, like,

three and a half hours of constantly talking about our issues with homework that we worked on. We really had to learn how to communicate.

What we learned was that she was speaking Russian and I was speaking French. So we weren't even in the same romance language, you know. And we had to learn how to talk to each other, and we still practice a lot of what we learned. So we worked very hard on this relationship. And so, I am pleased that we are getting married, that we live in Massachusetts, a state where we can get married. And so, we will be getting married real soon.

ROSS: So, how did your broader community react to your coming out as a lesbian?

AVERY: Another reason for being with the white women is that I was accepted among the white women more so than black women. Black women didn't talk about it, but — some kind of shunned me. A few were accepting, but it was kind of hurtful because most were not accepting. But when we got to the Black Women's Health Project, it didn't seem to matter. People had grown and moved on and, you know, it was fine. But in the early days, it was very hard.

ROSS: I was going to say, I don't recall it being openly discussed at the Black Women's Health Project.

AVERY: No, it wasn't discussed but it was OK, you know what I mean? I was not avoided because of it.

ROSS: Right. I would say because I would've loved to have been on those discussions.

AVERY: No, no. It wasn't openly discussed. It wasn't openly discussed. But it sort of got me and Lillie as a package and each of us had a partner at the time who happened to be white, which was also very restimulating and kind of difficult and kind of hard.

ROSS: I could imagine.

AVERY: So, but people were respectful and whatever opinions they had, I never really heard them, but I'm quite sure there were opinions.

ROSS: Well, the opinions that I heard actually came from many lesbians who were concerned that there wasn't open discussion. The acceptance was good but the fact that there wasn't a structured discussion —

AVERY: Right. It was, Why were you in these relationships, et cetera.

- ROSS: Or just, Why we don't talk about the role of lesbians in building the black women's health movement?
- EVERY: Yeah. Well, we didn't talk about it that way, but we did talk about homophobia and lesbian — we had to do that because on Friday nights, people couldn't go to bed if we didn't have a discussion around it, because it was double occupancy. We had to sleep in a bed with somebody. So we usually talked about it, but not in terms of specific — we didn't talk about the role of lesbians in the women's health movement. We didn't do that. We didn't do it that way. We were going to talk more about people's personal feelings.
- ROSS: OK. Do you mind if we pause to record on air — I'd like to get Ngina on tape and talk about where you all are and her perspective and some of her life.
- EVERY: No. Wonderful.
- ROSS: So we'll pause and get her on tape. (pause in tape)
OK. We're resuming the taping of the story of Byllye Avery and I've invited into the session Ngina Lythcott. Welcome, Ngina.
- LYTHCOTT: Thank you.
- ROSS: Tell me about Ngina. Where were you born? Where do you come from? What do you do?
- LYTHCOTT: I was born in Boston, Massachusetts, at Boston City Hospital, during a year that it was not accredited. I moved from there to —
- ROSS: What year were you born?
- LYTHCOTT: 1945.
- ROSS: Give me your whole birthday.
- LYTHCOTT: August 24, 1945. I moved to a suburb of Boston, which was not then a suburb of Boston, but — let's start over again.
- ROSS: That's all right.
- LYTHCOTT: OK. I moved to Acton, Massachusetts, which is now a bedroom community of Boston. But then it was just a rural area in which you had to ring on the phone. The milkman delivered milk that was cream on the top of the milk — not pasteurized or anything. And then when I was ten, we moved to Oklahoma, and in Oklahoma, for two years, I lived with my grandmother.

ROSS: Why did you move to Oklahoma?

LYTHCOTT: My father and my mother were wanting to start their relationship over again, so they sent all of us to my grandmother's in Oklahoma, and they moved to New York, and my father was able to do a special training there, and they were able to start all over again. They had had some hard times before then.

ROSS: For the record, can you tell me your parents' names?

LYTHCOTT: My father's name was George I. Lythcott II, and my mother is Ruth Andrad Lythcott.

ROSS: For the historical record.

LYTHCOTT: And in Oklahoma, it was the first time that I had a serious impact by segregation. So, I moved there when I was ten, went to public schools for the first time. They were all segregated. The community was segregated. We couldn't eat in restaurants. We could only get certain jobs, we couldn't do anything.

So, um, two years later, my family moved to Oklahoma City, and I moved there at the age of 12 and got involved in the NAACP youth movement. And every Monday, we met at the local Baptist church to hear about the preachings of Dr. Martin Luther King and to understand about the importance of nonviolence, and every weekend, we went and sat in. And most of us, led by a wonderful woman named Clara Luper (and her two children) and all the rest of us were children.

And, I remember every Saturday, first the fire department would be called and we were ruled a fire hazard, and then the police department would come and put us in paddy wagons. And if we were not lucky, the police officers would feel on us and use shock sticks on us. Sometimes when we were sitting down there in front of the places where we couldn't eat, people would spit on us on the way in and/or step on our hands, when we were sitting down.

It was a — I don't remember it as a bad time. I remember it as a time when [I thought], How could these people take these rights away from me? This is something that is important. This is something that we have to fight against. And because the children were so involved for three or four years, the parents started to get involved. And at the end, some of the public accommodations began to open up for African American people in the Oklahoma City area. Some textbooks say we were before the sit-ins in North Carolina, and some people say they were two weeks ahead of us. So, that's something that I am very [proud of].

So, when we were taken away in the paddy wagons, we were arrested, but they couldn't hold children under the age of 16. So they would keep us as long as they could. Then they would send us back in the most marked cars they could, with sirens blasting, but they didn't

know, in our community, it made us heroes and heroines, and so that was a wonderful time.

ROSS: OK. We'll pause. So, what year was this sit-in?

LYTHCOTT: The sit-ins started in 1957. And we moved in 1959 to Ghana [says 1961 below]. And my father was responsible for the eradication of smallpox from the continent — well, 43 countries in the continent of Africa.

ROSS: So he was a doctor?

LYTHCOTT: He was a pediatrician. And the funny thing about my dad is that he didn't really care about getting paid. And I remember when we lived in Oklahoma, before we went to Africa, that sometimes we'd get paid with greens, sometimes we'd get paid with potato pies. Sometimes we didn't get paid at all. But he was also the pediatric consultant for the Native American reservations in Oklahoma, working for the Indian Health Service. So, there were four of us children. My father single-parented us, for the most part, and —

ROSS: So your parents eventually did get divorced?

LYTHCOTT: Um, my mother had a nervous — she became suicidal when I was five, and finally when we moved to Oklahoma, she was hospitalized, and so my father single-parented us. But we used to take turns getting — miss school one Thursday a month when we went with him to one of the local reservations. And he started well-baby clinics also on the reservations. And we got to be exposed to Native American culture, and it was fabulous.

ROSS: Has anyone written a book about your father?

LYTHCOTT: Not yet.

ROSS: It sounds like it's one that —

LYTHCOTT: But it's something that I'm certainly thinking about, yeah. So, when we went to Ghana, the thing that was the most amazing to me was everybody, from the street sweepers to the president, were all black. It was something that changed my life forever. So, when I said Oklahoma, that was a big change in my life, because everything was segregated. And then in West Africa, everything was black. The most wonderful president on this earth —

ROSS: Kwa me Nkrumah.

LYTHCOTT: But he had another name. Osageyo (Kwame Nkrumah) was president. And it was just a wonderful time for African people.

- ROSS: So, Ngina, tell me what impact growing up in Africa had on your consciousness. In what year did that take place?
- LYTHCOTT: Well, we moved there in 1961 and left in 1969. And I can say to you that it helped me to realize that African people could be anything that we wanted to be. It led me to feel very close solidarity with African people, wherever we are, and it resulted in me getting involved in the pan-Africanist movement, something that was very vital to me. Thinking about — and almost having this — I'm a very concrete thinker, and so, I almost had this vision in my head of pieces of a puzzle coming back together, as African people from all around the world would pull back together again, with the different strengths and weaknesses that we have based upon the different places of the diaspora where we were sprinkled — or raped and robbed or whatever. And pan-Africanism became very important to me.
- ROSS: So, where did your feminist consciousness come from?
- LYTHCOTT: My feminist consciousness came from the civil rights movement in Oklahoma. It started there, where this woman named Clara Luper and her two children pulled us all together. I was raised a Catholic and everything in the civil rights movement grew out of the black church. And so, going to the black church that was mostly women, mostly middle-aged and older women, and seeing them sit and be in charge of the events that took place, and seeing the power that women had with their families, helped me to realize that that was a really important aspect of my own being. And having been raised pretty much by my father with three brothers and a male cousin, I have to say that my understanding that I was a woman and that I have something to offer emerged from Clara Luper.
- ROSS: Did you have any early engagement with any of the reproductive rights organizations, like Planned Parenthood or something?
- LYTHCOTT: Well, unlike Byllye, my start was in the civil rights movement. Byllye's start was in the women's rights movement, and so, I kind of missed the women's rights movement until — I guess my first brush with it was during — very early on in my first marriage, I got pregnant, and my husband was not interested in having a child at that point. I was in Northern California at the time, Berkeley, California, and had an abortion in 1970. I think that was before it was even legal in the United States, possibly.
- ROSS: It was before *Roe*, definitely, but some states had legalized earlier.
- LYTHCOTT: Then, in 1975, I became a single parent by choice, with my wonderful daughter, Mawiyah, and then, immediately after I had, another

contraceptive failure and I got pregnant again and had my second abortion. Then, this whole notion of abortion rights being threatened was something that really disturbed me. So — I'm a person who's moved 21 times in my life — so I moved from Los Angeles to — well, I missed the whole part of moving to Tanzania and living there and working there for two years, and then coming back to the United States by way of New York City and then Los Angeles. And then I moved to Washington, D.C., where I got involved in the White House Conference on Families. And there, I met Mary— her husband was the mayor New York City at one time — Mary –

ROSS: Dinkins?

LYTHCOTT: No, it was before Mayor Dinkins. It was a white mayor [John Lindsay]. He was the liberal mayor in New York City — anyway, Mary was active on the board of Planned Parenthood of New York City, and he had been the mayor of New York City, and she organized us during the nights of the conference, around choice and reproductive rights. And um –

ROSS: What year would this have been?

LYTHCOTT: This would be in 1979, 1980. And I was working at Planned Parenthood of Metropolitan Washington. I was the deputy director of Planned Parenthood. It was one of the bigger chapters at the time, and I was also the coordinator of medical services. I wasn't the director of medical services — that was a physician. But we had about ten clinics a week in Washington, D.C., ten more in Northern Virginia, ten more in Montgomery County, Maryland, and ten more in Prince Georges County, Maryland. And I guess I was the first black administrative person in Planned Parenthood of Metropolitan Washington, and most of the other African American people there were working in clerical positions and some in the delivery of direct services to women. But we — in Washington, D.C., we even had clinics in the schools, and so that was a very highly organizing time for me.

I moved from there to Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire, and got involved with Planned Parenthood of the Upper Valley. And that was wonderful. I was working then with very low-income — New Hampshire doesn't have state income tax and so it's not a place where you want to be poor — very low-income white women around reproductive rights, as a volunteer.

And from there, Planned Parenthood of Vermont wanted to create something called Planned Parenthood of Northern New England, so we could organize together, in Maine. And I was against our merging, because I didn't want to be just a dot on Planned Parenthood of Vermont's map. We were very autonomous, very independent, and very active. And so, they put me on the committee to help make this decision because they knew if I decided that it was worth the merger, that they

would agree to it. So, we did become Planned Parenthood of Northern New England.

After that, I moved to Atlanta, Georgia, and was on the board of Planned Parenthood of Atlanta and was the vice president and president-elect there. But I was only in Atlanta for two years. But that's where I met Byllye.

ROSS: I was going to say, that was a productive two years.

LYTHCOTT: That was a wonderful two years. That's where I met Byllye, that's where I got involved in the Black Women's Health Project, and that's where I was on the board of what's now the Black Women's Wellness Center in Atlanta that was at the — (to Avery) what was the name of that housing project?

VERY: Mechanicsville.

LYTHCOTT: Was it Mechanicsville, the name of the housing project?

ROSS: McDaniel.

LYTHCOTT: McDaniel Glenn.

VERY: McDaniel Glenn.

LYTHCOTT: And when I was asked to be on the board there, I said I would only consider being on the board if the goal of the organization was that within two years, more than half of the board would be residents of McDaniel Glenn and the chair would be a resident of McDaniel Glenn. And so, that was also a wonderful period of time. I learned about Self-Help, and it's interesting. It was something that I had done in California when it was just something called RC [re-evaluation counseling] and it was something that you used to get to know yourself better and to discharge some of the things that happened to you with other women or men around issues of racism, class, homophobia — lots of other issues. So, when I found it at the National Black Women's Health Project, I was amazed to see how it had been adapted to work in the service of African American women. It was extremely powerful.

And the kind of work that I had been doing before I met Byllye was around community organization and development, more from a women's empowerment movement and women and children [perspective], and if men were around, fine, but to just develop the African American community by way of women. But Atlanta was the first place I had worked with — who was that at Carver Homes in Atlanta. (to Avery) Who was that woman there? Wasn't she Somebody Love?

VERY: No, she wasn't. Um — Louise Whatley.

LYTHCOTT: No.

AVERY: Louise Whatley.

LYTHCOTT: Was it Louise Whatley?

AVERY: It was Louise Whatley, at Carver Homes.

LYTHCOTT: OK. So, at Carver Homes, I was trying — I have this model of community organization and development that I use that I had developed over the previous 20 years of my life. And my favorite thing to do was to try to use it in different parts of the United States and find out what aspects of this paradigm needed to be changed, given the community you were in and which aspects of the paradigm were the same. So, I went around Atlanta to try to find places where I might use this project and everybody told me, Here are the places you should think about, but whatever you do, don't go to Carver Homes, because it has so few auxiliary resources.

So I decided that Carver Homes was exactly the place where I wanted to go. And — it was Louise Whatley. Louise and I — she was skeptical of me because I was an educated woman, and I was crazy about her because everybody's place I went mentioned her name. And she and I worked together and it was wonderful finding out that having information and changing behavior are two different things. African American women had lots of information about lots of things, but whether it informed our behavior or not was a whole different conversation.

ROSS: So, how did you meet Byllye Avery and how did this romance begin? And I ask this question in recognition that you all are getting married.

LYTHCOTT Yes.

ROSS: To morrow?

LYTHCOTT: W e're getting married legally tomorrow, but people that are coming — our families are coming to a celebration that is going to be August 13th, but the real deal is tomorrow, on the 23rd of July.

ROSS: So, how did you meet?

LYTHCOTT: Well, I was at the end of the second marriage. We were talking about divorce. We hadn't slept together in years. And I had told my friends for a long time that if this marriage didn't work out, I was going to try women. I have to say to you that that was an intellectual thing, but I knew deep inside of me, that I had very strong attractions for women. But having been raised a Catholic, those were considered mortal sins,

and so it was something that I didn't really practice. But I would say that I was very open to it. Now Byllye, you should talk more about this.

ROSS: Yeah, because how did you meet Ngina and how did she fall into your life?

AVERY: Well, I first saw Ngina when she came over to the Black Women's Health Project for a meeting. Earlier, Jackie Williams told me that the dean's wife was over at Morehouse and that she was very interested in the Black Women's Health Project and I said, "Well, why don't you just bring her over the next time you come to a meeting? Bring her over." And so, Jackie brought her over to the Project and she came with a little briefcase and everything and it was just like, she was kind of striking, you know, and I liked her kind of crisp manner that she had, and her kind of ways of being. And so, she was at that meeting, and afterwards I told her about the task force, that we were going up into the Georgia Mountains and that we did this, like, three times a year and I wanted to invite her to come and that I would put her on the mailing list to make sure she got information, which I did.

And so, the first two quarters went by and she didn't come. And so, I just thought, Well, you know, she's just not going to come. I think I saw you at one meeting, that Campbell Soup meeting.

LYTHCOTT: Yes, right. I forgot all about that.

AVERY: Yeah, I spoke at that meeting. And before I knew anything, she said, "Hi, Byllye." So –

LYTHCOTT: Was Ginger there, the Ginger who introduced us?

AVERY: I know Martha was –

LYTHCOTT: Martha Hargraves.

AVERY: Martha Hargraves, yeah. She introduced us. And I saw you there and then the next thing I knew, you called and told me, you said, "I'm coming to the meeting." And I said, "Oh, OK." And so, you came up to — I remember you came to the task force meeting and one of the first things we did was play basketball. We had a basketball game, and so –

LYTHCOTT: (laughs) I'm competitive.

AVERY: It was my team against somebody else's team, but I had you and I had Nikki Finney and –

LYTHCOTT: Because we were older, they thought we were going to lose. (both talking)

VERY: [We were playing] pickup. They thought we were going to lose. I knew that Ngina played basketball. I knew that Nikki was a really great basketball player at Talladega. And then somebody whopped the socks off of them and they wanted us to let them win. And so, they went up to Ngina with that idea of letting them win. Ngina said, "You're talking to the wrong person. I don't let nobody win anything." They didn't know she was fiercely competitive. So we did that. And then, that night, I think, we sort of sat up talking to each other all night long.

LYTHCOTT: Mm-hm, till 4 o'clock in the morning.

VERY: Until 4 o'clock in the morning.

LYTHCOTT: There were four of us in three beds? Two beds. Four of us. I think I was in the bed with –

VERY: Jackie.

LYTHCOTT: You were in the bed with Ama. And I thought maybe they were a couple or something. And um, and so, we just talked until deep in the night. We just talked and talked and talked and talked.

VERY: And then the magic started happening.

LYTHCOTT: And it's been magical ever since.

ROSS: All right. And you all have been together how many years?

LYTHCOTT: Sixteen years.

ROSS: OK. So, how has the relationship helped each other grow?

VERY: Tremendously. It's been a lot of work.

LYTHCOTT: Well, I think I was on my way to saying something before and I got lost in what I was saying, but what I wanted to say was, my work was with women that were up and dressed and whatnot. But when I went to Carver Homes, there were women that I couldn't get to — they were so depressed. All they could do was get their children out of the house to go to school. So, what happened with Self-Help was that when Byllye and I came together, she had all these skills about Self-Help and helping women to feel better about themselves, which would make my work much more interesting — much more fruitful, not interesting, but much more fruitful, because the women were a little less depressed and then together, when we did that Chester work, that was kind of magical work. We also did the McDaniel-Glenn work.

EVERY: Yeah, we did. We did. And the Chester work was very interesting. I forgot about that.

ROSS: What is the Chester work?

EVERY: We worked in William Penn Housing Projects for about five years, and —

ROSS: In Chester, Pennsylvania?

EVERY: In Chester, Pennsylvania. We did Self-Help with women there for at least two of those years, continuously, every single week.

LYTHCOTT: Let me interrupt you just for a minute to say that Chester was in receivership.

EVERY: The town.

LYTHCOTT: The town. The school board was in receivership, and um, something else — was it the public housing was in receivership?

EVERY: Everything was in receivership.

LYTHCOTT: That's where Brent Staples lived. And so he writes about Chester a lot.

EVERY: And this was a town where all of the garbage from the Main Line was dumped in Chester.

ROSS: Yeah, it's a suburb of Philadelphia.

EVERY: The trucks would come in with burning — and you have the infant mortality rate was —

LYTHCOTT: The highest in the state.

EVERY: Environmental justice issues were through the roof. Zulene Mayfield was organizing as hard as she could and it was just really, a really, really pitiful situation. But we sat in a circle with five women and shared our stories and we shared every single thing about our lives and what we found is that our lives were really not that different, depending on our income level. It was sort of what we did with them —

LYTHCOTT: With different options, because we were of a different class.

EVERY: Yeah, we made different choices but we ended up with basically the same issues, the same problems — the same domestic violence, the same alcoholism.

LYTHCOTT: They were surprised, and we were surprised.

EVERY: It wasn't that we were raised in a bubble at all.

LYTHCOTT: No, no. We weren't raised –

EVERY: So that was really quite interesting, and we learned a lot of things. We learned things about when women don't have babies, or when women have only one baby, several of the women really wanted their daughters to get pregnant, that it was some sort of rite that gave them a reason for being. We watched that. We watched the lives of women whose men were in prison and how the men controlled the women from the prison, and telling them, Send me this, Buy this, You do this, You do that. It was an interesting experience.

LYTHCOTT: And what ended there was that they wanted the women's wellness center.

EVERY: They did.

LYTHCOTT: So, they were in the process of having their public housing stuff torn down and houses being built for them and they took a whole apartment. It was hard as hell to get into — those were the first public housing units that were renovated and it was as hard as hell to be assigned one of those, but they assigned one of them for a women's wellness center. And that was as a result of the work that we did with that.

ROSS: So, what's the status of that center? Have you been back?

EVERY: I don't know. We haven't been back. I don't know. But it also was connected to Swarthmore College. Swarthmore College also was involved in helping to make it all happen.

LYTHCOTT: That's where I worked. I was working at Swarthmore, so the first thing we did was to facilitate a relationship between Swarthmore and that public housing community, so that it would continue after we left.

ROSS: So, what kind of work do you do now, Ngina?

LYTHCOTT: Well, I just want to tell you one other thing –

ROSS: Please do.

LYTHCOTT: – where our lives — worked with each other, and that was is that, together, we've done some global work. I had worked two years for the ministry of health and social welfare in Tanzania and Byllye had done some work in Belize. And after we got together, we did some work in Brazil.

EVERY: I forgot the Belize work.

LYTHCOTT: Yeah, we did some work in Brazil, we did some work in South Africa, and we did some work in Nigeria. And again, I'm a person — because I work in the academy, I always think that I have to do some kind of paper research and I have to write my words down. Byllye has been a person that's helped me to try and not use paper and to — that I've got all this information in my head and in my experience and in my heart and that we can just let it out. And I don't know what I do for you. What do I do for you?

EVERY: Well, you do a lot for me. I mean, you know, first of all, there's a sense of confidence that you make me feel in what it is I do. There's a wonderful, tremendous support that is necessary and a validation for the thinking and the work is what you bring. And you always bring a willing spirit to try it. You might not — kind of be a little scared of it at first, you know, you might say no in the beginning, but no means no just for a few minutes. Give me a half a second to think about it.

ROSS: She's a classic Leo, and she's on the cusp.

EVERY: Right, in the right way, too. The first thing I say is always no.

LYTHCOTT: Even when I hire people at work, I say to them, Now when I tell you no, just give me a chance to get on the throne the next morning, and while I'm brushing my teeth, I will come back to you and say, You know, that idea you had about such and such? Let's talk about it again.

EVERY: Right, yeah. So you always — which I think is good. And you're real smart. And I like it that you're real smart.

ROSS: All right. Well, we're at the end of this tape. I want to thank you again for sharing your story with us. Is there anything else — you've got about two minutes left — that you'd like to share?

LYTHCOTT: I want to say that my first master's degree was from Smith College.

ROSS: All right. So you're a Smithie?

LYTHCOTT: In social work. (both voices) So I just feel so honored.

ROSS: Well, this is great. And again, I really appreciate your willingness to do this impromptu capturing of the story.

LYTHCOTT: Do we have any seconds left?

ROSS: Yes. You've got about another two minutes.

LYTHCOTT: I want to say something about our children.

ROSS: Please.

LYTHCOTT: I have a child and Byllye has two children, and I want to tell you one thing that's funny. And one is that we did so well telling our children about family planning growing up, that we barely have any grandchildren. So, we're looking forward to some changes there. And then the other thing is that I love how we have parented each other's children and how we've been there for each other's children, and how, to me, I think it's made a difference in all three of our children's lives.

EVERY: It has. Yes, it's been really wonderful having to share the parenting and not have to deal with all of the issues alone and to know that Sonja would just as soon tell Ngina everything and talk about it, and the way they came and took care of me when I was ill — to see Ngina and Sonja together, working together, [they] came in just like two little soldiers, you know, they were taking charge. And it was really wonderful to see them.

ROSS: What's your daughter's name again?

LYTHCOTT: Mawia. Like Maria with a W. Mawiyah Akua Bolanile Lythcott.

ROSS: And when was she born?

LYTHCOTT: June 1975.

ROSS: We're putting these things in the historical record, in case [some]one does research.

EVERY: She's getting ready to start working on her Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology at Loyola University next month.

ROSS: Thank you all very much. (Avery and Lythcott kiss.)

END TAPE 4

TAPE 5

ROSS: OK. This is tape five, our final tape of the interview with you for the Voices of Feminism Project. I want to start this tape by asking about your legacy. And I know legacy is one of those things they generally ask people when they're a lot older than you are, but you've left a very, very large footprint that people like me are going to be writing about for years. So how do you see the footprint that you've left?

EVERY: Oh, my goodness. Well, I have so much trouble with doing this kind of thing about myself. That is just a weakness of mine. I'm a little bit self-effacing, especially when it comes to thinking about me and what I've done. As I said earlier, I've never felt like I've really done enough.

I think that, though, one thing that I must say that stands out crystal clear to me was probably the most important thing I did was ask the question, What's the difference between black women's health issues and white women's health issues? Mostly because that placed an emphasis on looking at us based on our ethnicity, our culture, our subculture, the way we were reared, the things that go on in our life and how that affects our health, and the fact that we as black women have a different perspective.

I was really perplexed by, when white women got together, really the most of the things they only wanted to talk about were reproductive health issues. But when black women got together, and we started talking about health, we started talking about different things. We started talking about things that had to do with psychological well-being. We started talking about issues that were affecting our lives — violence, sexual abuse — and also, white women were talking about these things, but they were not priorities. And reproductive health — black women would use reproductive health services but they were not priorities.

And so, the whole thing that makes our health issues unique to us depends on looking at what are our specific priorities that have been influenced by who we are and our ethnicities. I think that bringing that out was crystal clear — and also showing that it was unique in bringing women together to organize around health, that it could be used. That when we speak, not just women in general, when we speak specific to different ethnic groups, they know that they are to be there.

I just participated in a retreat a couple of weekends ago and there were two Asian women there, and so I went over to speak with them, to thank them for coming to the meeting, because they were there. Most of the meeting were white women and there was a handful, I guess, ten or 15 black women, but only two Asian. And she said, "We really tried to get more women to come, more Asian women to come, but they wouldn't come." I said, "That's because they didn't know that there would be things specifically for them."

So, part of what would be really good, if we're real smart organizing, would be to include a whole section for different people so

that they would know that there's going to be one workshop, or one topic, that's going to be made specifically for them. So I think my legacy was bringing in ethnicity into health, the health of women's lives and the way we look at it.

ROSS: It seems to have also been striking about your work, the way you crossed classes, because a lot of work is not done across class. Tell me your intention about that.

EVERY: Well, I felt that — we look at the lives of people who live on lower incomes, who struggle on lower incomes, and they have a lot to overcome, and a lot of their perspectives are not articulated. What we hear articulated are really the voices of the middle class. That's what people continue to care about — the middle class. They seem to be the largest group. They seem to be the group that's sort of in the middle, and the safest group to talk about.

I chose to find out from women who lived on lower incomes what their perspectives were and what they were dealing with. And it was always my belief that if we raised the standard of women for people on lower incomes that we raise it for everybody else. If you raise it for middle class and upper class women, then, you know — so their lives change but nothing changes for the people on the bottom. And if we really want to make social change, if we really want to make economic change, if we want to have our society become responsive to everybody, we have to first deal with the lives of the people who struggle on the bottom. And that was always the perspective that I projected, and always said that not all black women are lower income, but I explained why it was important to look at the lives of these women.

ROSS: Well, what would you say to new women coming into social justice work, particularly reproductive justice work — lessons you've learned that you would pass on about how to sustain yourself in this world?

EVERY: Well, first of all, I think it's very important in reproductive justice work that we look at the opinions of many groups of people of color in this country. And I guess I've been made so much more aware of the diversity living in New York City. It has to be one of the most diverse places in the world.

ROSS: I'm going to stop. So, Byllye, what lessons learned would you pass on to younger women coming into the reproductive justice movement?

EVERY: I think it's very important for younger women to gather as many of the cross-cultural reproductive health experiences of women that they can, because they need to show that this is not just something — like, being in charge of your fertility, your reproduction, it's not just something for American women, European women, that across all the cultures from the beginning of time, this has been something that has been passed

from women to women, and that we need to know how do Asians handle it, how do Southeast Asians handle it, how Indians handle it, how everybody handles it, so we have in our psyches a legend of how women have handled reproduction throughout the ages.

And sometimes that will be what will give us our courage and give us our strength, because as we look back, we find out that these women ran into difficulties, that they ran into backlashes, that they ran into antis, but that they also ran into people who were grateful for the help that they were able to give them. That it is important to learn about the life of the grand midwives in the South, and how they took care of women who had babies, how they helped women who had had far too many babies and didn't want to have other babies, how they handled women who had been victims of rape, how they handled women who were victims of incest. How they worked with everything in a nonjudgmental way, that, I think it is really, um — there's a lesson in there for all of us.

So, I think, do your homework. Talk to other women. This is not necessarily something you get from books. Go up to women. Start the conversation. Have them talk to their relatives wherever they are, so that we can stop having us think that this is something unique at this time that's going on. It's been going on throughout the ages, and will continue.

ROSS: So, how have you sustained your energy and your activism over three decades?

AVERY: I'm turned on by people, and people give me energy. Whenever I go to speak, I like to stand right close up to where people are. I don't like being way back on the stage behind a podium. I want to be where I can feel your energy. So what has sustained me is the energy that I can get from people. Or just seeing people who, in the course of an afternoon, you sit and have a conversation, and watch their eyes light up as they get an insight into something that they could do. Or, just saying to people, You have a lot of resources around you. You have a lot of gifts that's just waiting for you to reach out, take your hand, and take one. Why not do that? And to see people just feel a sense of feeling empowered, that they can do something. Just sharing that.

As I said earlier, words are so important. And you just have to be careful what you say, because you never know whose ears they will fall on, and you never know the influence that they can have. So, you know, be lavish with your praises. Just — you see somebody doing something wonderful, don't hesitate to tell them, You're doing a good job. We all need that, you know. And I get that from people, and I love it, because people see me, they know I hug, I get a hug. They feel the warmth, they feel the love. It keeps me going. And I get tired. I get so tired.

And I think that we've been working on these issues for so long. But what I realize is that the things we work on have no due date. That they go on and on, and if most of us thought that they would have a due date

and get born and grow up and go out of our lives, but that's not the way this works. They continue. And so, you have to be able to go inside yourself and know that we're standing on the shoulders of many and that we push this ball just a little further up the hill, and that if we get it up there, there'll be some others who will come and push it further and further up the hill, and that keeps me going. It keeps me going.

ROSS: Well, Byllye, something that you said put me in mind of Audre Lorde's poem where she said, "We weren't meant to survive." So anything, basically, we do is triumphant.

EVERY: Absolutely, absolutely, absolutely.

ROSS: And some people would hear that and see that as pathos, where we see that as a spiritual grounding.

EVERY: Absolutely. It means that I can only go up! I have been to the depths of the bottom. And so, whatever we do pushes us up higher.

ROSS: And you had a lot in common with Audre.

EVERY: I am so glad that I asked the question about black women's health and I will be grateful until the day I die, that I pushed through whatever it took to get black women to come together and talk about our health. I don't think that I could do anything any greater than that. And as a matter of fact, I think that that's why I was put on earth to do. Mmmmm. That was what I was put on earth to do.

ROSS: Well, what do you think will be the legacy of the National Black Women's Health Project?

EVERY: That men and women's lives will change, that men and women's eyes will open that will never be closed again. That many women — that we know that we can stand together as sisters and that we can do it. And we know that we're real powerful, and we know that we are good, and we know that we are bright, and we know that we can be healthy, and we know that we can accomplish pretty much whatever we want, that there are very few jobs in this world that some black woman isn't holding. They might not be the president of the United States, but they're women presidents. The job of president of the United States, like [it's] the only country in the world. There are women presidents and there are women who could be presidents of the world. [If] there was a world president, there are women — and I'll wager you there are some black women who could also do anything.

So we no longer have to — you know how *Ebony* magazine has this section where you are looking, who's making advancements? We would look at it religiously when it first came out and see it, you know?

ROSS: Who were the few black people on TV?

VERY: Right, right, right. Now, we've got black women running Fortune 500 companies. We got black women doing everything. So we can do it. Black women being presidents of colleges. I think that that is something that is such a noble thing. I remember when Johnetta Cole was inaugurated at Spelman College and she brought in an honor guard of black women presidents. There were, like 12 black women college presidents. And I remember being in the civic center and how we *screamed* when they came in the room. We were *overcome* with excitement and joy. And whenever we see a black woman with wonderful accomplishments, we can identify with that, because we know that there's a part of us that's in her, and a part of her that's in us. Nothing can take that away.

ROSS: Well, I would argue that the National Women's Health Network changed the whole health consumer movement in this country.

VERY: Oh, absolutely. Oh, absolutely.

ROSS: Where people started being aggressive about taking charge of their own health care and wresting sole control from the medical establishment. In that same way, I would suggest that the National Black Women's Health Project married real personal empowerment to health care, because it wasn't enough to have the information. You have to feel empowered enough to act on that information.

VERY: Absolutely.

ROSS: Would you agree with that assessment?

VERY: Totally. No, no, no. It's absolutely true, because white women had a sense of entitlement that we didn't have, and so we had to give ourselves permission to be entitled, give ourselves and give each other permission to be entitled. And that's what made the marriage work, exactly what made it work.

ROSS: So, how do you see that manifesting itself now, 20 years later?

VERY: I see people — I see them all over in the breast cancer movement, working there. I see black women working over there being strong, asking questions. I see them being, um — like Ngina's part of the department of defense where they give away, like, some 12 or 15 million — 200 million dollars a year for breast cancer research. She is an empowered black woman there influencing how the department of defense makes grants. You know, that's very important. I watch many of them in the HIV/AIDS movement stepping up to the front, being in charge, doing the work. And then, you watch the person who goes to the

doctor for her own health care, who asks questions, who demands to know what's happening, who goes to the website and gets information and goes in as a knowledgeable consumer. That's how we see it. That's how it works.

ROSS: That's an incredible legacy. Are there any other things you'd like to share for the historical record? Anything we didn't cover you'd like to talk about?

AVERY: I'm just trying to think. We didn't talk about the work in Belize.

ROSS: Let's stop and talk about the work in Belize.

AVERY: The work in Belize was very interesting. We met Cynthia Ellis and I got invited by the National Women's Health — no, the Boston Women's Health Collective made it possible for me to go to Belize on my very first trip. And I went down. I remember meeting Cynthia Ellis and Diane Haylock. I remember meeting Cynthia Ellis and Diane Haylock, and Cynthia Ellis had the Belize Rural Women's Association, and she and I got really connected and so they came to the task force meetings, they came to some of the Black Women's Health Project meetings and a couple of years later, I went down to Belize. Me and Lillie Allen and Dazon went down. I called up this women's health center and asked them about Dazon coming down there, because I wanted to do gynecological self-help with the women. We were already doing our regular psychological Self-Help but I wanted to do gynecological self-help. So we went down there and Cynthia had this group of about 50 women there.

And one of the things that's so wonderful about Belize is that there are many ethnic groups there and they all just sort of live and work together so harmoniously. One of the first things is, they all know each other's language. So if you're speaking in Garifuna, or if you're speaking in Spanish or if you're speaking in English, they can communicate with you. So it was really wonderful. And also, the Garifuna women, and there were a group of them, who were just an incredible group — crystal-clear politics. And you would think these women didn't know much, that they were kind of rural and they were kind of backwoods and they didn't know a thing, but they had a real analysis of Belizian men, the relationship between Belizian men and Belizian women that would make Gloria Steinem stand on the table and shout. It was just pretty incredible.

So, we went down and I told Dazon that I wanted to teach them well-woman GYN, I mean, well-woman self-help, and Dazon brought in slides and did this wonderful slide show and taught them all about the slides. And then, we wanted them to look at their cervix. So what we did, is we set up two rooms. And we had nurse midwives who came to teach them how to look at their cervix. And we had one room, if you needed to be in a room alone with the midwife, you could go in there.

But if you were comfortable with being in a room with someone else, you could go in this next room and two people could work together. So that way we could do three people at a time.

So we did the conference attendees and we started noticing that [the line of] women [was] never getting done. Because they had, like, gone out and told women in the community we were doing it. They said that other women who [weren't] a part of the conference were coming because they wanted to see theirs. So, pretty soon, we were doing almost everybody who was in this little town, St. Ignacio. We were, like, we had done almost the whole town. And the women sat around and they thanked us, and they said, Oh, I see why my husband loves me so. I am so beautiful. And it was just another whole way to have a wonderful feeling about who you are.

So we did that. We did several workshops in all. And then, I had never been to Guatemala, and Belize is, like, right next door to Guatemala, so I said to Cynthia, "I want to go to Guatemala. Can you arrange it? I can pay if we can get somebody to take us over to Guatemala." And this is to show you the kind of thinking that our sisters do — sisters of the South. Wonderful thinking. She hired a bus that carried all of us from the conference to Guatemala, because there were women who had been living in Belize all their lives and had never been to Guatemala.

And so, when we got to the border, because there was a little friction between Belize and Guatemala at that time, so Cynthia told us, "Everybody here is from Belize." You're all from — and she told us what towns we were from. So when the guy came on the bus to see who was in the bus and where the people were from, she pointed, She's from (unclear), she's from Belize City, she's from so-and-so, so we all blended in with everybody and we all went to Belize. But she took everybody there. And when we came back, the women were so grateful because they had never thought that they would get to Guatemala. And we're talking about 20-some-odd miles. We were not riding for hours in the hot sun. It was, like, 20-some-odd miles, but she knew that they hadn't been there. So it was just some wonderful thinking that went on.

And I was just amazed, because that was the first time that we attempted to do well-woman self-help cross-culture. We had always done the talking Self-Help, but not the other. But you know what? With the supportive environment, with the right setup and the right people doing things, you know, there are not many barriers that you can't cross.

ROSS:

I actually want to ask you more of a political question. With all the uproar going on with the Supreme Court appointments now and we certainly are at grave risk of getting a replacement for Sandra Day O'Connor who's going to be opposed to abortion, I've often thought that it's time to take abortion technology back into our own hands.

AVERY: Absolutely.

ROSS: Because whether it's legal or not, women are still going to need them and we still have to make them safe. How can your past work contribute more to this topic further than I can see now?

EVERY: I think that there needs to be an active recruitment of people who make a commitment, who would learn how to do abortions and continue to do them underground. I have always said that we needed to have a movement above the ground and a movement underground. I am pleased that several medical students have continued their Medical Students for Reproductive Choice. Some of them might be interested. But we do need to have it in the hands of women. And certainly some of this work can be done by young people. The Jane Collective wasn't only made up of doctors, you know what I'm saying? And it's not that we have to have doctors doing all these things.

Certainly we don't want to compromise their life situations whereby the people need to be trained, but we need to have in place training programs, training women how to do abortions, and how to be safe themselves while doing them, because people are going to need help. People are not going to have money to go to Europe or go to Canada, or even to go to the states where it is going to be legal. That's not going to be illegal all over our country. I don't think that's going to happen. But it will be a problem — like the woman I met in Gainesville who had no money to get to New York, and you go back to those days — it's still going to be needed. Still going to be needed.

And I think that the public needs to get prepared for finding babies in trash cans, for finding babies in hotel rooms, or finding people killing themselves from self-induced abortion, that we have to go back to that way of living.

ROSS: Why do you —

EVERY: I have a problem with how [some people say], Now, abortion is the taking of a potential life. But what is war? War is the taking of a life. And if all these people who claim they are pro-life, when we see young black — young people of color who go into the army because they want an education, because they want a job, become bullet catchers in a war, or if they are sent off to fight a war ill-prepared, without the proper equipment, you tell me, where's the morality in that? And as long as we can justify killing or wars, I think women can justify being in charge of their reproduction.

ROSS: I don't hear much discussion in what's called the pro-choice movement about extra-legal alternatives. It's like, they're so preoccupied, rightly so, with keeping abortion legal, they've always neglected keeping it accessible, and keeping it affordable. But I don't think they should set the tone for what is needed to save women's lives, is needed for people to have widespread knowledge of the technology, to have so many

people trained on how to do it that it would be impossible to fill the jails with all of us.

AVERY: Right, right. And I think that we need — I think that that is another — we don't need these people doing that. We don't want them doing it, because they can't do it. There needs to be a group of people who are radical enough in their thinking, who are clear in their thinking, who will take this on and who are serious about it, and who know what they're doing, know how to organize it and set this up, and really start training an army of people to do this work.

ROSS: So, it sounds like it's time for a new Gainesville Women's Health Center movement.

AVERY: Yeah, it is. It really is time for a whole new movement — at least a shift into another gear. We're a little late on it. It should've started quite some time ago.

ROSS: We're not even having the conversations, that I can find.

AVERY: I haven't heard it. But there needs to be a conversation.

ROSS: But women will die if we don't.

AVERY: Oh, absolutely.

ROSS: We know that. There already are.

AVERY: Absolutely.

ROSS: OK. Because we're at the end of the interview, I need to ask you some basic questions. You will be given a copy of this interview. Do you prefer it on DVD or VHS?

AVERY: I'd like DVD.

ROSS: OK. You will also be given a copy of the transcript, which we ask you to mark up and send back to Smith College. And would you consider donating, at some point, your papers, your archival materials to Smith College?

AVERY: I'd have to see if I made a commitment to donate to the Atlanta Library, I think.

ROSS: The Auburn Avenue Research Center?

VERY: No, not the Auburn Avenue. That was before it was there. It was the downtown library. They came and got a lot of stuff from the Black Women's Health Project many years ago.

ROSS: We never knew that.

VERY: Many years ago. They came and got all the stuff and it's in archives there. And I don't know whether that was just them. I do have the film — *On Becoming a Woman* is archived at Indiana University, and I would certainly consider it.

ROSS: One of the beautiful aspects of the resources that Smith College can bring to bear is that your stuff will be exquisitely preserved and handled. Unfortunately, a lot of places that want to be quality archives don't have the millions of dollars it takes. It is not unheard of for them to spend a quarter of a million dollars per person archiving their stuff. Unfortunately, it takes an institution with the resources to treat it like the treasures that it is. I shudder, unfortunately, to think of what's happening at Spelman College, because they're so under-resourced, yet a lot of black women are sending them their papers.

VERY: Yeah. I'm glad that Smith College is doing this. This is really wonderful, and I'm glad that you're joining as a part of the team.

ROSS: I am enjoying it, too. So, on behalf of the Sophia Smith Collection, Joyce Follet, Sherrill Redmon and the team that brought us together, I really, really appreciate you spending these last two days with me. I know getting two days out of your schedule, particularly on the day before you're getting married, (laughter) was a tremendous sacrifice and we really appreciate it.

VERY: Thank you. It's been wonderful.

ROSS: Thank you again.

30:00

END OF INTERVIEW

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