

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

LADORIS PAYNE

Interviewed by

MARTHA ACKELSBURG

April 10 and 11, 2005
Northampton, Massachusetts

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Narrator

LaDoris Payne (b. 1948) was born and raised in St. Louis, Missouri, and has spent much of her life there. She is currently director of the Imani Family Center, which was established in 1993 and is located in a former Ursuline convent. She also directs WomanSpirit in St. Louis, an organization formed in 1984 to provide a place for women to gather, talk, and support one another in their struggles against poverty. WomanSpirit has received funding from a variety of organizations and foundations that have enabled it to develop programs such as Enterprising Women, a microenterprise training program; the Imani Business Incubator and Technology Center; and the House of David shelter, a transitional home for homeless disabled veterans. Payne has been affiliated with the National Congress of Neighborhood Women (NCNW) and with GROOTS (Grassroots Organizations Operating Together in Sisterhood) since the early 1990s. She served as a delegate to the United Nations 4th World Conference on Women in 1995 in Beijing, to the UN Conference on Sustainable Environments in 1996; and to the UN/Economic Commission for Europe preparatory meeting on the 2000 review of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action. In 1994, on the 10th anniversary of WomanSpirit, Inc., the mayor of St. Louis declared WomanSpirit Day in St. Louis, and LaDoris was also named the Homeless Service Provider of the Year for her work in opening the House of David shelter.

Interviewer

Martha Ackelsberg (b. 1946) is Professor of Government and Women's Studies at Smith College. She writes and teaches about social movements, women's activism, and political theory, and has been active in various aspects of the women's movement since the 1970s.

Abstract

The interview provides a wealth of information on LaDoris Payne's growing up in segregated St. Louis, MO, the relationships within and among her family, her struggles with illness and depression, and, ultimately, her coming into her own as an activist and organizer. It is rich in discussion of both the strengths of the black community in St. Louis before *Brown v. Board of Education* and the personal costs to those children who, like LaDoris, were among the first to go to integrated schools. The oral history gives a sense of her own personal trajectory as an activist, of the ways she was able to use government programs (e.g. War on Poverty programs) to pull herself out of poverty; and, most dramatically, of the vision and energy that have gone into the establishment of WomanSpirit, the Imani Family Center, and David's House. There is also considerable information about her engagement with the National Congress of Neighborhood Women and GROOTS, as well as with UN-related and other international organizations whose meetings she has attended. (Transcript 73 pp.)

Restrictions

None

Format

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

Transcript

Audited for accuracy by Martha Ackelsberg, August 2005. Edited for clarity by Revan Schendler, January 2006. Reviewed by Martha Ackelsberg and LaDoris Payne, February 2007.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video recording

Bibliography: Payne, LaDoris. Interview by Martha Ackelsberg. Video recording, April 10-11, 2005. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote example:** LaDoris Payne interview by Martha Ackelsberg, video recording, April 10, 2005, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, tape 3.

Transcript

Bibliography: Payne, LaDoris. Interview by Martha Ackelsberg. Transcript of video recording, April 10-11, 2005. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote example:** LaDoris Payne, interview by Martha Ackelsberg, transcript of video recording, April 10, 2005, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, pp. 23–24.

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Transcript of interview conducted APRIL 10, 2005, with:

LADORIS PAYNE
at: Smith College
by: MARTHA ACKELSBURG

ACKELSBURG: OK. We're going to do this kind of chronologically, so if you could tell me a little bit about your childhood, your family background, your early years, the people who raised you.

PAYNE: I was born in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1948. My mother was a teenaged single parent. My parents married shortly after I was born, and I grew up in the household with my grandparents and my mother and my father from time to time. My father had a lot of problems, and my mother and father were divorced in 1957. I was about nine years old. But mostly, I grew up in the household with my grandparents, who were just extremely loving. And my grandmother was probably the most significant person in my life till now, really. My mother's nickname was Tillie, so I was Tillie's baby. And so, I was kind of everybody's baby in the household.

Originally, when I was born, we lived in a segregated neighborhood that was a historical black neighborhood. It was the home for Sumner High School, which is the oldest black high school west of the Mississippi, and my grandmother, mother, uncle, and I all went to Sumner High School. It's also the high school where Arthur Ashe went and Grace Bumbrey, and a lot of people, because people used to travel from other parts of the country to attend high school at Sumner, particularly from the South and places where there weren't black high schools.

And, uh, it was on a kind of a quad. There was Sumner High School, there was Simmons Elementary School, there was Turner Middle School, and then there was Harris-Stowe State Teacher's College, which was an African American teacher's college. But there was also Homer Phillips Hospital there, and it was built during the Depression and it was a large African American hospital, and it had a school of nursing, a pharmacy school, and medical students came from all over the world — people of color from Cuba, from the Dominican Republic, from South America. So, in a sense, it was quite cosmopolitan until integration, and people were able to go and practice in other places. And it was a home for a number of black churches in the community.

Until 1948, there was a housing restriction law, and black people could only live east of a street called Taylor, and in 1948, when the law was passed, my grandparents bought a large house west of Taylor. So we moved, oh, maybe two blocks away from the area that we'd lived in. We were still able to walk down there, but I attended a different elementary school. When I was growing up, of course, because the area had been very recently desegregated, it was an integrated neighborhood but it quickly changed, as black people moved in, particularly since there was a black area, and the Ville, which was the name of the area where we originally lived, was the home of a lot of black professionals. So the doctors and lawyers and dentists and accountants all lived next door to domestic workers and people who worked for the railroad — you know, it was a very, very tight-knit community.

Around the time that we moved, in '48, when I was born — we moved when I was nine months old so we could have a big yard — and uh, around that time, people began to move out of the Ville because we were no longer legally restricted to certain streets and certain areas. And so, the neighborhood began to change. But it was a good place to live when I was growing up. I attended a school that by the time I got there, six years after integration, was primarily African American. So, I had African American teachers. My favorite teacher was Grace Centers, who was my first grade teacher, and I stayed in touch with her until she died.

And so it was a pretty good life, really, you know. The cliché that we were poor but didn't know it, I guess, applies. I'm not even really sure how poor we were. There wasn't a lot of evidence around us, particularly because I was raised mostly by my grandparents, so they had already raised a set of children and were kind of further along in life than many of the kids who had young parents, or certainly struggling single parents. There were three, at least three, adults in the household, and it was a big house. I just sold it last August, and it was a big house.

And during that time, other families lived with us. When I was a little bitty girl, there was a lawyer and his family that lived in the bedrooms on the second floor. So nobody had much money, you know. My grandfather worked for the MKT Railroad. He was a freight handler.

ACKELSBURG: Is that Missouri-Kansas —

PAYNE: Texas, yeah. And my grandmother was a maid. She worked in hotels, which was slightly different than being a domestic worker in the household. It was, you know, more like a real job. She belonged to the union. She was a shop steward, and she was a housekeeper. The person who was the manager of the hotel at that time was an alcoholic, and so basically he slept a lot and was drunk a lot, and my grandmother did most of the work of managing the hotel. It was what they called the second house in town. The first house was the Chase Park Plaza, which

was on the next corner. And the Fairmont was also a relatively well-known hotel.

So, my grandmother had a lot of experiences, because when basketball players or entertainers came to town, they either stayed at the Chase or the Fairmont, so she met a lot of people. And she was a great organizer. She practically ran our church, too, because it was a very, very, very small church — one room, coal stove. And I think my grandmother almost single-handedly kept that church open for a number of years with her enterprises. She baked cakes. She would sell World's Finest Chocolate Candy on the street corners on the way to work. She solicited donations from even the wine-heads. They would give her a quarter to put into church.

ACKELSBURG: Did she make the candy?

PAYNE: No, she bought it. Uh-huh. She was an entrepreneur. She bought it. She held rummage sales. She just did everything. She had a friend whose name was Esther Bloch and they would go to auctions together and then Mrs. Bloch would buy the stuff and my grandmother would sell it. She also had friends, primarily Jewish ladies, who worked in department stores and things and they would buy clothes and my grandmother would resell them. So, I remember when Mrs. Bloch died, we went to her house to visit with her family, and her son Arnold, who was a psychologist, introduced my grandmother as his mother's business partner. (laughs) But she was really kind of a caretaker and caregiver for Mrs. Bloch.

And in the hotel — all of these things had something to do with where I am now — I'd go to work with her on Saturdays, often. I'd either go hunting and fishing with my grandfather or I'd go to work with my grandmother on Saturday, because there was no one for me to stay with. And so, when I went hunting and fishing with my grandfather, we did just that. We caught fish and shot rabbits and squirrels. When I went to work with my grandmother, the ladies who worked in the hotel would kind of take me with them.

My grandmother and my mother both loved clothes, and across the street from the hotel there was Saks and Montaldo's. So we knew the people who worked behind the house and all of the stores. My godfather was the doorman at Saks, and my grandmother's friend, Uncle Johnny, was a doorman at Montaldo's, and her friend Suzy worked in the Woman's Exchange. And so they bought me lovely, lovely, lovely clothes, because the people would set them aside when they came in the store. Or when they were at their deepest discount, they would buy them with their store discount. And so, it was a kind of interesting way to grow up.

So that even though we were in the midst of segregation, I grew up in the hands of these older, mostly Jewish ladies, and they would take me to the thea[ter] — even though things were segregated, if I was with them, I don't think the people at the door knew quite what to say to an

older Jewish lady and her little black girl (laughs) coming to the theater, or the museum, or whatever.

So I had all of these experiences that were cross-cultural, that I'm still repeating — you know, I'm still meeting the same kinds of ladies that I met when I was a little girl. And even though I grew up in a segregated community, I guess because I had these early childhood experiences with people, I never felt totally segregated. And I actually didn't think it was unusual. I didn't really realize that most children weren't doing that on Saturday.

And when I was about in the second grade — first I skipped a grade, I skipped the second half of second grade and the first half of the third grade. And then when I was about in the fourth grade, they came up with the notion of having gifted classes, and so they tested all the children in the public schools. This is the craziest thing — they wrote your IQ up on the board (laughs) for the semester. They never took it down. And the children with the two highest IQs in each school were selected to begin a gifted program at another school. That really didn't work for me. I think I developed a –

ACKELSBURG: You were one of the ones that was taken out?

PAYNE: Yeah, I was one of the ones that was taken out. I asked — it was so horrible. I asked my grandmother later on, “Why did they send me away?” And she said, “Well, the psychologist came from the Board of Education and he had a meeting” — and he explained that I was really smart and the best thing to do would be to put me in a school where I could reach my potential, and that I was strong and I was smart and I had the best chance of surviving. Unfortunately, I didn't. (laughs)

The schools were just being desegregated and the school that I was sent to, the gifted school, was one of the kind of plums, both for teachers and parents. And integration was something they didn't want. So they did a number of things like close the lunchroom so the children couldn't eat together, and it was a very, very difficult experience. By the time I was in the seventh grade, I actually think I had a nervous breakdown and nobody noticed it, because there wasn't any — I never heard of childhood depression until I was grown. And I just basically stopped talking, but nobody seemed to notice.

And I returned to my original school. But by that time, I had been away for a number of years, and so the children who had been my close friends had grown up and I was kind of on the outside of things when I returned. People kept asking me to say something in French, (laughs) which I knew about seven words altogether after three or four years. But I went on back to the regular school that was across the street and in my neighborhood, and finished elementary school there and went down the street to Sumner.

ACKELSBURG: What were the names of your grandparents, by the way?

PAYNE: Mattie and Moses Moore. But my grandfather preferred his middle name, so it was Mattie and Al. Mattie and Al. But Moses Moore. Moses Albert Moore. My grandfather and grandmother were two extremely different people and different from everybody else, both of them were. My grandmother was very religious — like part of the whole thing was getting dragged to church every Sunday, all day long.

And my mother was an eternal teenager. She only got to be about 19 years old. (laughs) She got stuck there, and I think she eventually went up to about 24 after my grandmother died, but she was 60 by then. And she was great. She had me for like a doll, so she would — she liked to dress me and comb my hair. And she was extreme about it, so that in the morning — she worked at night at a place called Moulton's. It was a cafeteria, like a diner, and it was where the Jewish gamblers hung out after the racetrack and everything. So she made a lot of money in tips. She'd make more money in tips in one night than most people made in a week. And she spent it like that. So in the mornings when I would go to school, she would dress me and everything, and then when I would come home for lunch, she would've been downtown and bought new clothes, and put those on me, and recomb my hair and new ribbons and everything, and send me back in the afternoons.

And she was off on Wednesdays, so she often didn't take me to school on Wednesday afternoons. We would go out and have lunch, like, at little restaurants in the neighborhood. Everything was still pretty segregated, the theaters and stuff, but on Wednesday afternoon it was integrated. Well, all the black people were at work or at school, so it wasn't really a big deal. But my mother took full advantage of that. So we would go to the movies, we'd go to the theater. She loved entertainment, any kind of entertainment — dog show, museum, anything. So we went to all children's entertainment and bought a monkey and a balloon. She loved entertainment until the end.

And so, my mother worked in the evenings, so in the evenings, I was mostly with my grandmother and grandfather.

ACKELSBURG: Now you said your grandmother and grandfather were different from other people. How were they different?

PAYNE: My grandfather was pretty much his own person entirely. He insisted that he was descended from Ethiopian princes and that he was the descendent of a royal family in Ethiopia. Nobody ever paid much attention to him, but he never wavered on that. His mother had been a Pentecostal preacher, so he was raised in a household of preachers. But he was just funny. And my mother and uncle were actually his stepchildren, so I was the first baby he ever had. He really, really, really liked me. I was just his very favorite thing.

So, he was an avid outdoorsman and he was always starting businesses. One time he was going to train boxers, so he built a boxing ring in the backyard. He knew nothing about it, nothing about it. One time he had a pink truck with Have Gun, Will Travel on the side. One

time he bought a school bus and decided that he was going to sell vegetables out of it, and every time we went someplace, we had to ride in the school bus.

He never set foot in a church in my life, but he read the Bible constantly. My grandmother went to church all the time, but she didn't know the Bible like he did, so that was a constant thing where he would tell her, "Well, thus sayeth the Lord."

And he loved dogs, so we always also had a bunch of dogs that he was training as hunting dogs. They didn't do anything. They were just hounds, but he'd train them as hunting dogs and other kinds of things. So he had all kinds of hobbies, friends of his own that were interesting.

My grandmother was really the disciplinarian. I never remember him disciplining me in any way. He told funny stories and jokes. He taught me how to play cards, Tonk, which my grandmother hated because she didn't really allow cards in the house, so we would sit out in the back yard (laughs) and play Koon Can and Tonk. And he was just — he was different from everybody.

He used to fix cars. He could fix everything. Once when I was a little girl in the '50s, a store went out of business down the street. And he went and got the central air conditioning unit from the store and installed it in our house. So we were the only people with air conditioning. And he could fix anything. He fixed cars. He would go to auctions and buy cars and then he would resell them to people in the neighborhood after he repaired them. He always had a lot of little businesses that he ran, including [at] one point, he decided he was going to be a numbers runner or something. So he did that all the time, and for a while.

He was kind of like me, I guess. I have different projects. For a while I'm just gung-ho about them, that's all I do, and then later on, you'll ask me about it and I'll say, Oh, I haven't done that in years. So he was kind of that kind of person. He pursued his interests strongly. Oh, one time he decided he was going to teach himself to play the guitar and become a blues singer, and at night after we went to bed, he would play Jimmy Reed records and plunk on the guitar — boing, boing. He never did. And my grandmother would get up [and say], Al, Al, cut that out. I got to go to work in the morning. (laughs) So he did all kinds of things. He was really, really funny. He was really, really funny.

And he had a group of friends who worked on the railroad with him. On Friday nights they would come over, because we had a television before most people had television. They would watch the television, they would watch the fights, Friday night fights, and so — he was just busy. He was just busy, yeah, he always was.

When I was a very little girl, my grandmother's sister died, and she had a son whose name was Julius, and he was a baby, he was six weeks old, and my grandmother went and got Julius and brought him to keep during the funeral, and she never took him back, so Julius stayed with us until he was 15, 16 years old, and he started going to jail, and he spent most of his life in jail. He's in there now and he won't be eligible for

parole until he's 64. He was tried as a habitual criminal. He never committed violent crimes or anything. He was simply the worst thief I've ever seen, so every time he went to steal something, he would get caught. So, he was tried eventually as a habitual criminal because he was a nuisance to the court, and so he's in jail now.

I didn't have other brothers and sisters. My mother remarried about 1959 and my stepfather has a daughter who is my age, although she lived with her grandparents, too. So we weren't really close. We didn't live together, but she was my stepsister and I stayed in touch with her. I still talk to her.

And my mother had another child when I graduated from high school. My sister Lisa was born after I was out of high school, and so I'm 17 years older than she is. And my own son was born a couple of years later. So she's just about two years older than my son. And so, I had Lisa and Derrick together all the time, like two children. We kind of shared taking care of children in my family, so, you know, somebody would have both of them and somebody else would have both of them. My mother would have them both or I would have them both, you know. They kind of stayed together like brother and sister.

ACKELSBURG: So was Julius kind of like your brother?

PAYNE: Julius was like my brother. We looked a lot alike, in fact. People always thought he was my brother. So, there were always two children, a boy and a girl. In the '30s, it was Tillie and Joe, my uncle and mother. Then in the '50s, it was Doris and Julius, and then in the '70s, it was Lisa and Derrick. So there were always two kids, a boy and a girl. And, um, let's see. What else did you ask me?

ACKELSBURG: Well, you said both your grandparents were special.

PAYNE: Oh, my grandmother. My grandmother was very, very special. One of the things that we say all the time now is my grandmother didn't take any foolishness. She was just not for foolishness. She didn't entertain it, she didn't allow it, you know. So if somebody was doing something crazy, my grandmother wasn't the person to go to. She was extremely disciplined. When she died — she died in '93 — when she died, I found her book where she kept a record of the money she spent, and if it was five cents for a newspaper, she wrote it down. She kept track of every dime. She was an excellent manager. Nobody else was. And in a way, I guess she wasn't, either, but it seemed like it was because she managed to juggle all the stuff.

And as I'm running the Center now with very little money and very little resources, I call on her spirit on a daily, daily basis, because she knew how to switch things around and she knew how to make big meals out of very little and we have to do that all the time with our shopping and budgeting because we have very, very little money. And my grandmother was good at that.

My grandmother was also a traveler, which was interesting for women of her income status and class. My grandmother never made over eight dollars a day, and she traveled all over. She'd go on cruises in the summer. She went to all 50 states, Hawaii, Barbados, the Bahamas, Haiti. She never went to Europe, but she traveled the whole western hemisphere with friends of hers who were in a travel club. So part of her hustling all year with the garage sales and the cake baking and everything was to save money for her trip. Her trip was a monumental occasion every year because, first, nobody else knew anybody who went on a month-long vacation. And I think that because she saw the people traveling and coming to the hotel and that just seemed like where she wanted to be when she grew up. So by the time she was 50, she'd traveled a lot.

And she loved lovely things, and so somehow, whether it was buying them secondhand or getting them discounted from the ladies who worked at the store, she bought many beautiful things. I still use and enjoy many of the things that she purchased. She liked a lovely house. And I think I might have told you this: she worked in a hotel. So our house looked like the lobby of a hotel, because that was her idea of what was lovely — and so, the linens and towels and all kinds of household things, pots and pans. She liked a lot of it and she liked the very best. And how she accomplished that — when I look back at that stuff now — how on earth did this woman accumulate all of this stuff? I can barely — my sister and I tried to split the stuff up after my mother and my grandmother died, and we could barely contain it. I live in about a 13-room house and I have a convent next door, and I filled both places up with my grandmother's things.

But there are other things she didn't care very much for at all. She didn't drink. I never heard her curse. She didn't allow card playing. She was a Baptist and a very staunch Baptist, and a supporter of her church. And she was very kind to people. I remember once there was a lady who lived on the corner and she had a drinking problem. And she came to our house and knocked on the door once and said that her daughter had the opportunity to go away to camp but she had to take towels and she didn't have any towels. And my grandmother had these very expensive towels she'd bought for something. She just bought stuff. And she went and got those towels and took them and gave them to the lady so the girl could go to camp. And I asked her, I said, "Why did you give her those brand-new, fancy towels?" And she said, "Whenever anybody asks you for anything, give them your best. Give people what you would use yourself. Don't ever give anybody things that you wouldn't use or wouldn't want."

And so, in my own work, which I describe as ministry, I remember that, and I always offer the best to people who come in, the best that we have. Even with food, she was that way. You prepared well for guests, and so I consider the people who come in guests. And we remember that. In the beginning, Sister Mary Jude was my partner — and nuns are different, you know, they are really frugal. And she'd say, "Why are

you fixing all this food and everything?" I said, "Because the people may want it, and if they don't want it, they can take it home, whatever." So in the beginning, we used to have tension over why I'd want to give people the very best. But it's my grandmother.

Also, managing money. There are lots of responsibilities. And managing the property. My grandmother was a property manager, and observing her at work — I didn't just hear about her work, I went to work with her. And she managed a staff of about 20 people, and she was a union steward, so she was very interested in benefits and insurance and those sorts of things. She fought very hard for those things for hotel workers. She was in AFL-CIO.

So she was unusual for her times because of the traveling, the level of professional responsibility she had, her leadership in raising money for the church, because she had very little money of her own — and her independence from my grandfather. They were certainly married, but Moses didn't tell Mattie anything. Mattie did just what she wanted to do each and every day of my life. (laughs)

ACKELSBURG: Now, what kind of message did you get as a girl growing up about what it was going to be? What you should expect in your life, or were you treated differently from Julius?

PAYNE: No. They treated us the same. But Julius was different from me, so Julius ended up getting different treatment because he would do different things. You were never, ever able to tell Julius anything, even when he was six years old. My grandmother would go to work and she would tell us to stay in the yard and two minutes after she'd left, Julius would be over the fence. And I'd be worried all day, is he going to come back or whatever.

But one of the women in our group, one of our circles, was talking about playing house when she was a little girl, and I said, "What did you do?" She said, "Well, we would sweep the floor and we would cook dinner, and pretend. And we would get dinner ready for the daddy when he came home from work." I said, "Oh, I never played that game." She said, "What did you do?" I said, "Well, I played house, and I even had a little stove and refrigerator and all of those things, but I never used them when I played." They just must have thought I'd like it so they bought it. I said, "But I had a hundred dolls and I would have tea parties with my dolls all the time. And we would dress up and we would have tea." That was my notion of playing house. And she looked at me and she said, "You're still doing the same damn thing. (laughs) All you do is have tea parties with these women from all over all the time."

And my hundred dolls were because the women in the hotel traveled to Europe and other places, and whenever they traveled, they would bring me back a doll from the country they'd been to. So my dolls were from all over the world. So I'd have a Japanese doll and a Laplander, and I don't know, sitting at the table. And she said, "And you're still getting people from all over the world to come to your tea parties."

So, I had no notion, or no desire, to ever be married. My mother was unhappily married twice, and she never seemed to pay much attention to that. My mother liked to date, which she did until she was about 65 years old. And my grandmother prided herself on her independence and on having her own money. One thing my grandfather used to say sometimes when he was angry was, "I don't even know how much money you make, I don't know what you do with your money." And she'd say, "It's none of your business, Moses."

So, I developed this notion that you could be independent, you could have your own money, you could manage it, you could travel. You could work, you know — I've been married several times but I never really had the desire to share decision-making with another person. And so, even when I was married, I pretty much operated like Mattie. And I called my grandfather and grandmother Mattie and Al, and I called my mother Tillie.

And so, uh, you know, I didn't have a notion, even though I lived in a house that had a male and a female, I never had the notion that the male was in charge, because my grandfather wasn't in charge of anybody in that house but him. And he was completely in charge of him. Nobody controlled him either. So, in the house, everybody could do anything, you could do anything you wanted as long as you didn't harm yourself or another person.

And we had really strict rules. In fact, I have my grandmother's rules posted in my kitchen. But basically, we were to be kind to one another — and my sister and I were talking about this recently. Because there was enough, we didn't have an abun[dance] — you know, we didn't have — but there was always enough. We never really had to share. So everybody had their own ball or their doll, or their own cupcake, you know, or whatever. And so, I didn't get the notion, I never did get the notion that everything you get you had to look to see if the person next to you had one. There was enough. And I've been fortunate throughout my life that one way or another, there was enough.

My grandmother was also a person of great faith, great faith. So she never doubted that God would provide. And we were taught that and it was taught to us in a really, really, really deep way, so that I never questioned that. Between my grandmother and my grandfather, my grandmother with church, and my grandfather with his Bible reading, I developed a great love for the Bible. I'm not a really regular churchgoer now. I attend whenever the people send for me. They send for me often to help with different things. And I'll attend from time to time. There was a time when I was younger that I went almost every day, and I can be driving down the street and see some people going into church and park my car and go on in with them.

So it's like I had these two extremes, this woman who went all the time, every day, and this man who didn't go at all. And both of them seem to be all right with God. So I didn't think that it took going to be OK, you know, nor did I think you had to be angry and stay away. My grandfather wasn't angry, he just wasn't going. And he had a distrust of

preachers. He thought that they took money from poor people, and so I heard both sides of that growing up. My grandmother didn't pay him any attention at all. She went on and did whatever she was going to do and had the preacher for dinner if she felt like it.

My grandmother was also — she had a lot of kind of rules about being kind to others, being gracious, being generous. Generosity was an important trait for her. She was beautifully dressed, and I loved that about her. I loved the smell of White Shoulders when she had it on. I hate the smell of it unless she had it on, but I loved the smell of White Shoulders. And this is a crazy thing. She had a chocolate-covered girdle. And I thought that was the most wonderful thing. (laughs) She'd wear it on Sundays. I'd get it out of the drawer for her and — yeah, they were very different.

My grandmother lived until 1993 and she died right before we opened the Center. But my mother was there when we opened the Center, and she was on our first board. Our first circle was her friends, a wise women's circle. And she wanted them to come and to see what we were doing, so our first circle was a senior circle of women. And she invited the first few and then others came over the years.

And she loved to cook. When my grandmother was alive, my grandmother was an excellent cook. We didn't get a chance to cook much because my grandmother didn't want anybody messing up her food, so she did most of the cooking. I had never cooked anything except teacakes and biscuits when I was married. The first time I started cooking was, you know, after I got married, but I never had responsibility for preparing food or anything.

My grandmother also believed in age-appropriate tasks for children. Some of my friends say that they were very overworked as children, but we had things to do — like she collected whatnots, so it'd be my job to do something like wash the whatnots, or things like that.

But interestingly enough, I guess because she supervised people doing work at work, she always had a household helper. When I was in the hotel today, I saw the houseman pushing the linen in the cart. It's just the same as 50 years ago. And she always kept a houseman at home, someone to help with heavy tasks and things, and I still have a houseman, you know, to help me. Kenneth is his name. I think that I found it easier, even as a poor person, to employ help and ask for assistance because I saw my grandmother do that. She didn't do everything. She supervised everything, but she didn't do all the tasks at our house.

And I find now, I use household helpers a lot because we've got like 37 rooms and nine bathrooms, so obviously I can't manage it by myself. In the beginning, the women wanted to do all of the work themselves. As we've aged over the last 12 years — we were already getting kind of long in the tooth when we started — it's been easier for them to give up trying to mop the floors and wash the windows and all of that. But I doubt it they would have done it if I hadn't been a leader. And what I felt it was most important to do was the thinking and to do the work of

organizing and holding the conversations and the support groups. And if all everybody did was scrub and wash and clean, we would've just been in a big house doing that instead of our own individual houses. So, we have work days, but following my grandmother's example, I use help whenever I can, which is a bit different from the people who are around me.

Um, let's see what else was different. We used to go to Mississippi in the summertimes. My grandmother was born in Aberdeen, Mississippi, and when my grandfather was away in World War I, my grandmother's mother, Mama, decided that she was going to move to St. Louis where she had cousins. And she took my grandmother and my oldest great-uncle and they moved to St. Louis. I'm not real sure why Mama moved to St. Louis. She liked to travel, too, though. So in the summers — my grandfather worked for the railroad — we'd ride the train and we would go to Mississippi and they'd leave us down there in the summer, and we'd stay with my great-grandfather. He owned a store and he had a lot of land that he leased to a man who raised Shetland ponies.

And so I would work in the store, and a few times I went to pick cotton, which was an interesting experience, yeah. I told one of the girls — we have a girls' group — and I told one of the girls — we went during Black History Month to the old courthouse where the Dred Scott decision was, and they were reenacting the trial and everything. And so, there was a lot about slavery and history and I was showing them the cotton exchange, because people used to float cotton up the river to St. Louis and then there was a cotton exchange and then people would come in and buy it. And I told the girls that I had picked cotton. And one of the girls, who was about 11, said, "Get out of here. You're not old enough to have been a slave." I said, "Baby, they're picking cotton now. You don't have to be a slave to pick cotton."

So, I remember the truck coming about 5:30 in the morning. It was still dark, and we'd go out and stand on the highway and then we'd get on a truck, everybody, and one of my cousins, you know, that watched me during the day for my grandfather. And I got so tired I would have to ride in the cotton bags. So instead of being able to fill the bag up with cotton, they had me dragging. The most I ever made was 35 cents a day picking cotton. I wasn't able to pick much cotton. But I went because all the other kids were going and I just wanted to see what was going on, you know, what they were doing.

And then we'd go to Chicago to see my Aunt Sue Lou, who was grandfather's sister. And she lived in Chicago and she was married to an Italian man whose name was Harry. And she didn't speak Italian and Harry didn't speak English. So they communicated with each other by talking real loud. HARRY, TAKE THE DOG OUT! I don't know what that had to do with it. I think he might have understood English and just not spoken it. But she didn't even understand Italian. But they were married for many years, and they had a store in Chicago. Both my

grandfather and his sister both had small stores. And so, I would help her there.

And, you know, we would visit other people, because we had passes and we could ride the train for free or for taxes or something, it wasn't very much. So, Mississippi was a lot, lot different from St. Louis. It was in Mississippi in the early '50s that I understood segregation on another level, because we weren't allowed to go into the stores in town. Black people could go into the stores but children couldn't, black children couldn't. And there was of course segregated drinking fountains and all of that. And I remember, my grandmother loved nice things and so once we were in town, in Aberdeen, and she had on a pair of Florsheim shoes and a Mr. John hat. And a woman walked up to her on the street and said, "Girl, where did you get those shoes and that hat? Where did you get them?" She said, "Not in Mississippi, not in Mississippi."

So, and there were animals on the farm. Once, I decided that I wanted to get a kitten to bring back home. Nobody liked cats except me. So I decided that what I would do is I would pack the cat in the suitcase and when we got home, I would have the cat and there was nothing they could do. The only thing was, the cat didn't make it. And right before he died, he made a mess all over all my clothes. I'd also packed some eggs because I was going to have chickens. And so, when my mother opened my suitcase in St. Louis, with all these lovely clothes from Saks, there was a dead cat and some smashed chicken eggs. (laughs) I liked the country and I thought maybe we could duplicate a little of it in St. Louis.

And our yard was very nice, too. Our yard was nice but our yard was nice. There was a grape arbor and there were apple trees, persimmon trees, apricot tree, cherry tree, apricots — mulberries, which aren't good to eat but we used to play house with them. And so, there was just a lot of — it was a lovely, lovely place, lovely time. Right across the street from the school. Yeah, it was a lovely time. Lots of children.

ACKELSBURG: How did you experience segregation as a child? You must have started school right around the time —

PAYNE: I started school right around — well, that was '54, but they didn't really segregate in '54. That was the law. I was born in '48, so I started school in '53. In the beginning, I went to an entirely black school, so if integration was the law, it hadn't come to St. Louis yet. But I really didn't know it was a segregated school. There's some words that — we heard the words segregation and prejudice. I never heard the word racism. I believe I might have been an adult before I ever heard of racism.

There were, of course, civil rights marches and all of these things going on, and my grandmother belonged to a number of organizations, so we would go to the meetings. I was never all that sure of what was going on at them but I knew that they were important and that she would come home from work and get dressed and we would go back

out. My grandfather and grandmother had been Garveyites during the '40s and the '50s, and she talked for years about how they would go to the meetings and they would pay a dime. And my grandfather was determined he was going to go back to Africa. So, that part was unusual for us. I don't know anybody else in our area who thought about that or participated in that. But there were a lot of people.

And my grandmother belonged to a number of civic organizations, so there was always talk about better schools and that sort of thing, because we had recently moved. The neighborhood had changed, and we had recently moved two or three blocks to a school that had been a white school. It had a lot of stuff in it. So, it had not yet gone down to the point where it was a substandard school. And Sumner and those schools, the high school and the medical school and the nursing school and all of those things, they were high standards for the nation. So we had very good teachers, teachers who were very concerned about us.

And there were children from all different places on an economic ladder. So there were the children of doctors, there were the children of domestic workers, there were the children of, I'm sure, people who were on welfare. But the fact of the matter is we didn't talk a lot about that. And so, if someone, um — they didn't build the projects, public housing in St. Louis, until a little after this period. I think about 1957 they built Pruitt-Igoe, which turned out to be the model for poor housing in the country. So things kind of got worse. They kind of got worse.

One of the things that I experienced about segregation is that in my community, black people moved into the houses and the neighborhoods the Jewish people had moved out of. They were just like a half a step ahead of us, in terms of moving and that sort of thing. So there were a number of black and Jewish merchants in the community. So there was a jewelry store and there was a bank. Really, everything we needed was right around us.

But my grandmother always shopped in the downtown stores. And they didn't have credit cards then, they had coupons, and you'd get these coupons and you could buy things. So Famous Bar, which is a May Company department store, was her very favorite. And, um, we shopped, you know. We went downtown and bought candy. You couldn't eat in the restaurants. You could eat at Kresge's dime store, which was just fine with me. I loved it. They had caramel popcorn and hot dogs, you know. That was my idea of a cool meal.

So as a child — there were restaurants in the neighborhood, we would go to those restaurants and that sort of thing. The theaters were segregated except on Wednesday afternoons and during Brotherhood Week. During Brotherhood Week, black people could go to the big theaters. I think it cost 75 cents. I never got to go. One of the things that my grandfather was adamant about was that if you couldn't go there all the time, the hell with the people.

There was the Poro [Beauty College], which was started by Annie Malone. Do you know Annie Malone? She's like Madam C.J. Walker. She was a black beautician. She was the richest self-made woman in the

United States in 1926. There was the Fairmont Hotel, where people like Duke Ellington and, you know, famous people stayed. There was the Amethyst Theater that was next to it and it cost 15 cents to get in and popcorn was a nickel. There was Billy Burke's Restaurant that was, you know, right next to that.

And so, I think one of the reasons that my mother loved entertainment so much is that she grew up during the '30s and the '40s and those things weren't available. But by the time I was a small child, we were able to attend them and since my mother loved entertainment, had no husband to answer to, we went to a lot of places that I have found out later a lot of people didn't go. My mother liked the Ice Capades. She liked dog shows. She liked the rodeo. She liked the circus. She liked anything that — any kind of children. Parades. And so, looking back, I'm sure that most of those crowds were all white. I didn't notice it. I noticed my mother and my grandmother. I didn't notice it. I really didn't notice it.

Yesterday, when we were walking around in this town, I asked Ola after a long time, I asked, "Have you seen any black people?" She said, "Last year, I saw three." I said, "No, I'm talking about today." But I guess it's not as discomfoting feeling as a kind of like, just an awareness. I don't really have — the people were very cruel at the school that I went to. Very, very cruel.

ACKELSBURG: The one you got transferred to.

PAYNE: Transferred to.

ACKELSBURG: Was that a largely white school?

PAYNE: That was an all-white school. And the only black people were the kids in the gifted program. And, uh, I heard many hurtful comments from teachers about, Well, they're just not prepared. Well, they really just don't have the capacity. I, uh, developed a lifelong lack of respect for educational institutions. And I read a study once that said that many of the African American children who were in those gifted programs never finished college. Just the whole educational process started to be something that was difficult and didn't feel good.

I loved to read, and so I was in a sense somewhat self-educated. I remember as a child, I read two sets of encyclopedias from cover to cover, A to Z, *The World Book* and the *Britannica*. And I'm surprised now at the things that drift out. I was in a mountain village in Austria, and there was a Japanese man standing next to me and we were looking in a window. And he said, "What is that?" And it was an instrument. I said, "Oh, that's a zither." And so, somebody asked me, "How the hell did you know it was a zither?" I said, "It's the last picture in the encyclopedia." It's the last picture.

END TAPE 1

TAPE 2

ACKELSBERG: OK. So, we were talking about school.

PAYNE: So when I returned to my regular school and my high school, I really never did as well in school as I did before. I think I had lost the passion. When I would go to school, I had to ride the public bus. And it was so stressful that by the time the bus got to the school, sometimes I was in tears and not able to get off the bus. And I would ride to the end of the line, when the bus turned around, and I'd go back home. So they would send me out at 7:30 and at 9 o'clock I would come back down the street. So my mother had to start taking me to school. At first, she would just take me to the school and she would stay on the bus and let me out, but I wouldn't go in. I would just go sit on the steps and they'd come, make me come in. So my mother, every morning, had to take me all the way to the room and sit me in the seat and leave me, you know.

And I'd never had a bad report at all. I was accustomed to getting glowing reports and much attention and favor from all of the teachers. Even now, I think teachers like the children who are well mannered and well dressed. But when I got to Ashland, there was nothing I could do. The teacher was convinced that African American children did not have the same capacity as the other children that she was working with and that it was a mistake and they shouldn't have been allowed to come. And she said that all day long, every day. And you know, no one stopped her.

And my mother, who was very young — I was born when she was 17, so by the time I was nine, she was just 25 or 26 — she didn't know quite what to do, because she wasn't accustomed to interacting as an equal with educated white people. And she didn't know what to do. She just didn't know what to do. But they wouldn't let me stop going. So, that's why I said I think I suffered from depression, but we didn't have a word for it. And there was no one. There was no counseling. There was no support.

And when I came back to Cote Brillante, people were disappointed in me. I was the brightest and the best and I had failed to succeed. And nobody knew why. And so, it was kind of a blame-the-victim thing. Everyone was just sort of — didn't quite know what to do. Here she is back and she is still obviously smarter, not performing at this level. I've never thought about this before. I think I dumbed my performance down so that I would fit in. And hardly anybody noticed it.

One teacher — whose name was Mr. Payne, Nathaniel Payne, the same as my first husband — he gave me a copy of *Gone With The Wind*, a ragged paperback that was about this thick. He said, "You like to read so much, read this." And so I read it. I think I read it seven times. And then I just switched and started reading adult books. So I read all of those — my grandmother used to bring them home because people used to have books in the hotel and they'd just leave them, right. So I read all

of those best sellers, *Marjorie Morningstar* and *Exodus*, and you know, when I was a little girl. And so, I escaped into reading.

My mother also remarried in 1959, and my stepfather was an abusive alcoholic, so that kind of tore up the house. And it really just tore up the house. He was very abusive to my mother, and it was very difficult during those times because it was like she brought a monster in the house. It had been very serene and very quiet, and now there was all of this fighting. And he was like from a different tribe or something, fighting and cursing, and it was just horrible. And I really withdrew then, because there was school that was difficult, and there was home that was difficult.

ACKELSBURG: Both of these things happening at the same time.

PAYNE: At the same time. And also, my mother, who I'd been kind of a doll or toy or something, didn't — by the time she got through dealing with Alfred, she didn't have time to deal with that. And she stopped working in the restaurant during that time, where she had a lot of excess money, because she had to work from four to 12, and she needed to be home in the evening.

And she became a domestic worker for a family whose name was Sheinfeld, and they were very, very nice people. They were very kind to my mother and very kind to me. However, she made a quarter of the money that she'd previously made. And so, she started to be trapped in this kind of dependence poverty. She didn't finish high school because she had me when she was a senior in high school, and at that time, high school was kind of the dividing line between one kind of job and another. And so, but she was — I never heard her complain. She was very good-natured.

The people had three children. She loved children, and she was kind of a nanny for the children. And she loved the little boys and I was actually attached to the little boys myself. They were my age and babies. And so, I'd go to work with her often. And the boys were so poorly behaved that Mrs. Sheinfeld — again, when she had to go to the beauty shop or to shopping or whatever, she took me instead of them, because she couldn't manage her boys. And so, again, this was kind of going out with someone from another culture, another Jewish lady, and really just experiencing their home. And they were very loving towards their children, which is one of the reasons the children were so poorly behaved. They were like wild people.

And she stayed with the Sheinfelds until I was 16. I graduated from high school when I was 16. And she got a job when I was 16. Lisa was born that September. I turned 17 and Lisa was born two days later.

And my mother got a job working for the federal government at the VA Hospital. And I think she started working in the kitchen and then, because you could move up by applying in the federal system, she then went to work as a file clerk and later on, she was the — what do you call it? — telephone operator. And so, she loved her job. She liked to

dress up. And so, she loved this job where you could wear suits and pretty dresses and things to work. And also, she was paid adequately.

My mother and my stepfather separated when I was about 14 and the apartment that was upstairs in my grandmother's house, where my mother and stepfather moved, and lived — because when I was little, remember, I said there was a lawyer that lived up there. My mother and I lived up there by ourselves. It was just kind of upstairs and downstairs. So, my mother and I had an apartment.

And my mother liked to gamble. She liked the horse races, Bingo, I think we used to play, Tripoli, Pokeno, all of that. She liked to go to Las Vegas. She liked all of that as I grew older. She didn't start that, I don't think, until after she was no longer married to my stepfather, and that became a major source of entertainment for her. She didn't care too much about the Lottery. She liked playing games. She loved to play games — Scrabble, anything. She loved all kinds of games. I like toys. I'm not into games that much. But my mother liked games, and so there was always a puzzle set up or some kind of Life game, game of Life, Sorry, something. We were always playing games. And she liked the *Price is Right*, you know. She was so nuts over the TV game shows that my nephews — my sister had children, they were only 16 and 13, and the oldest boy would stay at home with my mother and when they would holler, Come on down, on the *Price is Right*, they would both scream. My grandmother said, "You got these boys as crazy as you are."

And so, I graduated from high school when I was 16 and that was in 1965, and in a sense, that's kind of like the period we're going through now, in terms of society being in the midst of a lot of big changes. And some of them are so big you can't see them. But '65 was kind of the middle of the civil rights movement and it was also, um, the beginning — by '68 we were singing, I'm black and I'm proud, you know. And Vietnam was going on, so the men in my generation went to Vietnam. So there was a lot of unrest.

And at that point, I did become sort of politicized and really began to focus on my blackness as a sense of identity. As a child, it was a warm and comfortable place, but it wasn't a primary thing that I thought about. But by the time I was a young woman, between Vietnam and all the things that were going on, at one point, it became all that I thought about.

And I remember during that time, people started to wear natural hair styles, and I decided that I was going to have my hair cut in a natural. It was '68 and my son was a baby. And when I came home, I had this big thing on my head, and my mother told me, "Don't come back." She would not keep my son anymore. She was just opposed to the whole thing. And my great aunts began to do babysitting for me. She never did it. She didn't back off it.

And I had a lot of experiences in working. My first job was at Melidios, which was Sea Pass Sea Foods. And I packed raw fish. I've never eaten one since then, a fish cake. You know, they have those Mrs. Paul's and things? Well, in this factory where I worked, they cut them

and our job was to hand bread them and box them. I haven't had one of those since '65. I doubt if I'll ever eat one again in my life, because working in food processing is very dirty, and it's not clean at all, and the government inspectors did nothing but take bribes and not say anything about the mice droppings and all of that. So there's a lot of stuff I'll fool with as a result of that.

But shortly thereafter, I got a job working for Brown Shoe Company, and it was a clerical job, and uh, it was a first. And it was, again, like pre-gifted classes. Oh, everyone was very proud, uh-huh, because I was going into the kind of work that black people didn't really have an opportunity to do.

See, in '65, when I was 16, most of my peers went on to college. But for some reason, I'm not sure, racism and internalized oppression, a lot of things, no one ever mentioned going to college for me. There was no preparation. I had been in college-prep classes, but no one ever said, Well, you know, you have to fill this out and go here. And I didn't know how to manage it. I was actually the first woman in my family to graduate from high school. So nobody else had ever been, and my grandmother and mother had no idea how to accomplish this. My mother was preoccupied with this new baby because she was going to have to go back in another 20 years of taking care of a baby. And she suffered from depression, so she was kind of out of it. And my grandmother didn't quite know what to do.

And the community colleges system had just started, and so we tried to — I tried to work all day and go to the community college at night on the bus, but it didn't work out for me. First, I really wasn't that interested in school. And it was hard. It was hard. I would leave home at 7 o'clock in the morning and I would get back at 10 o'clock at night on the bus, and there was no time to do homework or study or do anything else. And I didn't really realize it at the time. Really, to be truthful, I thought I was dumb, because I couldn't — I was only 16 — because I couldn't manage a full-time job and full-time school and I didn't know to take two classes. I didn't quite know what to do. I didn't understand how the whole thing worked, you know.

And that was one of the things that moved me to help women as I grew older, because most of the people didn't know how it worked. So they didn't know how to make the decisions that they needed to make, or how to plan, you know. I have some friends now who are ill and they're going to have to go on disability sometime soon. And I'm trying to walk them through what you have to do to plan.

By this time, my depression had kicked in full force, and I had been diagnosed as bipolar. I had married when I was about 18. It was horrible. I didn't want to marry at all, but I was pregnant, and my grandmother and mother insisted. I don't know what my mother was insisting for, but she surely had lived to have her two children. (laughs) But for some reason, she got on the bandwagon. My mother was something. She got on the bandwagon about I needed to get married.

And so, I married Derrick's father, who was nine years older than I, and it didn't work out at all, not at all. He was a Vietnam veteran and we didn't know it then, but it turned out later he was schizophrenic. But it was scary living up in there with him.

So, when I was 19 and Derrick was eight weeks old, I attempted suicide for the first time. And I took a bunch of pills, and I had a green leather jacket, I remember, and some keys. I don't know what I was going to open up. And I walked to the public park and laid on a bench and went to sleep. And the police found me and took me to the psych unit of the public hospital. And when I woke up from that, I said I wasn't going back home and they couldn't make me. So they didn't really quite know what to do with me.

But I went to my grandfather, who had not been consulted during this whole time. My husband had hit me on my arm and there was a bruise. And I went to my grandfather and I told him, I showed him the bruise and I said that he had hit me and I didn't know what to do. And my grandfather said, "Well, I didn't raise you to fight so you have to come back home." And so, once my grandfather said anything, as crazy as the rest of them were, that was it. That was it.

So, I came back home, but there really wasn't kind of space for me there, you know. We kind of muddled along. But I didn't really know how to manage it, and within a year or so I had moved out and moved in with a fellow that I met. And that whole next period was just a crazy, crazy time, with me going through these cycles of depression and euphoria, because I'd go from manic to depressed. I was on a lot of medication. I had a number of shock treatments — dozens, dozens. I had some — although they say this doesn't happen — I had some brain damage from the shock treatments. I lost my memory and it was really, really, really difficult.

And I went through that from the time I was 19 till the time I was about 35. I was really, really sick. I saw a woman that I used to work with at a meeting. She's the director of an agency, and I walked up to her and I said, "Are you Kathy Beecher?" She said, "You must know me from a long time ago because no one has called Kathy in 20 years." And I said, "I'm LaDoris Payne." And she looked at me and she said, "Are you still alive? You were the sickest person I've ever seen. I had no idea that you would live." I said, "Yeah, I'm still alive and I'm OK, you know, I'm OK."

At 33, I had a hysterectomy and I woke up on the table and my mind was clear — in the operating room. And they kept saying — since I was about 14 or 15, I had been going to some doctor my mother was taking me to but I didn't understand it, and he was a gynecologist and he was giving me hormone shots. I always had a hormone imbalance but nobody really knew what it was. You know, they tell you that you have a hormone imbalance but they can't tell you what hormones they are. And so there was something about having the hysterectomy. I had cancer. And there was something about having the hysterectomy that cleared me up.

I had been like in a fog for about 15 years. And I just — when I woke up in the post-op room, I realized that there had been like a buzzing going on in my head that was — you know, I'd hold my head like this — and that it had stopped. By that time, I had had at least 50 jobs. I had had all kinds of jobs. And every one would be so, uh, exasperated with me because they would say, You have a good job, why don't you keep it?

Some of them I kept. I know one time, I was working at Washington University, and I went to work that morning and when I got ready to get a pop on my break, they told me that I couldn't use the Coke machine that was right outside the door. I would have to go someplace else and use the other one. And I just got my sweater and went outside and caught the bus home. I mean, by that time, I just couldn't take anything. So if there was any racial stuff going on, which was all over the place at that time, if there was any kind of conflict, I'd just leave. I just wouldn't stay with it. I wouldn't stay with it.

I had very little public life at that time. My son was small. I had a mental illness. I was heavily medicated, in and out of the hospital. Between the time I was 19 and 35, I must have spent about two years in the hospital, you know, at different times — 30 days, 60 days, whatever. When I was in Houston, I was committed to a hospital for the criminally insane because I had attacked somebody. We were in a store down on Main Street yesterday, and Ola went in and she said, "Here's a straight jacket." It was for sale for two hundred dollars and I'm like, Nah, I already had one of those. I mean, straight jacket, the padded room, the whole bit — Thorazine, the whole, whole, whole bit. It was rough. And my mother and grandmother were trying to help care for my son during that time.

ACKELSBURG: Were you living at your grandparents'?

PAYNE: No, I had bought a house that was right around the corner. It was about six houses from theirs. And so, it was a very, very difficult period. And I was manic more often than I was depressed, so I would do things at the hospital, like, you know, they give you a pass so you could go out? Once I took the pass and walked to Saks and bought six wigs. When I came back to the hospital, I would change them about every 15 minutes. I had a long blond one. They kept me much longer (laughs) because I kept changing those wigs every few minutes.

But I had a lot of friends, lots of boyfriends. I loved boyfriends during that time. They were my favorite toys. So, lots of boyfriends. My friend Vel Marie King says that the reason the relationships don't work out is the women take men too seriously, and basically they're just toys. (laughs) You try to make them into other things and it just doesn't work out. So I had a lot of toys during that time. I lost track of them, like the jobs.

And I think I went back to school. I went to SIU in Evansville for a while and, but I was too distracted by all the other things that were

going on and really my physical condition to do well with that, you know. And I guess it must have been around '74, my husband got his social security and in a sense –

ACKELSBURG: So you were still married?

PAYNE: I was still married. I didn't get divorced until, uh, '96. Because I didn't ever want to get married anymore, so I didn't see any point in having a divorce, and also I felt that somebody would talk. I was always getting engaged but I would never get a divorce. I think about six people paid for me to get a divorce. I would buy dresses with the money. (laughs) But, you know, I never did want to get married again. I never did want — I just didn't want to be bothered with that. I didn't like it. I didn't like it. And my mother didn't like it, and my grandmother didn't like it. So, I didn't like it.

And I was fortunate enough by that time to have bought some kind of house on a government program where I had a little bitty house and owed 65 dollars a month. And then when I began to get my social security for my husband, I had an adequate income, because I got a social security check for myself and for my son. So, some of that stress and pressure and those things were kind of relieved.

And around — Ola has to remember this, she knows everything, around '70, I think it was — when was the bicentennial, '76?

ACKELSBURG: Seventy-six.

PAYNE: In '77, Ola was living in Texas, and I never, ever thought about moving away. And I went to visit Ola and I decided that I would move to Texas. And, uh, that was the last time I was hospitalized, that's when they committed me for hitting a nurse, who hit me first. I hit her back — about 22 times. So in order to get out of that, Ola came in the hospital and switched places with me. We looked a lot alike then. We both had real short hair cuts, and switched places with me, and I left there. It was on, like, a weekend and Monday they were supposed to ship me wherever they were going to ship me. And Ola smoked cigarettes then — she's been smoking for years — so Ola just sat there and smoked cigarettes. And when they came, she told them she wasn't me. And they had to let her go. So they may still be looking for me in Texas. (laughs)

ACKELSBURG: So you knew Ola from before?

PAYNE: Oh, yeah. I knew Ola from the time we were about 18, 19 years old. We worked together on one of those jobs. Worked for the city, worked at City Hall. And so, I knew Ola before. And then Ola moved to Texas in '73 and then in '77, I moved down there. She was in San Antonio and I moved to Houston, and then she came up to Houston. And we lived together for a long time, until, really, I guess, about until I came back to St. Louis.

No, I moved from Houston to Dallas in '80 and then in '82, I moved to Denton, Texas, and I went to Texas Women's University [TWU]. I went away to college when I was 35. And I went to Texas Women's University. And my little sister, Lisa, had graduated from high school and she came down there and lived with me and went school at TWU, too.

And it was a nice small town, kind of like this, about 25,000 people. It's 100,000 people now. It's humongous. But at that time, it was just — it was the first time that I had ever had time to think. One of the women in my group said one time that if she had had time to think, there was a lot of stuff she wouldn't have done. And so, it was a real quiet, slow-paced, small town, not a lot of distractions.

I was feeling well. Lisa was with me. She lived in the dorms but I lived in a little apartment, like the house you were talking about. And it had all foreign students in it. I was the only American student, and there was one other woman, who had been a student at one time but had gotten involved with guys in town and had had her three babies and she was living there. She was living on the ground floor.

And it was a good time for me. I read a lot. At one point, I read as many as ten books a day. I went to the library at the university, and I read through the Dewey Decimal System. I just picked the first book off the shelf, over at the 00 run, and I read till about 640. So, I just read through religion, philosophy, the sciences, and I began to see the inner connections for all of those things, and I became very interested. Not so interested in the classes but interested in learning.

And it was very quiet. It was a women's school. I liked that a lot. And so there were all of these women, in various places in their life, and it was like a therapy. I really started to get well there. I had stopped being sick, but I hadn't started getting well. And so, I started to get well there.

We didn't have very much money at all. In fact, because I had been in St. Louis, I knew to go and apply for public housing, and I think they approved me when I went in the office. So instead of paying rent, they sent me nine dollars a month. That's how low my income was. And we stayed down there for about two years. We stayed down there for about two years. And I felt better.

When I came back, I was on the dean's list, so I transferred to Washington University in St. Louis, and I was at Wash U for maybe about a year. But again, Wash U was hard — not the classes, but I was in evening school and I didn't have a car, and I got out of class at 9:45 and there wasn't a bus that I could take home. So at 10 o'clock at night, I would walk about seven miles home. And just one day, I said, "I can't keep doing this. I just don't feel like it." And I'm trying to think of what I did.

But I had a dream. It was time for my son to go to college, and he was at a Jesuit school in St. Louis, St. Louis University. And I had to come home to help manage that process, because I knew, from what I went through, that nobody there knew how to get him to college. And

so, I had learned how to go to college. So I went back home and started, as he was a senior in high school, started trying to help him make the transition to college and to get into college. And then, that first year I was going to school, but the year he graduated, there was only enough money for one person to go to school. So, I kind of took a job so that he could go.

And he went to Howard and graduated, and then he went to Southern University in Baton Rouge and got a master's degree. Then he went to the University of Georgia and was going to law school and he didn't like law school. He finished his first year and he just didn't like it. And so, he came back home and started to teach at a community college and then later, he went to Cardinal Ritter, which was an African American Catholic high school that he liked a lot. And later, he went to Texas and he lives in Dallas now. He works for the United Negro College Fund.

So, I got to spend my grandmother's last years with her and with my mother, kind of chauffeuring them around. During the time I was working in St. Louis, I had started to work in social service agencies. So, I began with — I'm trying to think of what the first thing was — Model Cities. So I began with Model Cities and worked all the way through those programs — CETA [Comprehensive Education and Training Act], WIN [Work Incentive Program], the Office of Manpower, JTPA [Job Training Partnership Act]. And I worked as a counselor and like a community outreach person. And so, that's when I first started working with people in the way that I work with them now.

And I always had clients and cases that I kind of took on the side, because everybody started to know me as a person who could help you figure out things, whether it was how to get into college, how to get a job, how to get a divorce, how to get a house, how to get a car, you know, that I pretty much had ideas about how things could be accomplished. Also, because I worked and didn't work during that time, I had a lot of time for children. So I was always very, very, very concerned that the children had as many experiences as they could, to help them grow. And so, I was always chauffeuring a bunch of kids around from tennis lessons to summer camp to guitar lessons and drum lessons.

And my neighbor, who lived next door to me, her name was Carol Lacey. She just retired from this, I think it's called, JTPA, but she just retired about a month ago. We went to her retirement party, and Lacey and I were two single women. I had Derrick and Lisa and she had three girls, and they were all the same age. And so, Lacey and I kind of did everything together and had the children involved in lots and lots and lots of activities. So, I think that — the Buddhists call it your householder phase — and so I was pretty much in my mom-and-householder phase then. Then I went to Texas, then I came back.

And then I kind of started helping to manage a whole bunch of other folks and helping people get in line. One of the things that I learned when I was ill was that — the first thing I learned that I was going to do

to help myself was to tell the truth all the time. It was too hard not to. And that helped me a lot, and I taught that to other people. Not just to tell the truth, but to look honestly at things that are hard, which is why I said I got the reputation for bringing the ants to the picnic, because I'd always want to look and say, Well, gosh, this is what's really going on here.

But there was something about the way that I understood faith that allowed me to look at very difficult situations without being discouraged, because I had already attempted suicide a number of times. I had been confined in mental hospitals and I had come out, you know. I had come out. I know that there are people who cannot believe, as Kathy Beecher did, that I actually got better, and I'm still functioning, and I'm half functioning. Yeah. (laughs) Let me take a break here.

ACKELSBURG: Do you have a sense of what, or what combinations of things, helped get you through that? I mean, that was an incredible period.

PAYNE: I had the strong faith thing. And the crazier I got, the more religious I got, and it kept me from losing hope. And religion — I belonged to a whole lot of churches. I've been baptized, like, three or four times, including one of the women in my group and I went to Israel a few years ago. We baptized each other in the River Jordan. And when I was doing it, there was a lady from Sweden, and we were singing. We were just having a good time. And there was a lady from Sweden and she was watching us and she said, "What is this thing you have?" And I explained to her, and I asked her if she was Christian, and she said, "When I was a child, I was baptized." And I asked her if she understood what baptism meant and everything, and she did. We talked about it for a few minutes and I said, "Well, I can baptize you if you want to." So, I have a picture at home of the woman I baptized in Israel from Sweden. And so that helped me a lot.

The other thing is that because my grandmother did not entertain foolishness, I don't care how crazy I got, they refused to recognize it. I had to do everything that everybody else did, crazy or not. I wasn't allowed. They just basically didn't believe in it. I remember, my mother did not even like sick people, so she didn't go to hospitals, even when I was a kid. If you got sick, you had to clean it up because it would make her sick.

And so, I remember waking up after a series of shock treatments in the hospital — I guess this was in the early '70s — and I had forgotten everything. Just really, I had gotten so bad that if I passed a mirror or window or something, I didn't know myself. I didn't know me from you, except that I knew I wasn't white. But I couldn't recognize myself, and I didn't know anybody, and my grandmother was sitting by the bed. This is when I remember starting to get better. And after she left, I asked the nurse, I said, "Who is that lady that comes here all the time and sits?" And she said, "That's your grandmother." And I remember thinking, I've got to find out what a grandmother is. I didn't know. You

know, I didn't know. My grandmother sat very quietly by my bed the whole time I was sick, but she didn't acknowledge that I was sick. Just whatever happened to Doris.

And so, one thing I think was faith, belief in God. Another thing, I was a real high-functioning crazy person. So people would still come to places like the nut house and ask for my advice. You know, they sought my leadership. You know, it wasn't like I got up one day and said, "I'm going to be a leader." It's that people came to me for advice and support. And that helped, that people still respected my opinion and that sort of thing.

The other thing that helped was that I didn't use drugs. Most of the people I know who fell down — my father was a drug addict. That was one of the reasons that he and my mother were divorced. He was in the penitentiary by the time they were divorced. But my cousins and other people that I knew fell down, especially towards '80 when cocaine started to abound — the people all used cocaine. I never did use it. I think I tried it once but I didn't, you know, care for it or anything. So it was not using drugs.

The other thing I think that helped me — although at times, people thought it was working against me but I think not — was that I didn't have another adult that I had to please. I didn't have a husband, and I'd change boyfriends like socks. So, you know, I didn't have to try to live up to anybody else's standards. If I didn't want to cook, I didn't cook. If I didn't want to have sex, I didn't have sex. So, the pressures that I saw the other women were under, I didn't really have those. And I was not concerned about it.

The other thing was that I had a sense of history — not just my own history but the history of my people, history of my family. And there was something about watching how things had evolved over generations and over time that let me know that this wasn't permanent. I just never felt it was permanent.

And, uh, also starting to read, even novels, but certainly when I started to read through the Dewey Decimal System, and I read biology and chemistry and those things, I began to believe in a kind of a universal goodness, you know. Not necessarily religion centered, but a force in the world.

Then I started to have dreams. In one dream — this was 1986, October 8th — I had this dream where I died, and it was a kind of a ceremonial death. And there were women who were attending to me and many of them are the same women that I know now, because a lot of the women in my group, we've been together 30 years. We've been together 30 years with me as the leader. We've only had the Center for 12 years, but Ola and all these people, we were together all the time, helping each other. We just didn't have a formal organization.

And they were attending me and they were crying, because I was getting ready to leave. I was getting ready to transcend. And as they were crying, I was a bit impatient with them, because we all had the ability to transcend, but they weren't ready. So, they lay me on this slab,

and as I lay on the slab, I had a crown on, and it was made of copper. And it had a stone, beryl. When I had the dream, I knew what it was but I didn't know what it was, you know. And I lay in this shaft of light that was white, like this. But there was a stream that was golden that hit my forehead.

And as I had the dream, I felt the cells in my body begin to quicken and move. And I was kind of caught up and I could look back down and I could see what I had been, but I had become something that was an energy akin to electricity. And when I looked down, I lost my fear of death. And after I woke up from that dream, I was never the same. It was like I died symbolically, and became a new creature. And that's when I started doing this.

Later on, this long involved dream involved me taking the group of women to a place where there was a war going on, and I was taking them to a safe place. And we camped in a field next to a house that had a group of women in it. And one day we woke up and the women were gone and the door was open. And we went into that place and we lived. And everything that we needed was in the place. There was food. There were beehives. And the dream was so real that I thought it was a real place.

So, I have a little crazy friend — his name is Brother Matthew, he used to be a Catholic priest — and I told him, I said, "Matthew," and I described the dream. He said, since he was a boy, he said, "Um, that sounds like that was a seminary." So we started to drive all over looking for this place, for real. And we would rent a car every weekend and we would drive to a different place. And one day, we were in Ironton, Missouri, which I had never been to before, maybe one-hundred-and-something miles from St. Louis, and we got lost, and as we came down the mountain, it was at the Taumsauk Mountain, I saw the little stone fence that I saw in my dream. I said, "Matthew, this is the place." And when we went in — we stopped the car and went in, knocked on the door, asked the people if we could visit, and they were Ursuline nuns. They were the same people who were in my dream. And that's how I met the Ursulines, in a dream.

So, my dreams started to clear me up, too. My dreams started to guide me. So I had a series of visions and dreams. And God still works with me in visions and dreams. So, in addition to being a person who has some resources and some knowledge of how to manage systems, I became known as a person who interpreted dreams, and who could give spiritual counselling. So people began to come to me for prayer, and to interpret their dreams, and to ask for spiritual counselling.

So that's kind of how I started doing that in my living room. And people would come by for Bible lessons, and they really weren't lessons so much as I just opened up the Bible and read it. And there was something unusual about that, because as one of the women told me, "You know, when I go to church, they tell me what it says. I know what it says, what does it mean?"

And so I just began to use the Bible as my primary guide for interpreting life — which is one of the reasons why, as difficult as things are politically now, I'm not all that concerned, because I know that at least over the last 2000 years, things have gone up and down. People have been oppressed, and there have been periods of great oppression, like the slave trade and the Holocaust, but that I do believe that in the end, good will prevail. There's nothing that can make me stop believing that. So even if we're in the midst in a difficult time, I don't believe it's the final time. I don't believe we're near the end of time, and I don't believe that the people will perish. It's just going to be a different way of living and managing.

So I think the dreams, the visions — there's this faith background that didn't require subservience to a particular religious practice, or to a specific religious leadership. I went to my home church where I grew up recently and they asked me to speak. I'm an ordained minister on top of everything else, and they asked me to speak. And so I spoke, and there was the old preacher up in the pulpit whose wife — they told me, I didn't know, his wife had died — and he was looking for a new wife. So, after I got through speaking, he jumped up and he said, "Reverend White, I've never seen this woman here before. I'd like to get her to come over to my church." And he said, from the pulpit, the whole church, "Where do you go to church?" And I said, "I home church." (laughs) Kind of broke the church up for the day. I home church, like people home school. I home church. I home church.

ACKELSBURG: How did you get to be a minister? What was that process?

PAYNE: Well, I had been working in ministry for many years. At first, I was going to go through the process at a church in the community, which is a Methodist church. They had it real, real complicated, like you had to be a slave for a couple of years and go visit the sick and everything. I didn't mind that but I didn't want to do that instead of the pastor. He was getting paid. He needed to go do it. He had a whole lot of jobs he wanted me to do and everything.

And then I considered going to seminary. And then I decided that I wasn't going to do any of that, that God was going to send somebody who would ordain me and that I could just move forward as a minister, and He did. It was a very strange place Ola went. Ola goes every place with me. (laughs) When I was coming up here, I said, "Ola, do you want to go?" "Of course." We joke, but Ola is a handmaiden. She attends me. So somebody always goes with me now.

And so, we went down there and they had an ordination ceremony, and I became a minister. It was about a year ago. Vel Marie King and Ola went with me. I went all by myself. I didn't invite my family or anybody. I just went down. And they ordained me based on my work, because they can ordain you based on — what they say in the church is that I came "by the word of my testimony and the acts of my faith." So, I was ordained based on what they call Christian experience.

Yeah, because I didn't really want to go to seminary. Naw, I really didn't want to do that. It seemed like that all the people I knew [who] went to that didn't like it. And one of the things that they didn't like about it was the sexism, and the male-dominated structure, and I knew I wouldn't like that either. So, I just read and studied and there was a test that you take and then they interview you and in front of a board, and they ordained me. So, Ola and Vel Marie King, who are the funniest women I know, went to that.

So, there are many things that I go to do within black churches where it gives me the authority to speak for women, yeah, many things that I go and do. When I say that I'm a minister, and I'm a women's minister, they'll be glad to let the people who've been to prison come to see me, or the people who've been on welfare come to see me, because the men don't know how to deal with that anyway.

So, our work began with Sister Mary Jude as women's ministry. It began as women's ministry. And that was very different from even the National Congress of Neighborhood Women that I joined in — I think it was '93, yeah. My grandmother was still alive the first time we went, which was August of '93, and she died at the end of August. And that was very different, because many of the women in Neighborhood Women, particularly white women, were suspicious of religion. And they didn't know it in the way that we did as African American women. There's almost no way to separate yourself. You know, it's down in you. And it's part of everything.

And so, you know, Jan [Peterson] and the others — I remember we had a conversation with Marie Cerillo, Jan and Sandy [Schilen], we were in a hotel, and I said that I considered service a privilege. And — not Marie, Marie got it, she had been a nun — and I considered service a privilege and I considered it an opportunity. I mean, I considered it a privilege to have the opportunity to live a life of service. And Jan and them had service confused with being subservient. And boy, they just — they couldn't understand. But from my upbringing, service to your community was not an *option*. That's what you *did*. When you got grown and you got time, and if you got money, you was supposed to help people.

I imagine that it began as a religious obligation, but it's a cultural and spiritual place. It's a place I want to be. I want to be in leadership and I want to be in spiritual leadership. I want to help people to make good decisions. And I want to help people understand that there is some guide for how you live. Now you may come from different kinds of backgrounds, but I think that's one of the things that interested me about the Pope's funeral, that he was a moral authority, whether you agreed with him or not, and there are very few people living that you can point to and say, That's what that person does. They provide spiritual leadership and moral authority to millions, billions, of people. And I thought that was very interesting, just very interesting, to watch that.

END TAPE 2

TAPE 3

ACKELSBURG: So, somewhere around the early '80s, you started –

PAYNE: In 1982, I started to feel better. I know exactly when it was. In 1982, I started to feel better — November of '82. I woke up in Presbyterian Hospital in Dallas, and it was like there had been static in my brain, and I sometimes think — I don't talk about this too much anymore — I sometimes think that I had the world's worst case of PMS, because I was sick all the time from it. And it was before there was a lot of, you know — like everything happened before there was a lot of focus on it.

And between not knowing what to tell the doctor — and nobody ever connected diseased ovaries and other things with what might be happening to me mentally and psychologically. And certainly nobody talked very much in the '50s and '60s about self-esteem and, you know, women's issues. There was very little focus on the particular role that black women had in the civil rights movement. There was just not sensitivity to the things that could cause illness.

And because I was an intelligent person, I really served as a guinea pig for doctors. I was going to Washington University's mental health clinic. And I can't remember how many times they had me as the focus for discussion for interns. Because I could articulate what I was feeling, you know, I really think I served as a guinea pig and that they tried different medications. One doctor, after a long time, even suggested that I smoke marijuana instead of taking the medications, because, well, they were giving folks LSD, marijuana, everything, man. But a young, intelligent, undereducated, underemployed, physically and sexually abused, unmarried woman with a small child living in poverty — you'd have been crazy as hell not to be depressed. (laughs) Me.

And nobody ever looked at any of those things. They just said, We'll have to increase that medicine. Nobody ever talked to me about diet, exercise, anything that I could do except take medication, you know. And it wasn't just me. There were lots and lots of people lost in the medical system that just — nobody ever talked to me about food supplements, you know, nothing. Nothing, nothing. Just take the medication. Just take the medication.

And when I see what I saw over the years was, I saw so many women, not just get sick, but die. And I had lupus. And not just get sick, but die. I buried my friends — from strokes, from heart attacks, from lupus, from high blood pressure, you know. It wasn't just about people being sick. The people died — from battering, from domestic violence, from drug abuse, from poor decisions, you know. People died. People died. The women died. And we didn't know what was killing us. And we didn't have any place to talk together.

Church wasn't helpful, because at church, they talk to you, you don't get to talk, you know. It's helpful because you learn some stuff, I guess, if you go or whatever, but the people didn't have an opportunity to express themselves. So, in our circles, I think because I wasn't ashamed

of what had happened to me, I could talk about things like being sexually molested, being a victim of domestic violence, without feeling that it had been my fault. I didn't think it was my fault. I didn't think it was my fault. I know whose fault it was, but I didn't think it was my fault.

And I think, because I began speaking about these things, women started to come to me, individually and in small groups, and they wanted to talk about what happened to them, too. So, the beginning of this work is what we used to call Community Conversations, where we would just have something to eat, a cup of tea, a cup of coffee, and just talk about what was going on and what did it mean.

ACKELSBURG: And you were doing this in your house?

PAYNE: In my house, mm-hm, in my house. I lived in a little bitty flat by then in St. Louis, just a little kind of railroad flat, just straight through, and once I looked out of the door and Alicia Paolozzi, who was on the ECOSOC [Economic and Social Council] at the UN, was coming up with Peter Raven, who's one of the Bretton Wood scientists, was coming up with his wife in a yellow Mercedes and they were coming in and we were trying to get the WIC [Women, Infants, Children] crackers out and the government cheese to make a snack. (laughs) A representative of the Dalai Lama came. People started to come. It was really crazy. I couldn't — who were these people? How did they find out we were here?

ACKELSBURG: This was still in the early '80s, or this was —

PAYNE: That was in the early '90s. So people started to hear about what we were doing and what we were talking about, and come. And so, it was really funny. It was really funny. In the '80s, the people who came were students, other women who wanted to be ministers but who didn't fit into the regular church. I had a lot of them. They would come and go, you know, because they wanted a chance to work with women and there weren't very many opportunities. And the process that I was using that I refined later when I got with Neighborhood Women, was just this one of women talking, women's circles. I didn't even know to call them women's circles then, you know. We were just talking. And we were looking at the relationship between what was happening to us and what was happening externally.

I was doing a class last week with a group of parents in a local public school. It's been a stressful time in that school because one of the students whose mother was part of our group committed suicide — a ten-year-old boy, black — and we were very shocked by it because suicide for black youngsters, ten years old, is very rare. I mean, the kids might start using drugs, they might suicide in other ways, but he hung himself, in the apartment of the public housing complex.

And, uh, as we were, you know, just talking about what was going on, one of the women who is — there's a Mennonite peace center that I

go to and work in this public school, and one of the women who is a minister, a Lutheran minister, said I had mentioned internalized oppression in some kind of conversation with her. And she was, like, Yes, yes, yes, I want you to talk to them about internalized oppression. I said, “Well, that’s kind of like a fourth-rung conversation. You have to talk about racism and external oppression before you get there. I just can’t start with internalized oppression. There’s a lot of groundwork that needs to go on beforehand.”

So, the connection between the external oppression and the internalized oppression. I also started to read, in the ’80s, while I was at TWU in the early ’80s — oh, this helped a lot, too. I started to read self-help books. I just read every one I could find because I was trying to help myself. I’m trying to think. There was one book by Dr. Theodore Isaac Rubin and I think it was called *Compassion and Self-Hate*. That helped a lot. I can’t even remember the book but I remember that that one helped a lot, *Compassion and Self-Hate*.

There was another book I read, which had nothing to do with anything, that helped me for some reason, and it was by Mortimer Adler, and it was called *How to Read a Book*. And then he had another one, *How to Speak, How to Listen*. And those helped. Some of the books that helped me don’t even make much sense and when I pick them up now, I’m like, How did this help me?

ACKELSBURG: It triggered something.

PAYNE: Yeah, it triggered something. And so I began to read all of these self-help books and self-talk and just — I began to recondition myself deliberately, which I think made me different, because I think that people are reconditioned, but not many people that I know deliberately set out to reprogram themselves. And I wanted to function better. So I started to read all of these self-[help books] — I mean, well, there weren’t so many like now, so I was reading, like, Dale Carnegie and —

ACKELSBURG: And stuff from AA must have been —

PAYNE: Oh, yeah, started to read the AA stuff. And I just started to reprogram my thinking. One of the things that I stopped doing, deliberately, was I stopped blaming myself, but I also stopped blaming others. And I think I began to understand that everybody’s life has a series of challenges, and some are more difficult than others, but it is your response to the challenge, not the challenge itself, that determines the quality of your life.

And I began to teach that, to not be a victim. Not be a victim. Not be a victim. To rise up, you know. And it was revolutionary for me, but also for a lot of the women that I work with, because a lot of the women thought that because these things had happened to them, therefore they were always going to be a victim of domestic violence, sexual abuse — that their primary identity was around that victim status.

And in the early '90s, Sister Mary Jude and I met after I had the dreams. Sister came into the office where I worked as a tenant manager for families who lived in subsidized housing. And it was my job — what did they call that? something — but it was my job to provide services, help the people get back in school, help them get jobs, help them do things that they wanted to do in their life.

And Sister came in to apply for a job. She probably was already 68 years old, and she came in to apply for a job and I met her and we began to talk. And then we decided we were going to open a place for women to come to know themselves better, and to really have an opportunity to take time and to see what their options were in life. And we weren't really just concentrating on getting people to work on minimum-wage jobs, but getting people to wake up and see what it is they wanted, and then to figure out how to take steps toward that.

And right after we met, I changed jobs again, as usual, and I was working for Citizens for Missouri's Children, which is a public advocacy organization. It's statewide in Missouri, and they advocate for children's issues, and they do that Annie Casey thing, Kids Count. And so I was the statewide organizer for Kids Count. And in the process of that work, I met a woman named Amy Rossi, who worked for Arkansas Advocates for Children. And when I talked to her on the phone, she said, "You sound just like some women I met. I've just come back on an exchange to Germany where we visited the German Mother's Centers, and you should call them."

And so, I called and got Lisel [Burns] at home. Well, Lisel was insistent that we join them in Grailville, which was in a couple of weeks. And I had just got this job and they weren't going to give me ten days off, so I quit it. And Sister [Mary Jude Junn], who had never had a car before, got the sisters to give her a car, and we drove to Grailville.

And we met Neighborhood Women. And it was interesting and difficult. Neighborhood Women is not the easiest group of people to work with. It's kind of like, somebody told me once about herding cats. (laughs) It's kind of like herding cats. However, there were things they said that touched me deeply, and I felt that I could use the structure that they had as part of my future work. And Sister likes structure. I mean, she was a nun, so she was used to big groups of women coming together and making decisions and working together and planning and implementing things.

And so, Neighborhood Women in a sense became my extended community. I have my community at home, but there were a lot of people who were dependent upon me for assistance. In Neighborhood Women, I had peers, people who were doing what I was doing with varying degrees of success. So, that helped me a lot.

With Neighborhood Women, what I started to do was, I started to standardize my process, because before, I was pretty much just working by the seat of my pants. I would do some things all the time, but other things I'd forget and I'd do from time to time. So, having a process like Leadership Support Process helped me organize my work. Also,

switching the focus from charitable work to development was very, very helpful for me, because St. Louis is a relatively small city, and there weren't other people doing this gender-based development work that I became interested in.

The other thing is, like my grandmother, I wanted to see the world. And with Neighborhood Women, I began to have the opportunity to meet people from all over the world, invite them to our house to meet other people in my community, but also to go to other places in the world and meet other women. And it changed my life. It was an eye-opening experience, but it was also a spiritual experience. To begin to see these women with vastly different resources and lifestyles who had all this courage and spirituality that was expressed in different ways. But that's how I knew it. I knew it as a God force in them.

So, Neighborhood Women became a door to a lot of things. Although people had no notion of who Neighborhood Women, what that was or anything, the fact that I belonged to a national organization, and that that organization did work through the United Nations, and with women from other places, raised the way people thought of our work locally. And it made it difficult to dismiss us.

And out of that work, we began to develop relationships with other women's groups. And from their model, I learned to develop partnerships with universities and other groups of people. So there were people that I met nationally, like the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom [WILPF], NOW, OWL — Older Women's League — that I met those people nationally. And then I went back and connected to them locally — I didn't know them locally — and then extend that. It worked backwards. And so that helped, too. That helped, too. And it helped me because none of the Neighborhood Women made any money. And it was OK, because whether or not they believed that they had dedicated themselves to service, that's what they had done. So that gave me peers who were not pressuring me: Girl, why don't you get a job? or, Why don't you try to get some social security going, or whatever, you know. But it was OK.

And it was OK to think big thoughts. I loved that. It was OK to think about big things. We didn't always have to think about tiny little personal things. We could think about the world economy. We could think about global financial institutions. We could think about social change. And we could do it without apology. And if we wanted to sit up till 3 o'clock in the morning and talk about it, it was OK. And in my community, I didn't have many people who wanted to have those discussions over time. And we could really talk about the role of black women and how poor women had been affected.

So, more and more of the people who came to me were university students who were in that kind of learning phase of their life — graduate students, people who taught in universities, people who ran other organizations. And we began to have longer and deeper conversations.

ACKELSBERG: So, you didn't have connections with the women's movement before? You were somehow a feminist, came from inside?

PAYNE: Right, right, right. It wasn't from — well, the women's organizations that I was aware of really didn't have a way to welcome me. They were really glad when I would come to the meeting — as they would say, "bring diversity," like he was a small boy that could ride in the back of my car. But they didn't have any sharing power things going on, or sharing leadership things going on. And as an African woman, I was concerned about black families, and I really could not separate the way I felt about the issues of women from the way I felt about the issues that impacted their families. I had a very difficult time talking about gender mainstreaming in a community where none of the people, male or female, had previously been mainstreamed. And I had a different take on a lot of things, and my take was the ants-to-the-picnic story again. Well, we can't work with all that today, LaDoris. This committee is just trying to work on ERA.

So, you know, I'd been to the meetings, but there wasn't a welcoming place in my community, which is extremely segregated for women of color. And the work that we did with feminist organizations took us outside of our community. So probably my strongest movement work was civil rights and the peace movement, because I was a Vietnam kid, you know. And so, those movements all kind of merged. In '70 — Ola said that whenever the women's conference was, in —

ACKELSBERG: In '75, in Houston.

PAYNE: In Houston. Ola says that we attended it. And she says that I was on NBC TV. They interviewed me. I don't remember it because I was still ill then, so I don't remember it at all, but Ola remembers it. And she says, in fact, the newscaster came to our house for dinner. (laughs) I don't remember it. I don't remember a lot. And I do remember staying in touch with this woman for years but I didn't know why I met her.

So, we were interested, but we didn't quite know where we fit in. We didn't quite know where we fit in. I didn't see a lot of rural women. I didn't see a lot of low-income women. I didn't see a lot of black women. It seemed to be a place where education and prior privilege gave you special standing. And I didn't know how to bridge that, and I wasn't really that concerned about it because there was more than enough work to do. Yeah, there was more than enough work to do. And everybody just did — you put the shovel down where you were, you know.

And so, I was working mostly with poor women who were on welfare — single parents, ex-offenders, people who weren't really in a typical feminist movement, the women that I worked with. When I came, my testimony would be of interest, and I often came and brought women with me, so that people could hear their stories. But the real deal was, they didn't really know what to do after they heard the story,

except sometimes be overwhelmed by the injustice, but not really know what to do.

So, that's not how I came. I came out of the civil rights movement and out of faith-based organizations and out of the antiwar movement. And, you know, those things were all joined. I mean, you weren't going to a rally unless somebody was there from every place. So, I knew people, but until I joined Neighborhood Women, I didn't give this cross-cultural organizing of women.

After Sister Mary Jude joined me as my partner — here she came, representing the whole different group and the whole new set of things — so that moved us to do more cross-cultural work right away, because we were a cross-cultural pair. And she, whenever she had anything, she would call the nuns, who were interested in social justice, active in their work, had a strong sense — and this is something else that I got from the Catholic Church — had a strong sense and writings regarding issues of human rights and justice, that I could follow, you know, I could follow. They didn't necessarily follow, but I could follow them.

And I could also hold them accountable, based on their teachings. And so, the nuns were the first group of women that I could hold accountable. I could say, But you say you believe this. Your stand is solidarity with the poor, you know, preferential treatment for the poor. So I could go back to that and hold them accountable. And they are, as a group, the best educated women on the planet. And they have a long history of creating services and organizations, including their own religious communities, but also hospitals, Catholic charities, orphanages, other things that were, you know, really, really needed in the community.

I grew up around the time when black became beautiful, and I also came into this work during the time when nuns were particularly active and trying to create processes and programs for poor women and to be inclusive of them. So the sisters allowed Sister Mary Jude to come and work for us without salary, which she did for five years, and that was very, very helpful in getting us started, because Sister had been principal of a boarding school and had had other positions of responsibility in our community and some of the skills that we needed, administrative and organizational skills we hadn't been previously exposed to. So she was very, very helpful in helping us integrate the skills we needed with our own culture, and to deliver those services in a way that was both faith-based and culturally relevant.

Jan and Sandy. Jan and I had a difficult time getting along. But I decided not to let that keep me from participating. I think a difference for me and many of the other women of color who were in Neighborhood Women who seemed to have been hurt — I haven't been hurt by Neighborhood Women for real, you know — who seemed to have been hurt has to do with the kind of investment they made in the organization. In the beginning, Bertha Gilkey, who was the first president of Neighborhood Women, had come from St. Louis. And I knew Bertha, although I never knew she was in an organization called

Neighborhood Women, it wasn't part of the way she presented herself in St. Louis. She really served as a public housing advocate.

And I guess there's always — I see it more in other organizations than in my own — distrust. I can't think of any other words but distrust. And I hear Lisel talking a lot about sabotage and internalized oppression.

ACKELSBERG: Competition?

PAYNE: Competition and everything. In my own organization, WomanSpirit, we were talking about that recently, and someone said, you know, "There's not that much of that here, hardly any at all." And Vel Marie said, "Yeah, that's because LaDoris won't permit it." And my grandmother didn't permit it in our household. So I knew that you could handle that, you know, I knew that you could handle that. It takes time, it takes some discernment. But I'm not up for a lot of bickering and petty fighting about small things. And so, some people come and go because the way we work isn't the way they want to work. Some people want to work toward positions of public power. Some people want to have a following. We're really a circle of equals, you know.

It's very interesting. I had a woman who was a seminarian who was there with us maybe about '95 or '96. And at the time she left — she was African American — she was extremely critical because there wasn't this upward mobility and there weren't salaries, and just a lot of things. It just seemed like she was pretty dissatisfied with us. We weren't who she wanted to be with. And that was OK, because people come and go in life. And about a year ago, she called me. She was working at a university in Minnesota, and she wanted to know if I would come and help her, because the way I was working then was the way she wanted to work now. So, different times, you know, different times in your life, different things.

And I went, and I helped her plan a women's conference that's going to be held on the weekend of April 21st. I won't be there because I had already agreed to lead a retreat for the Ursulines in San Antonio about a year before. But it's a big conference. She's got all kind of people coming and it's a feminist theology, Afrocentric feminist theology. I would love to have been able to attend, but I wasn't. But I was able to make many recommendations and even some personal recommendations about her house and her life and that sort of thing. I spent a few days with her. And she's coming to spend a month with me in June. And so, I hardly ever had anybody that we couldn't stay connected to in some way, but many other women are just passing through. They're not there to stay.

The other thing that I noticed in some of the other groups that I work with, particularly Neighborhood Women's groups, is that there was some anger, because the people didn't stay, because they didn't stay. There was also some anger because people had made contributions that they thought weren't recognized. And because Jan is a real momma, you

know, she's a real momma — we would go on trips, she would keep all the money up in her bra and hand it out to us a dollar at a time. Well, I never did fool with that, I had my own money. My grandmother taught me that. "Have your own self stuff." So, in the beginning, when we would go on trips, we would go to Europe or whatever, I raised my own money or paid for it myself, so when I would go, I would stay in a decent hotel, eat whatever I wanted, manage my own tab. So I never had this feeling of being beholden or that I had to follow lock step, because I had my own organization. I had my own property. I had my own income. And so, I felt that I was a peer and not ever subservient to the leadership in Neighborhood Women. I always felt that they were lucky to have me.

And I never did anything I didn't personally want to do. I never let what everybody else was doing mean that I was going there. I mean, for years, I had a disagreement with them about public housing. I still have that disagreement. Public housing didn't mean the same thing to the people across the country that it meant in New York, where 600,000 people lived in public housing. And I wasn't trying to organize. I had worked with public housing tenants, but I wasn't trying to organize them as a bloc, because I saw no reason for that to be their principle identity.

And my focus was always on low-income housing, because everybody needs a house, whether they live in public housing or not. And I really felt that if we had spent time organizing around the issue of low-income housing, instead of public housing, we would have been much better off, because that would have invited rural people in, that would have invited women who were struggling in these little bungalows, or women who got no subsidy. From my point of view, the people who were getting housing subsidy and help with their utilities were in better shape than most people. I was really trying to figure out the people who couldn't even afford a house.

And so, philosophically, we've had, you know, differences from time to time, but I never really allowed that to distress me. Even now, there are some differences about the division of property and resources. It's not big, but it's there. But I'm not concerned about that because I got my own stuff. And I always believe in having my own stuff, and that's Mattie Moore. "Have your own stuff." Then when the people get ready to go or do or whatever they want to do, you can let them go, because you got your own, you know.

So, I strongly believe in self-determination. And I believe that self-determination has a cost, and you have to pay it yourself. No one will subsidize your freedom. If you're going to be a free black woman, you've got to pay your own bills. And you can't look to anyone outside of your community to resolve the problems that you have, that are internal to your community. So, that meant that I kept strong allegiances with groups that had male leadership. And I think we're going into a period with this demonizing the poor thing that we got going on right now, when all people of good will will have to come together and share

leadership. And we should be strong enough to do that without fear. That's what I think.

ACKELSBURG: Sure what we need.

PAYNE: Yeah, yeah. We got to make it. We can't stay in our own ethnic group. We can't stay in our own gender group. We can't stay in our own geographic group. We are really global citizens and we'll have to figure out ways to bridge the gap. That doesn't mean that we need to forget our priorities or that we should give up our goals. But it does mean so many things have happened in the last 30 years, that we've got to continue to reassess this thing and figure out what was going on. "So what?" "What does it mean?" Why is it important to us? "And now what?" What will we do now? And Sarah Gould from the Ms. Foundation added a fourth one to a meeting I was at: "And what will happen if we don't"? Yeah.

ACKELSBURG: So, I know a little bit about this story, but I'd like to capture more of it for the tape. In 1993, you started –

PAYNE: We started WomanSpirit.

ACKELSBURG: What was the process leading up to that?

PAYNE: Leading up to starting WomanSpirit?

ACKELSBURG: Yeah.

PAYNE: Well, I had been working as a social service director without a degree for several years. And I had a big group of women, about two hundred women who were in that process. And I had about 20 of them that needed special help that I couldn't give them there.

ACKELSBURG: Now, the social service director of –

PAYNE: Of an organization called Ecumenical Housing. It provided low-income housing in single-family dwellings for families in St. Louis County. And so, we had all of these people who were spread all over the area and not linked to one another. And even though they were housing tenants, it wasn't like in New York, which is what I kept trying to explain to Neighborhood Women, where five hundred families were in a building. One might live three miles [away], and so they weren't geographically connected. And the only way I could connect them, really, was their aspirations and their dream, because they were very different. Some of them were college students. Some of them were professionals who didn't make much money. They taught school.

I have a big group of people that come to me often who are people who teach in universities and colleges on a part-time basis, and they're making about 14,000 dollars a year. Often they don't even have

benefits. One of the myths was that we were poor because we were uneducated and did not work. But I was seeing poor women who were working really hard and who were well educated. Some had Ph.D.s but they weren't making any money. And so they were struggling with the same economic issues — that actually a tenant in public housing might be doing better because a university instructor might be trying to pay seven hundred dollars a month for rent and the public housing person was paying 30 dollars.

So, you know, things balance out. Even in my own personal poverty now, I'm much better off than many people that I know who are working poor. And that's a bad thing. Yeah, the working poor suffer. By the time they pay the childcare, the transportation, the insurance, utilities — I had a harder time as a working poor young mother than I did when I received the social security, and I was able to stay at home and raise my children.

So that was one way we got started. And then, when Sister came, it just kind of put fat on the fire, because Sister was an organizer. And so, as soon as I told Sister I needed a place to work, she went out to the priests she knew and got somebody to give us an old convent to work in. I mean, it was a raggedy old place. And we were paying twice as much as we were paying in the nice place that we moved to later. But we went and got started. We were the first African American women's organization in our city to have our own space. We were the only African American women's center in St. Louis for many years. There is another one now that is run by the nuns. And that's different from what we're doing, which is self-help, because the nuns came in and bought a house and paid for it and then they lived there and they invited the women in. We did the opposite. We bought a house and paid for it ourselves and invited the nuns in.

And so, it really is the principle of self-determination and collective worker responsibility and common economics that we were trying to implement, which were the principles of Kwaanza. And so we were trying to live those principles. We didn't know what we were going to do. All we knew was that we wanted a place for women to come together and be together, and since we had been to Neighborhood Women we knew it was a women's center. We didn't even know it was that at first.

The name of our building is the Imani Family Center, because in the beginning, we didn't even know to say women's center. We were working with women and their families. So, Catherine Dunham helped me start my first children's program. And it was called Socialization through the Arts. And it was based on a program that she had created in the '40s. And the only thing she asked me to do was to give her credit for helping me, because people had come to her and used her help and then went on and created new things.

When we went to Neighborhood Women, this leadership support process I was very interested in it. I had written a couple of workbook kind of guide things, and I had done some training when I worked for

Southwestern Bell in Texas, and then I had worked for the Auto Workers, and I had written a couple of little books, and I had gone across country training people, auto workers, so I had some experience in leading groups and facilitating groups, and leading workshops and doing training.

And we didn't know what we were going to do. So we just sat down at the desk and got our telephone books out and started calling all the people we knew and telling them that we were there. Well, the first person that came by was a Dominican sister. I can't think of her name now. I know Sister Pius Fagan was one and another — and they wanted me to work with women in prison. So that's how we got started, that someone came and said, "We need some help."

And then, I had the children of the women who were in the housing project. I still had many of those women because when I left that project, they stayed in touch with me. And they wanted to do something for children, and I said, "Oh, I don't really work with children but I do work with parents. So, I'm going to make a parents and kids club, and your children can be in it if you participate. I'm only serving the children of the women who are part of what we do at the center. We're not a baby-sitting service. We're not doing that." And I still do that.

I still have a grandparents club for grandparents who are raising children. And the grandparents have their own circle. They meet on the second Saturday of the month. This was their morning. They were kind of pissed at me. And the girls meet on the third, because it turned out that all of the kids were girls, and the girls meet on the third Saturday. And we have an activity with grandparents and kids. But the grandparents have their own time and it comes first.

And so, we started with that and then we moved on, later on, to working with people moving from welfare to work. We got a Community Development Block Grant for 100,000 dollars to start a micro-enterprise program. And I helped about 25 women start or expand small businesses. So, you know, we would just do what came into our area, whatever. Whoever showed up, we would sit down together and say, OK, what do we want to do about this?

And so in 1995, right before the Beijing conference — we had been planning to go to Beijing for a year — I had a woman who taught at a university and a woman who was on welfare. And I had committed to raising the money to take them to Beijing. Now that was more than our annual income. I don't know what made me think of that. Sister says that the day I came home and told her, "Sister, I think I'm going to go to this conference in Beijing," she said we had 12 dollars in the bank. And when she went home that night, she said, "I'm going to have to quit. I just can't keep this up." But the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet paid my way, and I was able to raise Leah — the woman, she's dead now, who worked at Webster University, was able to raise some money, and we were able to raise Pat Child's money, and we went on off to Beijing.

We left for Beijing, I think, August 28th. On July 3rd, I had a stroke. And I was not able to care for myself. And Sister got the priest who was

in charge of the rectory that was next to her house — she persuaded him to rent the house, rent the rectory to me so I could live next door to the convent and she could help care for me. They had no idea I was going to still get up and go to Beijing. So that was August the 14th when we moved in that house. And August 28th, we left for Beijing.

And it was a real trip because I was very ill. And by the time I got to China — which I don't know how many hours that took — and got off the plane, I really was barely able to walk. So eight Chinese men carried me upstairs to my room. You know, I'm kind of big and they're kind of little. (laughs) And I crawled around in the mud and the water in Beijing, having seizures and passing out, until I said, "I want to see an acupuncturist." And finally Gwen Smalls came from Beijing. She was in the official delegation, and she said, "There's an acupuncturist in my hotel, LaDoris." And I said, "Well, what's the name of your hotel?" She said, "The Grace Hotel." I said, "Well, that sounds good."

And so, the trip to Beijing was 50 miles on a bus that went like this, bumpity-bumpity-bump. And Pat Childs went with me. And Pat says, "It's funny, they invented buses in China but they didn't invent shock absorbers." And we went to the Grace Hotel, and I went to see the acupuncturist, who did not speak English and there was no one there who spoke English. So I lay on a table in this room and there were other people in the room — because there's no privacy, you know, everybody's in the same room.

And so I began to pray out loud. And the woman who was laying next to me on a table turned to me and she said, "What is the matter, dear?" And her name was Josephine Cho. She was a Sister of Charity from Washington, DC. And she told me that this acupuncturist was very famous, and that people came from all over the world to see him, and many Chinese people came from America to be treated. And she was able to translate for me and explain that I had had a stroke, because I couldn't even tell him what was wrong. And he treated me. And after the first treatment, the people were running down the halls saying, "Missy, missy, missy. Forgot stick." I had left my cane. I got on up. And then I was able to finish out the rest of that conference.

I think with Neighborhood Women, the first conference I went to, international conference, besides the ones at the UN and New York, was the PrepCom for Beijing for North America and this region — North America, Israel, and whatever was in the region. And, um, let's see, a woman who was Jamaican in my community paid for me to attend that and went with me, Bea Paratanka. So, we worked on a document and boy, I was so excited, because it was obvious to me that what we were doing was meaningful, and that it was important, and that it needed to be done — and that poor women of color were dramatically underrepresented, particularly from the North, because the UN, the UNDP [United Nations Development Programme], or UNIFEM [United Nations Development Fund for Women] paid for women from developing countries to attend, but there was no money for women from the G7 nations to attend. And so we had to raise our own money.

So we were in Vienna, and we were doing word-smithing on a document and Bea got arrested, because we didn't know how to put money in the bus and we weren't living with everybody else. We had gotten us a hotel, because Bea was well-to-do. And we were trying to make it. And so, I felt this surge of power kind of running through me that said, "Yes, you can really make a difference." And I met these people, and I started to invite them to St. Louis, to come and speak to the women in my community.

And we had a big event to prepare. We had Maria Reilly come from the Center of Concern in D.C. and speak. And Leisha Powell Lotsy came from ECOSOC. And I didn't even know that it was unusual to ask the people to come and see me and talk to people in my community. At that time, I was organizing down in the Mississippi Delta, too, so the women from Mississippi were coming. It was a very exciting time.

We didn't have much money and we struggled real hard. We're still struggling real hard, but that's how the Beijing conference, I think, gave energy to our local work, and gave international focus to what we were doing. And because there were not many women from our community attending, people were interested and excited. People were interested and excited, and wanted to be part of that.

And so, our cross-cultural work, we called it Women Think. And it was women from all different groups and everything. And we met for five years, from '94 to '99, looking at the Platform for Action, the result of the conference. And then when we were in Beijing, they told us that we were supposed to come back to our community and implement that platform. So I took that very seriously. So I went back and I convened the people, and we put the things up there that we were most concerned about and we chose four that we would work on for the next five years. And that's what we did.

END TAPE 3

TAPE 4

PAYNE: And so, Beijing, I think, was a critical point in terms of connecting our local group to the work of women around the world, but also in terms of me meeting those women. I had read about many of the organizations or met a representative, but in Beijing, I actually began to understand the work they were doing from the presentations that took place in the grassroots tent. I got to meet faces to attach to the names. And I really, really, really did feel that I was part of something new that was happening with women around the world — and where women in the West weren't taking a lead, where we had a lot to learn, and we had many models to examine that we hadn't previously done. Then the next year was Habitat II, and that was the World Conference on Sustainable Development. And in many ways, our work fit better into the framework of sustainable development than it did the traditional feminist model.

And Jan Peterson — there's a lot to say about Jan, but one of the things is that Jan is a marvelous leader. She's extremely intelligent. She has an intuitive sense of what's important and, as a group, what we should connect to. I certainly don't always agree with all of her decisions, or the way that she necessarily does business, but she's doing the best she can with what she has in the time that we have. In this work, some persons have to take responsibility for doing a lot of work with very little praise and very little reward. My center wouldn't run without somebody who was willing to work without market-rate pay or without pay at all. And Jan was that for Neighborhood Women.

If she had not taken the standard to the UN, established the commission, the Huairou Commission, worked as hard as any Fortune 500 executive in terms of making contacts, making deals, Neighborhood Women would have disappeared. So, no matter how I might feel from time to time about a particular incident, overall, I think that Jan has been a good leader, and that Sandy and Lisel and Geraldine and other people who were part of the organization for many years, for me personally, did a good job of mentoring me and welcoming me.

You know, you have to look at the whole thing. You can't just look at one thing or the other. And so, I've been pleased with my association with Neighborhood Women. I'm quite proud of it, and of the friends and peers that I've met along the way. Certainly there have been many people who have come to St. Louis to visit us who I would have never met under any other circumstance. And I'm happy about that.

ACKELSBURG: Can you tell me a little bit about how you came up with the process and the idea of Circles of Hope?

PAYNE: We came up with the name because I was really focused on different ways of organizing, but women's circles was one of the things that I was particularly interested in, sacred circles. So I was trying to figure out how to take the work that I did with these sacred circles and the

work of empowerment and self-help and to integrate it with these things that I was learning politically and economically. How do you fit all that together? How do you talk about those things?

And I actually got the name Circles of Hope from one of the women that Vel Marie King sent in. Vel Marie King sent a woman to see me one day and when she came to the center, she said, "Are you Ms. LaDoris?" which is what the people called me. And I said, "Mm-hm." She said, "Sister King tells me that you hope the people." And it was a corruption of the word help, but I liked the notion of "hoping the people" more than I did of helping the people. And so the name kind of stuck, you know, that we "hope the people."

So when we started to talk about circles, we talked about circles of hope, because people really weren't drawn to the phrase "leadership support process." Many people didn't necessarily see themselves as leaders and it sounded kind of clinical, you know, as though they were going to be subjected to something. But everybody loved the name Circles of Hope. So when I'd say we're going to have a Circle of Hope, people that I'd never met would say, I want to come to that. So, everybody's looking for hope. So that's how we kind of got the name Circles of Hope. We were describing our circles, and the fact that the circles were intended to inspire hope and confidence. And so, we kind of liked it.

And because we were a faith-based organization, that was one of the things that we had. We had hope. We didn't have a lot of money. We didn't have a lot of resources. But we had a lot of hope. And we really believed that things were going to change for the better. And Ola has a little prayer she says all the time: "I thank God for things being as well as they are." Because it could be worse. It could be worse. So, that's how we got the name Circles of Hope. It just seemed to fit what we were doing. And when I went into northern Mississippi, I was willing to let the women name theirs whatever they wanted and they said, Oh, no, no, no, no, we want to be the Northern Mississippi Leadership Network Circle of Hope. So now we call all of our work and all of our little publications and everything Circles of Hope.

ACKELSBURG: Now, how did you start going to Mississippi?

PAYNE: Sister Carla Dolce, an Ursuline sister who was in St. Louis, was stationed down at Tunica, and she tells me that one night, she was trying to figure how to organize the women, because they hadn't previously been organized in Tunica, even during the civil rights movement, and Tunica was one of the poorest communities in the United States pre-casino. And the casinos were moving in and it was just a big disruption of life and she said that she woke up one morning and said, "LaDoris Payne."

So she asked the women — she gave them some material about me and asked them if they'd like it if I came. And they said yes. And Sister Carla said, "Well, you'll have to write her and ask her yourself." So

they wrote me and asked me if I would come to see them and I went down to see them.

And I went once a month for years. We did Bible study. We used the model of liberation theology. So we did Bible study. We analyzed social situations. We talked about the economy, and we made both personal and collective plans for women, things that they wanted to accomplish and do on their own. They said their world changed, because it was primarily an agricultural economy with not many opportunities. And then, oh, eight or nine casinos moved in, in a short time. I rode with women for the first time when they were on an elevator, when we started to take them to Memphis and bring them to St. Louis. I even took some to New York to the UN.

And I remember Naomi Wilson was the woman's name that we took to the UN. And one of the things that we had arranged to do was to go with her to her congressman's office in Washington, D.C. They were so shy. And I'll never forget that day we walked into her congressman's office — I think his name was Benny Green — and she walked in and she said, "Hello, my name is Naomi Wilson and I represent the Northern Mississippi Leadership Network. We're part of the National Congress of Neighborhood Women and I've come to see my congressman." I get tears, still, in the pride of that moment. Yeah, I do. I do. I really do. They were wonderful women. Some have died. Ten years is a long time in the life of middle-aged women who were sick and poor.

ACKELSBURG: So you started with them in '95?

PAYNE: Um, '94 or '95. Eventually, Sister Carla was transferred and the project ended, but I'm still in touch with the women. They come to see me from time to time and I'm scheduled to go to Mississippi soon to spend some time with them down there. Since then, lots of things have happened. People were living in shacks. Some of the people were still working on plantations. And there's been much progress, much progress. I don't necessarily know if it's all good. I don't know if a gambling-based industry is the best thing for people economically or morally. But there have been many changes in that community, yeah. Northern Mississippi Leadership Network. There were women from Tunica, Walls, Sledge, Tibbs, Lake Clamerant, and Hernando, Mississippi — three separate groups, about 25 women. So that was some of the work that I enjoyed most over the year, going to Mississippi.

In some kind of way, I convinced the Sacred Heart administration that we needed to do peer-to-peer work. So I got them to pay for them bringing whole groups of women from St. Louis to Mississippi to work with the women there, and also to bring the women from Mississippi out of Mississippi to meet women in other places and other venues. And that was good. I remember taking people from Mississippi to meet Angela Davis. So they were introduced to things that they hadn't

previously had time to think about, and I think it certainly made a difference in the lives of the people we worked with.

ACKELSBERG: It sure sounds like it. So it sounds like, interestingly enough, groups within the Catholic Church have been very important to this whole process.

PAYNE: Primarily women religious — primarily the nuns who had a mission of social justice and who had also been excluded from the traditional feminist movement. I've heard different versions of the way people perceive the lives of the sisters in religious communities. And they're all kinds of nuns and they're people who have entered religious life for different reasons. And so, you can't make a generalization about women religious anymore than you can about any other group of people. However, because of the social justice teachings of the Church, many of the nuns were very active in peace movements, environmental movements, antipoverty work, social services and charitable work, working with women prisoners and ex-offenders. So they were already deeply engaged in the work that we were doing. They didn't have to be recruited. That was the main thing.

Unlike a lot of other groups of women who were not part of those oppressed and marginalized groups, they didn't have to be informed. They, from their ministry and from their work, understood the problems. And actually many of them belonged to organizations that had mission statements that talked about them standing in solidarity with the poor. And also, guess what? They weren't competing for position. So it was often their desire that they would help to grow grassroots women who would take over the work of self-empowerment and working in their communities, because they were aging out rapidly, even ten, 15 years ago. And so, yeah, they were important.

We bought our property from the archdiocese. We bought the property. They didn't give it to us, and we paid good money for it. But the archbishop, who is now Cardinal Rigali, one of the princes of the Church, did hold the note, and there were many times when we couldn't pay, and he eventually forgave the last part of the loan.

The way we got the building was, there was a full-page article in the *Chicago Tribune* about us. That was the result of a contact with Neighborhood Women. And the reporter came out and interviewed us and there was this full-page article. And about a year later, some sisters called us and they were the Holy Spirit Sisters from Techny, Illinois. I thought, Well, that sounds real good. And so they called and asked if they could visit us. And when they came, they spent the night. They stayed at the convent with the sisters, and the next day they were still there. Well, I hadn't prepared for them to be there the next day so we didn't have very much. We had, like, one turkey wing. And so, we decided we would make soup of it. And we had soup. And Sister Mary Jude took an apple and cut it up in slices and put peanut butter on the slices for our desert. I don't think we could have been much poorer than

we were. And when the sisters left, they left us a check for 100,000 dollars.

And with that check, since we didn't have any money anyway, we said, Well, just for fun, let's pretend we don't have it. And so we saved it. We spent a little money here and there but basically, we saved it. And when our parish came up for sale, they told us that we were going to have to move and they'd given us two days' notice. And we said, No, we want to buy it. And they were like, Yeah, right.

And so, we went to see the archbishop, and said that we could put 50,000 dollars down. But we couldn't get a mortgage on the property. So they took the 50,000 dollars and held the mortgage. At the point that the mortgage went down to about 30,000-something dollars, one of our dearest friends, a woman whose name is Joan Klearman — and Jewish women were the first women who gave us money. The Sisters came later. And Joan's husband went to see the archbishop and he said, "This is ridiculous. These people do so much good in this community. And they've won all these awards, and people come from everywhere to see them. I'd like you to forgive the debt." And the archbishop said he couldn't do that. And so, David Klearman said, "I will pay half the debt if you will forgive the other half." And he did. And that's how we came to own our building. And so our home for disabled veterans that we're opening is called the House of David.

ACKELSBURG: Oh, I was wondering where the David came from.

PAYNE: Everybody thinks it's David in the Bible. (laughs) But it's the House of David. Although it extends to David in the Bible, because David was a warrior and these are fallen warriors. And also, there's a scripture in — I don't know, it's in the Old Testament — and it says, "David encouraged himself." We're very much into people encouraging themselves. We thought we could do that in order to earn the money to keep the rest of the operation running. So far we haven't been successful at that, because we haven't been able to acquire an occupancy permit. And we'll see how that goes.

I really don't know what the future holds, or how it's going to work out. I know that I'm not necessarily emotionally attached to the property. As a board, we've already met and said that if we have to, we can sell the property. We're going to create an endowment, and with that money, we will fund scholarships and assistance to low-income women. So that's what we want to be, eventually. I already described myself as a philanthropist. I'm a grassroots philanthropist — I simply don't have a lot of money. But we like the notion that we can fund the work of others through prudent stewardship of what we have.

ACKELSBURG: And you do amazing, amazing work. When WomanSpirit first started, when you first got the space, how did you let people know that you were there?

PAYNE: You know, our number is not even in the phone book now, because I couldn't afford to get a business line, so I had to put the phone in in my name. There were lots of different articles in the newspaper that would mention us, and we belonged to a number of networks. And people started to call almost immediately and say, you know, I'm trying to start a business and I don't know what to do. Or, I'm homeless and I'm trying to find a place for myself and my children. It was so funny because in the beginning, all kinds of people came. You know, we thought we were, like, for poor African American women.

I can remember in the beginning, probably about '94 or something, there was a woman whose rabbi had sent her to us. I don't what made him [send her]. And she had a family income the year before in excess of two and a half million dollars. But she was the victim of domestic violence and she had to take an assumed name, and she had to leave the small town in the country where she was with her family. And she was in hiding. There wasn't any group that wasn't formed around a particular dysfunction.

So the idea that there was this kind of place just to go and talk and have a cup of tea — and we describe our work as hospitality and encouragement. The fact that you could have a cup of tea and a piece of cake — I was really inspired by the story of the mothers' centers in Germany and this public space for women. That was one of our primary objectives in the beginning, simply to provide public space for women and for women's work and visibility for women who were at the base in communities, and to connect them with other women's groups.

The emphasis on feminism and the women's movement really came in the early '90s when there was a series of UN conferences. And at every conference there was a women's caucus. Women working together across the boundaries of class and race was inspirational to me, and I tried to recapture and recreate that in our center in St. Louis. So, that's how it happened.

ACKELSBURG: So, in addition to the Mississippi work, what would you say has been some of the most satisfying work —

PAYNE: The block grant where we were able to help women grow their businesses or start businesses — that was pretty satisfying, because women came in and started all kinds of businesses. Although the block grant was new — I think it was, like, '97, the year we got it. And they did change the law in Missouri afterwards so that people couldn't provide personal support to folks under the guise of operating businesses. I felt that if you needed a pair of glasses and you couldn't see, you couldn't be a business operator. So, I'd buy you some glasses. And so, you had the same problems of starting a business that you did at any other kind of work. So they did change the law so that you couldn't do that. But we had a lot of fun that year. We had a lot of fun that year. That year, I actually got a salary. I haven't since or before, but that year, I got a salary, so that was a high point.

The work with women internationally has been a big high point. I've been to, let's see, to Austria, to the Netherlands, to Germany, to China, to India, to South Africa, to Haiti, to Korea, to lots of other places, Scotland, lots of places around the world as a result of my work. Not always with Neighborhood Women. Other organizations, AWID [Association for Women's Rights in Development], the University of Cape Town, other organizations invited me in. I've met with Romanian gypsies, with people from Lithuania, from eastern Russia, many people from former Soviet bloc countries.

In St. Louis, we've had people from Brazil, Liberia, Canada, Mexico, Germany, India, Zimbabwe. And we even had Wangari Maathai, who's the 2004 Nobel Prize winner, come and stay with us. So I've introduced the women in my community to people from around the world, and it has really changed their perspective on many things, including just the regular world events that are covered on the TV news. I'm trying to think of all the places we've visited — Israel, Jordan. And people from our organization have visited many of those places with me. There's a great deal of pride that comes from them being able to host in their own house women from around the world and around the country, and to have people, like Library of Congress, bring groups of women to visit us and to have universities bring visitors in. It's been a tremendous source of pride and a great joy, and an educational process for us to have participated in that.

I like the work that we're doing right now. We created something that I call a Neighborhood Peace Team, which we are doing in conjunction with the Mennonites and the Peace Center in a local public school that involved community conversations, much like the one that we're going to have here Tuesday, with local parents, on a weekly basis and on a monthly basis — a Circle of Hope that focuses on the work of building peace, within ourselves, within our families, and within our community. And so that's rewarding.

Almost everything I did, I loved it when I did it. You know, nothing lasts forever. So it's interesting about interacting with people. You interact with people in one way for a period and then, you know, times change, people change. But all of it's been good. It's all good. I can't think of anything that I've done that I'd say, Oh, God, I would never do that again. Yeah, it was all good, yeah. It's all good.

But the main thing's been sitting in the house, and greeting the women as they come in, and being able to offer cup of tea or hear about their day, or to find out what's of interest or concern to them — just to be there, and to offer spiritual support and to train people for positions of leadership. Women [who] have come through that have gone on to start businesses, run for political office, teach at universities, work toward Ph.D.s, earn Ph.D.s. I can't think of anything, any area, that women who have passed through, or even remain, have not participated in. And so that's been good.

ACKELSBURG: Is it sort of a membership thing? How many people are involved at any given time, do you have any idea?

PAYNE: Oh, for real, I don't actually — because people started circles that I don't even know, OK? Up in Cleveland, at Ursuline College, I went up to speak for Bishop Pillar, at a process they called Church in the Community. They decided they wanted to start Circles of Hope. And the next year they called me back for their graduation and they had dozens of women who had finished, from women who were just getting out of jail to women who had Ph.D.s in theology. So, you know, there's lots of circles. Or they called me from North Carolina once, and a YWCA wanted permission to start circles down there. So there've been a lot of groups that have started that I don't really have regular contact with but they will call me and tell me they're doing a circle. And I've gone to places like Oklahoma and other places and California and started circles, where people have invited me in to start circles.

But at the Center in St. Louis, there's a core group of about two dozen women and lots of others who are part of programs and projects, so that, for instance, we might have a workshop or something and a hundred people will come, but I won't necessarily see all of them. When Wangari came, hundreds of people came, and some of them participate as they are able. There are some people who've been with me from day one, and there are people who are still joining.

We don't have a requirement of attendance. It's intended to be a support, not another obstacle. And so, there are people who attend regularly and then something changes in their life — they get another job, they marry, their mother gets sick, they divorce, whatever — and we don't see them for a while. But they'll come in one day with a cake and say, I was just thinking about you and I brought this cake in. When are you going to have another Bible study? Or, What are you doing with the grandmothers now? You know, and they'll just start right up again. So, Thomas Merton said, in this work, which is essentially apostolic, to give no thought of results.

So I'm really not outcome-focused, even though funders are. I'm really a process person. And again, I can't tell you how many people I've taught the process. So, for instance, my son used it when he taught school. I have a woman that's in a Ph.D. program that uses it when she teaches at St. Louis University. I have another young woman who works with me now who's a family therapist and they've just opened a new practice, she and two other people. And it's called Imani Care and Counseling, and they do circles with girls. I've got two people, in fact, who do circles with young girls.

And so, I serve as an advisor and a kind of mentor to the people who are breaking off in their own circle. It's not something I own. I just introduced it. It didn't come from me, it just came through me. I'm always happy when people take it and do whatever. Ola uses it in the Minority Council at the Heart Association, you know. So it's really been integrated into the life of many organizations.

I went to a meeting, an organizing meeting at a Presbyterian church, and not only were they using the process, but Sister had made a little sign on a piece of cardboard with a magic marker with the basic agreements on. For some reason, we've been using this for ten years. We've never had a professional sign painted or anything. I've got this little piece of cardboard I pull up. And when I got to the meeting, the woman who was part of a stateside welfare-reform organization, and who had worked with us for a while and kind of went away — we really didn't know what happened to her — when she stood up, she took out a battered piece of cardboard with the basic agreements written in magic marker. And I was like, You don't have to do it just like this.

Somebody made a book once, another organization I won't mention because they're very well known. She had written down everything we said in the meetings over time, and she was then selling it to churches and organizations as an organizing practice. I said, "Well, since you've got a book and you're around here doing it, why don't you come over here and do some circles for me?" And she told me that it cost three hundred dollars a circle and perhaps I could get a church to (laughs) provide me with somebody for scholarships. So it doesn't always work out the way you think, you know. There are a lot of people who'll use the process in private practice and earn money. And that's fine, that's fine, whatever.

ACKELSBERG: Was there a particularly difficult moment or project in this whole process?

PAYNE: Oh, yeah, that block grant thing was difficult because of the accounting and reporting. And we periodically are in serious financial stress. I think we may be in it now. There are many times, late over the midnight hour, I wake up and I don't know how we're going to make it, you know. And I'm distressed, you know. And I became ill after the stroke, and I lost cognitive skills. A woman came in the other day from Kenya, and she works for the University of Missouri, and she brought me a real thick package about this thick, with a whole lot of papers in it. And I couldn't read it. I mean, I literally wasn't able to read it. And so I turned to her and my friend, Steve [Jeanetta], from the University of Missouri, and I said, "You know, I'm feeling really dumb right now. There's a 'no put-down' rule in Neighborhood Women." That's literally how I was feeling. I said, "I can't read this." And Steve said, "If you think that's bad, you ought to have had this one. It's full of charts." (laughs)

So there are times when I'm feeling overwhelmed by both the amount of work, but also the level or difficulty of the work. I have to press myself, push myself to do my best, because it's hard. I mean, it wasn't easy for me to understand economics enough to break it down and teach popular economics, and help people understand in their own language and through their own experience these difficult concepts that bankers and heads of state — I don't think George Bush understands it

either, but, you know. So that pushing myself to learn so I could lead, that's been a difficult process over the years.

And my own physical challenges — there have been times when I worked from the bed. And everybody would come and sit around the bed or sit on the bed and read me things. Often I have to hand the paper now to Ola and say, "What does this say?" When we got that paper from you that had the questions on it and what you were supposed to wear and everything, I looked at it and said, "Ola, what does this say? What does this say?" But I muddle through. I muddle through.

But those are some of the things that have been challenging. Welfare reform was a particularly challenging time, but I think that what we're going through now, which is what I call the second phase of structural adjustment in this country — it's the lack of kindness towards the most marginalized members of society. I find it difficult to believe that policy would allow us to abandon elderly poor people who have no other resource. It's almost incomprehensible to me, and it hurts my heart. And I keep bringing it up, and people are looking at me like, What is she going on and on about this for? But it's a fundamental change in the way we believed ourselves to be. We were a kind and friendly nation that cared for at least the people who lived here. And we lived through unjust immigration policies, racial discrimination, and all kinds of other things, but I never thought that we would, in a wholesale manner, turn our backs on people who were dependent upon us for their well-being.

And I'm sad, I'm sad about that. And I can look down the line, looking back at what has happened, and what I've read and what I've seen, and know that this is the tip of an iceberg, and it's going to get much worse. What they said in Missouri is that by 2008, they're going to end Medicaid, and they're going to have something else. But they haven't [decided] what yet, and there are no conversations and no studies taking place right now to plan that future.

So, it was like the welfare reform. I couldn't believe — I believed it. I take that back. But in the beginning, it was difficult to believe that they actually intended to abandon poor women and their children. But I really can't believe people are going to abandon their own grandmothers. It just — I just — so, these are things that were difficult, times that were difficult.

Nine-eleven was a difficult time for me, very difficult time for me, personally. It was as though I internalized what was going on. And I was part of a group called the Millionth Circle Movement. Jean Bolen, who wrote *Goddesses in Everywoman*, and a group of people had started it, and there were 40 of us who were part of what we called the Mothers' Circle, and we were trying to start a million women's circles around the world. And at the time I went to that meeting, which was in California, Santa Rosa, California, I hadn't spoken in three weeks.

And right after the towers fell, I had my fireplace — I had the gas man coming out, because I had it converted to a gas fireplace. I'm very afraid of rodents, and I asked him not to open the damper, because I knew there was something up there. And of course, he did anyway. And

it was a dead squirrel, and he took the squirrel, and I began to run and I began to scream in the house. This was, like, maybe the 13th. And he was very unkind and thought, I guess, that I was playing. And I actually had a seizure. And it scared him so bad, it scared the gas man so bad he left. He came back later and he was in tears, and he said he was so sorry, that he had called his brother in California to tell him what he had done, and he had no idea that I would be that frightened. I didn't speak for three weeks.

I screamed that day for hours. The women wanted to take me to the hospital because they couldn't stop me from screaming. And Del Marie Brown, who's the president of our board — she's a former auto worker — came and sat by my bed and she wouldn't let them take me. She said, "Let her scream. Let her get it out." And I screamed for hours, wailing like a banshee. I was just — and I realized that it was everything that happened, that I was in mourning for the whole world. I didn't know what was happening, but I knew that something profound had happened, that had changed the way everything would be in the future. And that was a very difficult time for me, very difficult time. I thought I was on the way back to the hospital. But I screamed it out. Del sat by my bed for hours, and prayed while I screamed. And eventually, I just kind of passed out and then I didn't say anything. It was like the end of September before I talked again.

ACKELSBURG: So it seems like it was some combination of friends and faith that pulled you through this?

PAYNE: Oh, yeah. I get by with a lot of help from my friends — friends and faith. After the whole thing is over, really it's the interesting thing. I think I told somebody this last night. I'm really not discouraged. I think we're going to win. I don't know when, I don't know how. But I do believe that good will triumph and that people of good will will come together and make adjustments and changes in society so that we can all live. I don't know when that's going to happen. I don't know how that's going to happen. But I have the utmost faith that we are going to survive this time, which is difficult, but as my grandmother used to say, "It really ain't hard times. It ain't as hard as they used to be."

We just have to work together and we have to stand for what we believe in. And we have to understand what we believe in so that we can articulate it others and we can warn people about what is to come. In my own community, my own small faith community, I'm known as a prophet. I think they say prophetess for women, but they call me a prophet. I'm known as a prophet. And it's not, I think, because I have any special gift, it's because I am alert and aware. I recognize what I'm seeing, and I'm able to tie things together. Say, well, if this is happening, therefore, at some point in time, this will happen. And as Dell Brown says, I ain't no lying prophet. A lot of this stuff comes true.

END TAPE 4

TAPE 5

ACKELSBURG: OK. So, how's this been for you so far?

PAYNE: The taping?

ACKELSBURG: Yeah.

PAYNE: It's been good. It's interesting, because every time I talk it out in front of someone, it's different. I don't [know] if different things come to my mind. Steve did a lot of taping and stuff from the University of Missouri, and if you're interested in it, he said he could send it to you.

ACKELSBURG: Great.

PAYNE: OK. He's been doing it over the years, but he said he'd be happy to send you either the transcripts or the videos — because I realized we talked about different things, and I guess it's just the questions you ask and what you remember on that day.

ACKELSBURG: So, I was wondering if you could go back a little bit, to St. Louis. What would you say is the place of St. Louis, specifically, in the work that you're doing? In other words, how much is it a product of a particular —

PAYNE: It's a real product of the particular place. When I was living in Texas, I decided to go back to St. Louis, although I'd had a difficult time as a young woman in St. Louis. But there is a scripture in Isaiah that says you have not been called to a strange people with a tongue you don't understand. And St. Louis was my home. And I knew the people there, and one of the things that impacted my decision to go back to St. Louis was that the cost of living was low. There weren't a lot of places where I could afford to do the work that I wanted to do, because the cost of living was so high that I'd have to spend most of my time in paid work, just in order to survive. And my family was in St. Louis, and I was very deeply tied to my family and I wanted to be there with them, especially as my mother and grandmother were aging and my son was getting ready to go off.

St. Louis, according to a recent survey I read, is the fifth most segregated city in the United States. So, the role that I thought I could play in bridging the gaps between people of different backgrounds, I thought I could do it in St. Louis. I knew a lot of the organizations and I had worked with people on the ground there for, you know, years and years. And so, I had enough connections in St. Louis, I thought, to begin working in a very simple way. And I couldn't figure out how to do that in Dallas or in Houston, where I wasn't well connected. So I went home — and the level of social isolation between groups of people.

But the cost of living at that time — it's rising now — was low enough in St. Louis so that most people could afford housing. You

know, there's a big homeless problem, but people who would not have been able to afford housing in New York or Los Angeles were able to afford it in St. Louis. And so that was important. And I knew of a number of programs to assist people, and I knew them intimately. And so, I just thought St. Louis was a good place for me to go back and work. I was already starting to have dreams about leading women out and that sort of thing, and I didn't know where that was going, but I knew I needed to get to a place where I could do that.

ACKELSBERG: Have you now had relationships with other organizations, black women's organizations in St. Louis?

PAYNE: Oh, yeah. I have relationships with most of the women's organizations, really most of the social service organizations. I spent 20 years working in social services in St. Louis. That was the other thing. So I had, through referrals and networking, met a lot of people over time, and actually the social service crowd doesn't change a lot. People go from agency to agency, but in a relatively small community, you see most of the people all the time.

There are a lot of networks of organizations that we belong to, like we belong to a homeless service providers network. We work fairly closely with WILPF, with OWL, or with other women's organizations — Organization for Black Struggle, other groups of people. So I know the people well. And while we may not necessarily always collaborate on projects, we are in touch with one another and they attempt to support us and we attempt to support them. So, yeah, that's been very important.

Also, with the institutions in St. Louis, it hasn't been that difficult to create relationships with Webster University, with Washington University, with St. Louis University, the University of Missouri. In fact, one of the people from the University of Missouri comes almost on a weekly basis and spends the day with us, helping us work and write. And St. Louis University did an evaluation of our work for us through their social justice program. And we get interns from all of the universities and colleges in the area, and we've had a good result from that. Many of our volunteers first come to us as interns. Or I'll go and speak to a class, because I speak to classes in a number of area colleges and universities, and people say, Hey, I want to know more about it. I'd like to spend time — so, that's also been good.

I know people who are working in other places, particularly where there's not a group of universities, maybe where there's only one school, and they've found it hard to establish mutual relationships with the schools. But St. Louis University and the University of Missouri have actually been instrumental in some of our peer exchanges, because people who came to visit them, or are who were in their programs in other countries — when they come to St. Louis, they'll bring them to the Imani Center so that they can meet grassroots women and hear about the work we do. And I'm not sure if that would happen if we were in

New York or someplace where there are lots and lots and lots of organizations.

There're not lots of women's organizations in St. Louis, and many of them have been focused on domestic violence and other kinds of things that are quite specific. We're really very general. We're not a job training agency. We're really not a social service agency. We're a self-help group. And so, you know, they'll refer people to us when they kind of fall outside the boundaries of what they do, or they'll ask us if we can help. So, yeah, we've been able to establish relationships fairly easily.

I'm fairly well known in the community. If people don't understand exactly what I do, they at least know LaDoris is over there.

ACKELSBERG: Now, one of the things that's kind of interesting is the whole relationship between you and the Center and the Catholic Church. Partly through Sister Mary Jude, I know that relationship is tremendously important to both of you. It's very valuable over time, and I'm just wondering, are there issues that you feel that the Center can't address or has to address differently, you know, maybe around birth control or abortion, because of the Church connection?

PAYNE: Probably so. I mean, we haven't found it a problem. In Neighborhood Women, many years ago we made the decision that our organizations didn't take a position on sexual orientation or reproductive health, because for grassroots women, we found that divisive. And when I joined Neighborhood Women, I took on that commitment that they had made to do so. Actually, all of the sisters aren't opposed to birth control. You know, they're in an organization that does, but the sisters themselves are very varied. And so, there are many sisters who are not really all that comfortable with what we do, so we don't interact with them that much. But there are many sisters who are progressive, who are feminist, who are concerned about social justice and women's rights, and they love what we do.

So I don't really have a direct relationship with the Catholic Church because I'm not Catholic. I do remember when Cardinal Rigali was first assigned to St. Louis as an archbishop. We were one of the first organizations he visited, even before he visited all the parishes. And when he came in, he asked the question about abortion. I'll be truthful: in the 30 years I've been working with women, only one person has ever asked me a question about abortion. In my community, it's not the overriding concern of the women who are there.

And so, I can offer personal advice, or I can talk to people about personal problems without it being the agency's position. And that's really pretty much how we handle it. We handle problems one on one, as they come up. But many of the women, because of their own faith beliefs, have positions on that that are not opposite of what the Catholic Church believes. And that's really one of the places where mainstream feminists and the work we do differ, you know. We're kind of responsive to the needs of the people.

And, in terms of sexual orientation, all kinds of people come. And we're cool with that, you know what I mean? I never have heard anybody in the Church, because I deal mainly with the nuns, not just the Church, they don't seem to care about — nobody seems to care, for real. It's not a big deal for anybody.

ACKELSBURG: I was thinking more in terms of birth control —

PAYNE: Birth control. Oh. People practice birth control. And I certainly advise them to do so, and that doesn't have anything to do with — we don't discuss that with the Church, no. People practice birth control and have. I did when I was sexually active and young enough to need it. Yes. The people do. I respect the right of the people to make the choices that they need to make in order to live their lives in a productive way, whatever that may be. And nobody ever asked us about it. Nobody has ever, from the Church or anyplace else, asked us about it. They're not interested and I had never thought about that. Nobody ever even inquired.

ACKELSBURG: That's great. Don't ask, don't tell.

PAYNE: Don't ask, don't tell. Like Bush and the Army. Nobody ever asked us about it, and because we didn't do reproductive health counseling, we would refer people to wherever they needed to go if it came up. There really wasn't a problem about our doing it. But over and over, whenever it kind of came up in a presentation or something, I simply stated Neighborhood Women's policy.

ACKELSBURG: So, I wonder if we could talk a little bit more about what we started to talk about yesterday afternoon, the question of intergenerational transmission.

PAYNE: Well, in the beginning, about a third of the women were in a generation older than us. And our first groups really focused a lot on what we called wise women, who were women mid-life to senior. And we spent a lot of time with those groups talking about issues that concerned them, from retirement to pensions to health care to legal issues. And we spent a lot of time educating ourselves about that, the women who were my age, which was probably in their forties at that time, and up. In the last 13 years, we've lost a lot of that first generation of people. Our oldest member came to the meetings until the end, and she was 98 years old when she died. She attended right up until the end, until the last year of her life. Our youngest members, when they joined us, were 12 and 13 years old, and now we have girls down to eight. Our youngest members are eight years old, eight-year-old twins. Those are our youngest members. The majority of us are 45 to 65 right now.

One of the things that happened as a result, I believe, of their involvement in our group is they became more and more interested in public issues and many of them found groups that specifically dealt with

the issue that was most important to them. And they've transferred some of their energy to those groups. And so, one of the things that we were preparing people for was public leadership. Not necessarily within our group — it was never our goal to grow our group. It was our goal to grow women who would operate in any capacity that they were interested in, but who would have the skills and would have a support group to come back to if that group didn't work out well for them.

So we train people to go other places, and they have done that. They've gone into education, social services, business, all kinds of places. When we first started, whenever we would go, like to a new group of people, or a new group would come in, there was always at least one or two people in every group who — when we got around to your dreams, and what did you want to accomplish — who wanted to do what I did. And I think that was just stand up in front of the group.

But one of the women, Charlene Teaser Pope, who's in a Ph.D. program at St. Louis University now, Charlene said, "I used to think I wanted to do what you did. Then when I found out what you did, I don't want to do that anymore." So that's usually how that turns out. Because at first it might seem a bit glamorous, you know — well, I went to Germany or I went to the UN or I came to Smith College, or whatever — but then when they figure out what it takes to do that, it's really, really, really a lot of work. Because in addition to doing those things, I also either mop the floor, see that it's mopped, work in the garden, supervise the maintenance, deal with the toilet if it gets stopped up. And so, there's a lot to do that people didn't realize had to be done.

Also, there's a lot of personal sacrifice because I think when some of the people came originally and wanted to do that, they thought I made a lot of money doing that. (laughs) Once they discovered that wasn't the case at all, and not only *didn't* I make a lot of money, but the money I made elsewhere was invested in the Center, and my own personal resources were very limited, because I put everything in the pot, there were fewer and fewer people who were interested in that program.

And the women in my own age group are aging just as I am. Two of our board members have died and some of the others on our board now are ill, very ill, end-stage ill. And so, the original group that made the decisions and did the work is aging out. There are people who come up from time to time and do work for us, and do work for themselves in the community with us, but hardly anybody wants to take it on full time.

In the kind of work we do, somebody has to do almost a sacrificial amount of work, because there are no salaries. So someone has to determine that this work is their life work. I got that example — when you talk about the Catholic Church, I really got that example from the nuns, of living on little. And I'm pretty good at that, living on little and making your work your life. And for me, that is my religious commitment. But just like the nuns aren't getting a lot of people to join, I'm not getting a lot of people to say, I want to take on that commitment. People want to do part of the work. We have many very dedicated volunteers, like Ola, who will accompany me every place, but

when we got ready to come over here, she didn't want to come over here and listen to a five-hour interview. She didn't mind helping me find my socks this morning or any of that, but she didn't want to hear this all day. And so, there are not many people who have the patience, curiosity, interest, and willingness to commit themselves to full-time work without pay. That is difficult. And that's OK. That's OK. I don't mind that.

So that, when we come to the notion of what we will do in the next generation, we've sat down as a group and talked about it, since we are getting older and we are mostly not in good health. And one of the things that we've decided is that we would actually like to — at some point, we haven't decided when, and there are external factors that will help us determine that — we would like to sell the properties that we've acquired. Perhaps buy a smaller, much, much smaller, or get donated a space that we can work in, and take the money and create an endowment that would fund works by women and provide scholarships. Most of the people are in agreement with that. Now and then, someone will come in and say, We can't do that; we can't change the way we work.

And one of the things I also learned from the Ursuline Sisters and from the founder, St. Angela — I'm a lay member of the Ursulines even though I'm not Catholic, and that's kind of really strange. I might be the only person like that, but I love St. Angela — and Angela said, "Change as the times dictate." So, you don't have to be the same way all the time. You can work in different ways.

And I think that a full pool of money, where we could do philanthropic giving ourselves, instead of always running around begging, is what I'd like to leave as my own legacy. I'd like to leave a way to help women and I would like to make it not as constrained. I'd like people to be able to come in with a good idea and we say, Hey, we support that. And that's what the women religious do with their funds — Loretta Sisters, Mary's Pence — they fund things that regular charities might not fund, you know, and that's what I'd like to do. I'd like to be able to give a boost or an assistance to grassroots women who want to do something in our community. And I think we could help a lot more people than we can on a one-on-one basis if we did that.

And so, occasionally, one of our women will come in and say, "We can't get rid of our beautiful house and all these dishes. We've got to do that." And then I'll say very calmly, "Well, you can certainly carry it on, but you will need to start coming immediately and learning how to do it, so that when I'm gone, you can take over the responsibility for this." So far, nobody has shown up for that. Yeah, everybody wants to see it going on. Hardly anybody wants to do the sacrificial work that's required to keep it going on. And so, we think this is the best thing for us. We don't have a property ministry — you know, we don't have a building ministry. We work for the empowerment of women. And we'll do that in whatever way is best.

And my other model for that came from the nuns, too. Because you have like the Sisters of Mercy and others. Sisters of St. Mary,

Franciscan Sisters of Mary, who own hospitals, and as they aged out and there were no longer enough nuns to run the hospitals and do the nursing, they sold those hospitals although they remained on the boards. And they used that money to establish charitable trusts. Now, we will not have millions of dollars for ours, because we don't have a hospital to sell. But we will sell what we have and establish a trust. And it might be administered in fact by the St. Louis Charitable Foundation, with us remaining on the board to make decisions. That's kind of my model of what the best thing to do would be with our assets.

But we'll be around for some time, you know. There's still a need for what we do now, but that's kind of our long-term plan, because we really don't have the young people to come over and take over the work we do. Nor do I know that the work we do will be appropriate 30 years from now. So, you know, trying to look forward to it. But my model for succession has been women religious who have communities that are declining, and the sisters are aging, for how we can use the resources and assets we have.

ACKELSBURG: This is related to something you said before, and I wonder if you could talk a little bit more about it. You said that one of the reasons you were anxious to do this interview was because the things you have done, we have done, over the course of the last 30 years, they're not happening anymore, they're not going to happen any more, we got to find a new way. And I'm wondering if you could just talk a little bit about how you see those differences between, say '70s, '80s and even the '90s when you started this and now?

PAYNE: Well, one of the big emphases in the '70s and '80s was welfare rights. And with the decline of public assistance, and time limits on welfare and many of the decisions firmly made, while we do champion and advocate for low-income women who are involved in the TANF [Temporary Assistance to Needy Families] system, our ability to grow that resource is limited. The same thing with public housing: public housing, despite our protests, has been demolished in cities across the country. St. Louis just tore it up out of the ground, you know, they brought in the Army Corps of Engineers and blew up Pruitt-Igoe. They basically imploded it. And so, low-income housing and those issues that we were working with coalitions of people — we're still part of a coalition that deals with homelessness. But right now, we're struggling just to stay up on ground. Just to stand up.

We no longer have the notion that the federal government is going to enter into housing. HUD [Housing and Urban Development] is being dismantled. We no longer have the idea that we're going to get new public housing units — I don't, anyway — new public housing units, or that we're going to grow that. And so, in the sense that, even with Pell grants and financial aid, affirmative action, we've had so many blows to the progress that we've made that I think the direction of our work has to change. because the organizations that we were working in

partnership with, and in coalitions with, those federal agencies and public agencies are diminishing and not there. And so, we can't do what we used to do. Nobody can. I remember we got a block grant a few years ago, 100,000 dollars. Now they're talking about ending block grants.

So, a lot, a lot, a lot, a lot of things have changed. Social service agencies that were in our neighborhoods that we could partner with — with the closing of all these Catholic parishes — in the basement of our house, there used to be St. Vincent DePaul that gave away food, that gave away clothes. They provided assistance with the utilities. It's not there anymore. And so, organizations that we could make referrals to, that we could partner with, those things aren't there. And the cuts in Medicaid are the scariest to me. They're the scariest to me. So the landscape is changing and I'm not real sure where we're going to end up, but I know that, as Angela said, we have to change with the times. And repeat the question again?

ACKELSBERG: It was really coming from something you had said to me on a number of occasions. What we did before, we can't keep doing, we can't do again.

PAYNE: No, no, no. We also had the UN conferences of the '90s, but beginning in Rio with the Earth Summit and going on to Vienna to the Peace Conference and the Cairo Population Conference, Beijing, Habitat II — we're not going to see those conferences again. We're not going to have that opportunity to gather people from around the world. Some of those things were glorious moments in time. But we have to move forward and figure out a different way to work. In my city, for years, the women who had gone to Beijing kept talking about the Fifth World Conference on Women that was supposed to have happened this year, I guess. And it's not happening. So, really trying to figure out how to make the transition from all of that international and public support to working on the ground on a daily basis. I don't know the answer. I wish I did know what we were going to do in the future, but I don't. I really don't. I'm troubled by it.

But for us, trying to figure out how we would survive as an organization and how we could continue having an impact on people in our community, we had to start thinking forward to what a different future might look like for us, which is why we've kind of come up with this plan to liquidate our assets, and to become a funder — because even the funders who were available to us before are no longer available. And the women's organizations that we worked with nationally, like the Ms. Foundation and NOW and WEDO [Women's Environment and Development Organization] and, you know, those organizations — we always thought they were the big girls, you know, and they had a lot of money and we were kind of like the country cousins, in a way. But they're suffering. And their leadership is also aging.

I don't know the answer. I don't know what's going to happen, but I do know we have to be thinking in different ways and planning for

change. We just can't let change attack us. We have to figure out who we want to be in the future, and how we want to position ourselves, so that our work continues.

ACKELSBURG: How do you keep going? How do you not get discouraged?

PAYNE: Well, my personal spiritual belief system is the primary, primary thing that keeps me from getting discouraged. I'm not discouraged because I firmly believe that in the end, right is going to win. I don't know what it's going to look like. I don't know what's going to happen between now and then. But I do not believe the majority of people on earth are going to continue to be marginalized and oppressed, and that people are waking up and that they are demanding access to the things that they need. I'm not sure how it's going to work out, but if you look back, you know, like you take a long view and you look back a hundred years — that's not a long time, sisters look at a thousand years — but if you look back a hundred years, things have changed in ways that people could not predict. And so, looking a hundred years into the future, I think that will also be the case.

But I'm happy that we've been here and that we did what we did, and I hope someday — that's why I was happy to do this interview — I hope someday people will look back and say, This was a little grassroots group, and these were women who didn't have a lot of education, didn't have a lot of money, but they made a difference in their communities. And I'm sure, like Sojourner Truth over there, with the statue in the park [in Florence, Massachusetts], I'm sure Sojourner Truth had no idea that there would be a statue in the park erected to her memory, and that people would visit it and remember her work. And I don't think we're going to get a statue in the park, but maybe somebody will look at the video and say, Well, they did some things; maybe we can, too. So I hope that in some way, preserving the legacy of what we have done will be helpful to other people in the future.

But my belief system says that we're going to win. We're going to win. And, you know, I was talking to a man who is Muslim, who does plumbing for me in my house. He's been coming for 20 years, Mr. Faquir. And so the other day, when the Pope's funeral was on, he couldn't stand it. And he came in and he said, "Mrs. LaDoris" — that's what he calls me — "Mrs. LaDoris, what exactly is your spiritual belief? We've been talking for years. And I never have been able to figure out what or who do you believe in."

And my belief system trains me to believe in the goodness of people, you know, and in a process that honors the dignity of people. And I believe strongly. I'm a Christian by choice. I didn't just get born one. I looked at a whole lot of things and I decided that this would work the best for me. And in that belief system, there is a story that says that we have a victory. And so, I really decided to hold on to that, because it didn't make any sense for me to believe that we were going to fail. I would have given up.

I suffered from depression when I was young, because I had started to give up. And when I got well, I decided that I wouldn't believe that anymore. And I made the decision that I would work as though my work counted. I was extremely inspired by Martin King, extremely inspired by Martin King, and I just — I'm not tired, you know. I'm going to work till the end. I'll work till the end. I don't know anything else to do. I'm just not tired. And I'm not discouraged.

When I was at the hospital for the last time with this mental health stuff, in about '91 or something, about ten, 12 years ago, I saw psychiatrists. I saw psychologists. I saw a neurologist. I saw somebody who was like a neuropsychologist. They did all kinds of tests, all kinds of cognitive tests and everything. And at the end, all the doctors sat in a circle with me to give me the diagnosis. I was in the hospital about ten days. And I have a seizure disorder, so I was hooked up to a brain wave machine all that time. They looked at it. I didn't have anybody to come. You know, your family's supposed to come, and I didn't have anybody to come except my little sister who was about 30 years old. And she didn't know what was going on, she just came because it was me. And as I sat there, they gave me this whole list of everything they discovered. I'd lost 40 percent of my muscle strength on the right side of my body and just on and on and on. But at the end, the psychiatrist said, "But Mrs. Payne shows no signs of depression." So, I got a whole lot wrong with me, but I'm not depressed. I'm not sad about it.

ACKELSBURG: That's a huge victory.

PAYNE: Yeah, that's a huge victory. No signs of depression. I'm not sad about it. Not sad about it. This is just the way life is going at this time in this place for the people that we are working with. And that's probably why I was sent to work, because the *people* are depressed. The *people* are sad. And I believe that my job is to help the people have hope. So, I'm not — I'm not sad. You know, this is just — it's not even the worst times we ever had, and it's certainly not the worst times in the world.

We are the luckiest poor people in the world. There's no place else on earth where poor people are sleeping till noon and they're getting up and turning on the cable TV, OK? As bad as things are here, we're not tsunami victims, we're not in the AIDS epidemic in Africa, we're not eating out of the dumpster or the garbage mound like the women in the slums in Kenya. You know, this is not the worst thing in the world that we are going through. And it's time-limited. Because one thing about white folks in the United States, they change everything all the time.

ACKELSBURG: Let me ask you one more question and that is — and you've already partly addressed [it], I guess — but what would you say are some of the most important lessons from your life and experiences that you'd like to pass on to the next generation?

PAYNE: I'm going to do the Winston Churchill. Never, ever, ever, ever, ever give up. Things change. Don't despair. Find some spiritual practice that enlivens you and gives you some basis for how you will act and treat others. I don't care what it is. You can be anything. But find some discipline that you apply to your life. Love yourself. Love yourself first. If nobody else loves you, love yourself. Love other people. That's important, because it is not *being* loved that will help you, it's loving. It creates a chemistry in your body that changes the way you think, the way you act, the way you perceive things. Get as much information as you possibly can. Read. Talk to people you know. Talk to people you don't know. Suspend judgment. Suspend judgment. Don't decide in advance that this is wrong and this is right. Explore and experience. And do as much as you can to help other people, because it'll help you. I think that's probably a good summation.

ACKELSBURG: It sounds pretty good to me. That's great. Is there anything else you wanted to say?

PAYNE: No, I think not.

ACKELSBURG: Thank you so much.

PAYNE: You're welcome.

END TAPE 5

END INTERVIEW

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