

# **Voices of Feminism Oral History Project**

Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College  
Northampton, MA

## **SETSUKO (“SUKI”) PORTS**

Interviewed by

LORETTA ROSS

January 5, 2008  
New York, NY

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

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## Narrator

Setsuko (“Suki”) Terada Ports was born December 12, 1934, in New York City. Her mother, Sumiko Takai, had immigrated from Japan to the US as a child with her family. Her father, Yoshio (Albert) Terada, was born in Hawaii; he owned a gift shop in New York City that catered to a Japanese clientele. Both were college graduates.

Suki grew up and has lived most of her life in the Morningside Park neighborhood of Harlem. She attended the Horace Mann-Lincoln School (lab school of Teachers College at Columbia University) and the High School of Music and Art, and graduated from the New Lincoln School. After graduating from Smith College as an education major in 1956, she taught for a year in Turkey, where she met her husband, Horace Gonder Ports, Jr. Their marriage in 1958 generated considerable racial hostility from her white in-laws. Her husband died in 1971 at the age of 36, leaving her a single mother of three. She held a series of short-term jobs in the 1970s.

Ports’ community-based activism began in the 1960s with engagement in local educational issues and struggles over the neighborhood park and access to public space. Since the 1980s she has focused her energies on HIV/AIDS and on the needs of low-income AIDS patients with the least access to health care and social services: people of color, women, drug addicts. She created the Minority Task Force on AIDS under the auspices of the Council of Churches in 1985 and was a co-founder of the National Minority AIDS Council in 1986. In 1989 she founded the Family Health Project to focus on issues of women of color and AIDS.

Ports has served on the boards of numerous organizations, including Asian Americans for Equality, the New York Women’s Foundation, and Asian Pacific Islander Women’s HIV/AIDS Network, the National Minority AIDS Council, the Sister Fund, and the Japanese American Association of New York. She has consulted to multiple projects targeting race, class, and gender inequities in health care, and she is the recipient of numerous awards, including the Susan B. Anthony Award of the NYC chapter of the National Organization for Women, the Frederick Douglass Award of the North Star Fund, and the Union Square Award.

The Setsuko Ports papers are at the Sophia Smith Collection.

## Interviewer

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

## Abstract

Ports recalls vivid stories of the impact of FBI surveillance of her family during World War II, including her mother's house arrest. She describes growing up in a Japanese American family in the postwar years. She details racial tensions in her personal life and public work, and comments on cultural norms and stereotypes that have influenced her ability to speak out. Ports summarizes her years of organizing around AIDS.

## Restrictions

None

## Format

Interview recorded on miniDV using Sony Digital Camcorder DSR-PDX10. Six 63-minute tapes.

## Transcript

Transcribed by Susan Kurka. Edited by Sheila Flaherty-Jones. Transcript reviewed and edited by Loretta Ross and Suki Ports. (Transcript 91 pp).

## Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

### Video Recording

**Bibliography:** Ports, Setsuko. Interview by Loretta Ross. Video recording, January 5, 2008. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote sample:** Setsuko Ports, interview by Loretta Ross, video recording, January 5, 2008, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, tape 5.

### Transcript

**Bibliography:** Ports, Setsuko. Interview by Loretta Ross. Transcript of video recording, January 5, 2008. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote sample:** Setsuko Ports, interview by Loretta Ross, transcript of video recording, January 5, 2008, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, pp. 82-3.

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Transcript of interview conducted January 5, 2008, with:

SUKI PORTS  
New York City, New York

by: LORETTA ROSS

ROSS: My name is Loretta Ross. I'm with the Voices of Feminism Project of Smith College, for the Sophia Smith archives. It's January 5, 2008. I'm in New York City, with the opportunity to interview Suki Ports for the Voices of Feminism Project. How are you doing, Suki?

PORTS: Okay.

ROSS: All right. It is such an honor that you have agreed to be included and interviewed for this project.

PORTS: The honor is mine.

ROSS: Well, I think it's both of us. So why don't we start with some formal data. Tell us your full name, your date of birth, where you were born, what your ethnic background is.

PORTS: I was born in New York City, in a hospital called the Lutheran Hospital. It's interesting, because our physician — the obstetrician-gynecologist that my mother had — served the Japanese American community and he could not get visiting privileges in the majority of hospitals in New York City. But Lutheran Hospital was in Harlem, on 145th and Convent, and so he was able to have visiting privileges there.

So I was born in Harlem. I've lived in the community since I was born. Some people call it Harlem, some people call it the Upper West Side, others call it Morningside Heights, but I've lived there my whole life. As a matter of fact, I've lived within the same six blocks my whole life. I was born — Suki is not my real name. I was born Setsuko, which is Japanese for *a holiday girl* [including the Japanese holiday known as Girls Day]. I was born in December, just around the holidays.

ROSS: What's that exact date?

PORTS: December 12, 1934, so I'm 12/12/34. My parents named me this fairly simple name, Setsuko, spelled S-E-T-S-U-K-O, but when I was just

about two, I got very sick. I developed scarlet fever, and when I got scarlet fever, in those days you were hospitalized, and it developed into pneumonia, and the pneumonia developed into pleurisy. They had to do an operation and all of this, so that I was in the hospital for quite a long time. And the nurses said, What kind of name is this, *Setsuko*? They could not pronounce it; they said it was too complicated to put on the chart. So one of the nurses said, "I know a Japanese dish, *sukiyaki*." And somebody said, "That's even longer." So they changed it to Suki. And so from age two, I had the name Suki. And when I got home and my parents called me *Setsuko*, I said, "That's not my name. My name is Suki." And so I've had Suki ever since. My parents ended up actually changing it so it became legally Suki *Setsuko Terada*, and then when I got married it became Suki *Terada Ports*.

ROSS: That's a fascinating story about how you were given a new identity by these anonymous nurses that couldn't recognize, or pronounce, apparently, the name that your parents had chosen for you. Tell me about your siblings. Do you have any brothers and sisters?

PORTS: I have one sister, much to my father's concern. You know, in a Japanese family, if you have a son, that's really quite important and quite special, and he had two girls. When we ended up getting a family dog, it was also a female dog, so he said, "That is just ridiculous." However, to show you the import of this, when our first daughter — when my husband and I were married — Horace Ports, Jr. — were married in 1958, and our first child was a girl. She was born in December, and my parents had a gift shop, and so December was a fairly busy time, and, you know, that was excusable, that my father didn't get there right away. My mother got there within the week to see her first grandchild, but my father did not get there. Somehow, though, he was able to get the business sort of settled so my mother could take care of it. He got down there two days before the Masters Tournament. He was an avid golfer, and we were living in Augusta, Georgia, at Fort Gordon, where my husband was in the military police.

So my father got down there to see his first grandchild just before the Masters began. And my husband and I said, Say, we have a little surprise for you. Do you know the Masters is going on now? And of course he said, "Oh yes, I was aware of that." And we said, Well, we got you a ticket for that. Well, you've never seen anybody so thrilled. And here he thought that he was going to — You know, he probably was going to say, "I wonder if it would be possible for you to show me where the Masters Tournament is."

It was very interesting though, that when he came home the first day after seeing the tournament, he was appalled that he had the darkest skin of anybody on the golf course — on the course and in the audience. He said, "There wasn't anybody there that looked like me." Now, he was a golfer, so his Japanese skin was pretty much year-round dark, but not so dark that he could be mistaken for Black. Now, I'm quite sure

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my father would have been thrilled to have seen Tiger Woods win his first green jacket at the Masters. It was a very interesting lesson for my father, in the difference between growing up in New York City, which I did, but he grew up in Hawaii, and he was surrounded by Asians of all different ethnicities. Then he went to [Oregon State]. He was at Oregon Agricultural College.

The colleges on the West Coast, particularly in Washington and Oregon, encouraged people from Hawaii to come, and so my father was the first young man on the block who left Hawaii and went to college on the mainland. He was born in Hana, Maui, which is one of the islands in Hawaii that had a large sugarcane plantation. The large sugar companies hired Japanese to do the manual labor of cutting the sugarcane.

ROSS: Do you know the year?

PORTS: Well, I would imagine it's somewhere in the late 1800s.

ROSS: No, I'm talking about the year of your father's birth.

PORTS: Oh, you know, I have it, but I'd have to look it up. [He was born in 1900].

ROSS: That's okay.

PORTS: He died in 1969, and he was almost 70, so if we backtrack we could get it. So he came from Hawaii to Oregon. And then when he wanted to go into business, they suggested that the place to get a business education was in New York, and that he should go to New York, to Columbia, to the business school. So he took a train from Oregon by himself to New York, and got settled in a place called the International House, which Columbia ran for foreign students and American students from other parts of the country that weren't going to be in the dormitory, mostly graduate students. So my father came from Hawaii to Oregon to New York, and settled around the Columbia University area.

My mother was born in Matsue, in Japan, so my mother was not a citizen as my father was, because Hawaii was then a territory when my father was born. But my mother was born in Matsue. And when she was a very tiny infant, her parents decided to move to the United States. Her father had been a painter in the court — in the castle in Matsue — and so when they came to the United States, they were fairly, oh, not used to the hustle and bustle of a lot of the U.S. They settled on a little island called Vashon, in the Pacific, just outside of Seattle. And so she grew up on this little island. Vashon now has ferries that leave every hour, I think, to and from Seattle and the mainland. When my mother lived there, the ferry came once a month, and they got their staples once a month, and they sold little farm products and exchanged — There

was a barter process of their getting flour and sugar and the staples that came over on the boat, and they sent back some of the farm goods.

So then my mother went to the University of Washington, where she was the first, and one of the few, Japanese women. At that time, she was not an American yet, an American citizen, but she was a Japanese alien who went to the University of Washington. They were so unfamiliar with having a Japanese woman that when she had to go for her physical, they assigned her to the boys' gym to get the boys' — So she started out having an interesting experience with her introduction to college life as a boy instead of a woman.

When she got finished with school, she was interested in music, classical music. She really loved the opera and the symphony. But people said to her, You can't get a job. You have no training in that. You could maybe teach.

ROSS: Could you tell me again your mother's maiden name?

PORTS: Sumiko Takai. And when this young lady heard that the only thing she could probably do would be to teach, they said, Well, Julliard, Teachers College, and the Columbia area are places where you could learn how to teach music, so why don't you go there? So this young woman, early in the 1900s, took a train cross country and settled in New York right near Teachers College and The Julliard School.

There was a professor, Professor Barry Tsunoda, who was from Hawaii, of Japanese ancestry, and taught at Columbia. And he invited all the students of Japanese ancestry — New Year's is a very special time when people have very special food; you only have it once a year. Now pretty much you can get it year-round because the food is flown from Japan, and people make things in California and ship them to New York, or vice versa. But he invited all these students of Japanese ancestry who were fairly homesick not to be in their home having New Year Oshogatsu food. So that's where my mother and father met, in the Columbia area, and that's when they got married. My sister and I were born in the Columbia neighborhood, and I've lived there since.

My sister has since moved to Pennsylvania, when she graduated from Russell Sage. It was very interesting. My mother and father both went to large universities on the West Coast. When it's time for us to go to college, they said, You will go to a girls' college only. You may not go too far away from home. And so my sister went to Russell Sage, which was a women's college in Troy, New York, and I went to Smith in Northampton.

ROSS: What kind of work did your father end up doing?

PORTS: Well, he was studying how to be in business, and he got a job as a clerk part-time with this company called the Aoyagi Company, and they sold gifts which people — It's a Japanese tradition. When you go visiting, you take something to the people you visit, and when you go home, you

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take something back to the people — your family, your friends. So the store was American items that people would like to take from the U.S. back to Japan as an example of something that was special. They didn't take back little statues of the Empire State Building or the Statue of Liberty. It was things like pens, fountain pens. You know, in those days, you had ink Waterman and Parker pens. It wasn't a ballpoint. You had a bottle of ink, and you had the ink that you filled. And pens and watches and cameras. So that's the kind of business that my father had. It was a gift shop.

ROSS: About what time did he establish that?

PORTS: Well, Mr. Aoyagi started the company in the early 1900s. And then when World War II came, the U.S. government sent all the Japanese-born Japanese men and women back to Japan instantly. They were mostly sent to Ellis Island until they were put on ships to go to Japan. So Mr. Aoyagi said to my father, You now have a store. You have to take care of it. And when I get back, after the war is over and when they let me come back, I'll take it back. But in the meantime, it's your business, and I wish you well.

So my father all of a sudden had a business. But he actually had no customers, because all the people of Japanese ancestry who had bought presents to take back to Japan, they were mostly — Most of the Japanese companies send people for two or three years. They work here in the office, have a stay in New York, and then go back. So it's when these people went back that they took the presents, or when they went back for holiday visits. You know, in those days, it was not a quick plane trip. It was a train across country, and then a boat from California or Washington or Oregon over to Japan. So it was a much longer trip, so there were very few trips back home in between the two or three years that people were assigned here in New York.

15:00

ROSS: Did the Japanese internment experience affect your family in other ways?

PORTS: Well, the issue was that the Japanese-born on the East Coast — the majority were put into the camp that was not officially a camp, but it was Ellis Island, and it was not meant for a long-term stay. This was where people came when they were coming to the U.S., and they stayed overnight or a week or until their papers got processed, and then they moved on. But at the outset of World War II, it was very easy to find the Japanese because there were a lot of Japanese single men who were brought here for the various companies. A lot of their wives were not paid for, to bring them. It's very common now to bring the whole family, but at that time, it was mostly the men in the company. Then there were a lot of restaurant workers, single men, and there were a lot of men who were used as the houseman — a butler or the equivalent of a maid, a house servant. A few were chauffeurs, but very few knew

how to drive, so it was mostly housework. All of those men lived in dormitories belonging to the churches. The Buddhist church and the Christian church were in Manhattan. In both Manhattan and Brooklyn they had dormitories where a lot of these men stayed in very crowded little quarters very typical of labor in the city, only instead of little houses, they were in apartment buildings. So they were shipped out.

My parents had an investigation by the FBI. My father had been in the ROTC in college, so he had an army record. My mother was an alien, so she was in jeopardy of getting sent back. However, because my sister and I were both in school, and because my father was in a business, the FBI went to our school, they went to our church, which at the time was Riverside Church. They went and asked all of the neighbors what we did, and they finally decided that it was okay, they would let my parents stay, they would let my mother stay.

But unbeknownst to a lot of people, my mother was under house arrest for the entire war. So my sister and I grew up during the war always saying, What is wrong with Mommy? Why doesn't she just go to the grocery store? Why doesn't she just go to the school? Why, since she's going shopping, why does she just call Daddy all the time and say, "I would like to go to the grocery store"? Why doesn't she just go? We thought she was just this wimpy lady who had absolutely no backbone to just go the store or go to do an errand or go to our school.

It was an interesting way that I found out about that. In New York City it's very common to send children away to what's called sleepaway camp in the summer. You go for a week, two weeks, a month, two months, during the school vacation, and you go to the country. So our neighbors came and said they were going to send their daughters to this camp in Pennsylvania run by the Quakers. Now, the Quakers throughout the U.S. were very kind to the Japanese. They were the one denomination of all the churches that unilaterally were very kind — housed people, did things for people. And so the Quakers said yes, of course my sister and I could attend the camp.

So we went to the camp with our neighbors. And on parents' visiting day, everybody else came and took their children out for lunch, or wherever they went for the day, and my parents didn't come. So my sister and I ran into the woods, and we cried. Mommy and Daddy don't love us the way American — you know, we equated it with American parents — they don't love us the same way they did. We were quite sad. But then when it got dark, we got scared. We didn't like being in the woods, being New York City girls. So we came back to camp, and we pretended like we'd been out with our parents.

Now, you know youngsters nowadays would be on their cell phones saying, Where are you? — with probably a few expletives included — Don't you know it's parents' visiting day? And they would get an answer. But in those days, whatever your parents did, you accepted. You didn't ask them, "Why didn't you come?" You didn't call them. You just simply accepted whatever they did was okay.

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Well now, going forward. When my husband and I had our children, we decided to send them to sleepaway camp. At that time, my mother was a widow, and so she came and I fixed dinner for her every night. She had dinner with us every night so that she didn't have to fix dinner, and it was nice for the children, they had Grandma there for dinner. But the weekend that we were going to visit the children at camp, I don't know where, in the deepest recess of my body — I said to my mother, "You're going to have to fix your own dinner." And I was quite rude. I mean, it just was, "You're going to have to fix your own dinner. We're going to visit the children. We think it's important to visit children at sleepaway camp. Parents should go on parents' day." And I went on and on and on, and my mother started to cry.

Now, this was the first time that I had ever seen my mother cry. In Japanese custom, you don't cry. And if you cry, you cry alone. You don't let anyone, especially your children, see you cry. So if my mother had cried, it was in the privacy of her bedroom. She never cried in front of us. My mother started to cry, and she said, "We would have come, but the FBI wouldn't let us leave Manhattan." So my father could have come because he was not under this house arrest, but he didn't want to leave my mother and have her feel badly that he was going and she couldn't go, and so he didn't go either. So neither of them came. But it didn't occur to them to call us or to tell us why, because we had no idea about this house arrest.

So at that point, my mother then told us about the FBI. And I, of course, ran to the phone and called my sister and said, "They did love us! They would have come!" And my sister said, "What are you babbling about? What is it? Who would have come where? What are you talking about?" So of course I then repeated the whole story to her, and she said, "Mommy cried?" And I said yes, and she said, "Oh, wow!" Anyway, that was perhaps one of the most interesting things. It had been such a problem for her that she did just forget the custom and she just did cry.

So my mother told me, at that time, what had happened. The FBI came to the neighbors and asked all these questions. And unbeknownst to my sister and me, as soon as the FBI left, the neighbors all came over and told my parents the stupid questions that the FBI had asked. One of them was, Did we have curtains that we lowered at night? And did my parents have a shortwave radio? And did they have people visiting with uniforms on? We didn't know these questions, so now it explains why, one morning, my mother ripped down all the curtains in our house. We had no curtains! All of a sudden all these — and most of them she had made. All the curtains were gone. Then there was sort of a fiat issue: we get dressed in the bathroom. Don't get dressed in your room, don't get dressed and walk around in the house. Go into the bathroom and change. This was a — you know, we didn't know why, but it just seemed a little strange, but we did.

And then, at the windows, my mother put glass shelves, and she put little flower pots, little violets and things, so it formed sort of a

curtain, but it wasn't really a curtain, and it formed a little bit of privacy, but not really. This was sort of also a form of burglar proofing, I guess, I don't know what. Anyway, she must have thought about it a while, but anyway. Then eventually, all these glass shelves got put up, with all these little plants all the way up the window. Of course, it was very funny to see my mother climbing up to water these plants on the top of the windows. That was one of the things.

And then we never, after that, had any Japanese company. They stopped inviting anybody Japanese. So if we were going to see somebody, we either went to their house, or we went out. You know, people who used to stop by. We didn't know why my mother all of a sudden didn't invite anybody anymore.

The only people that came were the soldiers who came from Hawaii and California. In the beginning of World War II, all the soldiers [of Japanese ancestry] were declared aliens, because they were perfectly legitimate American-born citizens, but because of the war, they were declared aliens. I will never forget hearing Senator Dan Inouye talk about how insulting it was for them to have been born in the U.S. and to be called aliens and not appropriate to serve in the U.S. Army. Well, they eventually changed that. But all of the soldiers got sent to Fort Shelby. The majority got sent to Fort Shelby, Mississippi, and then from there they were shipped, by train, up to New York, where they took the ships over to Italy and France to fight in the war.

The first call, that one of the cousins called and said, "Auntie" — You know, in Hawaii and California, in the Japanese community, everybody's *Auntie* and *Uncle*, whether you are biologically or not, but in this case she really was. And he said, "Auntie, a few of my friends and I would like to come before we go. Can we come stay with you and look at the Statue of Liberty and the Empire State Building? And we want some rice, Auntie. You know, in Mississippi they don't know how to cook rice. They put sugar and butter with the rice." And so it was funny. They said, It's horrible. They mix it, and they make it soft, and they mix it with butter and sugar. So my mother said yes, sure, they could come and visit.

My mother was not prepared, though, for this battalion. I mean, I don't know many is in a battalion, but anyway, 20 guys came — ba-dum ba-dum ba-dum! — into the house, and of course they all — What was so impressive is, in Japanese tradition, you take off your shoes when you come. So our whole hallway was lined with these big boots. And it was my sister's and my job to take all of the cousins and their friends to the Statue of Liberty. So my sister and I probably have a record of running up and down the stairs of the Statue of Liberty more than anybody because we went up with every group that came through.

There were several thousands that came through New York, and you know, they all, Oh, we have an auntie in New York. You can stop. Auntie will fix you some rice. And of course the word went around the sugar-and-butter crew that Auntie would fix — But the first time, when this first 20 came, my mother said, "I don't know how to cook rice for

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20 people all at one time. And I know these guys are going to eat more than one bowl of rice, so it really means cooking for 40 or 50 or 60.” So one of the boys said, “I was the mess cook. I’ll make the rice for you.” So he showed her how to make rice in a pot for 20 people. But she had to make several pots because they did all — They hadn’t had rice for so long — and *real* is what they called it, *real rice* — that they all had two, three, four, five bowls of rice. It was funny.

One incident that wasn’t so funny, with these boots that were lined up. One of my cousins was just my favorite. He taught us how to do the hula, and he had a guitar. He was just the party boy of them all, and he was just very funny. So in our little apartment in New York, he got all of them doing the hula, and taught my sister and me how to do the hula, and we were very surprised that my father knew how to do the hula. He never showed us that he knew how to do the hula. So he got up and he joined them, and he got out his ukulele and he played with them. So we had these really fun times.

But this one special cousin — I really didn’t want him to go and fight in the war. So before school that morning, I went and I hid his boots, and I stuck them in the closet, and I went to school. Well, midmorning, the principal came to the door and did this to me (beckoning gesture). “Get home immediately and get your cousin’s boots. Your mother cannot find them, and he has to leave or he’ll miss the ship.” So I knew I was in trouble. But I went home and I found the boots, and I gave them to him. I did get a good tongue lashing.

ROSS: How old were you at that time about?

PORTS: Oh, I was probably about eight, somewhere around there. But when the other cousins came back and this cousin did not come back, I said to my mother, “If you hadn’t made me take his boots out of the closet, he wouldn’t have gone and he wouldn’t have died. He wouldn’t have gotten killed.” And my mother said, “Don’t be ridiculous. He would have had to walk in the snow without his boots, and he would have had to walk on the rocks without his boots. At least when he died, he didn’t have cold feet and cuts on his feet.” So that was pretty fast thinking on her part. But it was very, very ironically sad.

When I went to see the Cultural Center in Hawaii that was set up, they had a room that had the names, on one wall, of every single young man from Hawaii who had been killed in the war. And because his last name was at the end of the alphabet, as I walked into the room, that was just at my eye level: Raymond Yamada. It was so interesting. And I said to one of my cousins who had brought me there, “Look, there’s cousin Ray’s name.” And she said, “You know, I hadn’t seen it.” She was a little taller than I was, so she had not —

There were a lot of things that happened during the war that were very interesting and probably were the underpinnings of our understanding of what happens when people have things happen to them based on the color of their skin. I mean, we had neighbors — We

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played with some of the Chinese kids in the building all the time, and we grew up — And they suddenly, at the outset of World War II, had signs on their door: “We are loyal Chinese Americans. We are not Japs like the people in apartment 52.” Now, you know, we said, What is that about, you know? So we were not supposed to play with each other anymore, because we were Japs and they were Chinese. So when there was a big debate at the UN about whether the Chinese — whether Red China should be allowed to join the UN, I said to my mom, “Do you think we should put a sign on our door: We are loyal Japanese Americans. We are not Red Communist Chinese who are asking to be part of the UN.” I mean, it was silly, but there were things that were very hurtful. They were subtle but not subtle.

Kids in the neighborhood when we were growing up did not know the difference between Chinese, Japanese, Korean, whoever, and we grew up having kids say *ching-chong Chinaman* to us. But during the war, the *ching-chong Chinaman* stopped, and it became *Jap, Jap, Jap*, which was not lost on us as far as there was a difference. The *ching-chong Chinaman* was kind of ha ha ha ha ha ha, you know, it was kind of — But *Jap* was meant as a real insult. And so there were some things that, you know, are sort of the underpinnings of, and perhaps the beginning of, what our parents said after we were ready to go to college. They said, You will go to college. You will get an education. You were lucky you didn’t get put in a camp. You were lucky. You have a chance to go to college. You will do something with yourself because you did not have to go to camp and you were not locked up.

It was a good ten, fifteen, twenty years later that we were admonished that we had a responsibility. I think that even though my parents did not get put in a camp, they had some of the deprivation that was — I mean, my father all of a sudden, as I mentioned, had this building, this office, this business, and no customers. So he went to the bank and he said, “I’m taking over the business of Mr. Aoyagi because he got sent back to Japan. And I don’t have any money to run this business because he took whatever he could so that he would have a little money. He left me the merchandise, but I don’t have money to buy the supplies and the merchandise that I will need.” So the bank said, “Well, the business has had a good record. It’s not your fault that there’s a war and that he was sent back. Of course you can have a loan.”

So the story of this was very important to my father. He told my sister and me, “You will always bank — ” It was at that time called the First National City Bank of New York. It’s now called Citibank but, you know, the logo is much simpler and it’s catchy. But I know that during the time when people were taking their money out of Citibank and saying they were investing in South Africa, some of my friends said to me, “Of all people! How come you’ve got money in Citibank still? How come you’re still going to Citibank?” I said, “Look, I don’t want my father coming down from somewhere and striking me on the side of the head, because he will say, ‘You were told never ever.’” I mean, [as

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a student at Smith College] I was the only one who didn't have a bank account in Northampton, Massachusetts, probably. Eventually, he let me have it because it was just — I think he got tired of going to the bank and making deposits for me, or whatever. But I was, at first, the only person who had to — whenever I needed money, I had to get it from the First National City Bank of New York. I didn't have a Northampton bank account.

ROSS: Tell me a little bit about gender relationships in your household growing up, in terms of relationships between your parents. Obviously, it was a female-dominated household. [Ports: Not really. Daily chores followed a strict gender code, but the context was very male-dominated.]

PORTS: Well, my mother had certain responsibilities, and my father had certain responsibilities, and never the two interfaced. My father went to golf on Sunday; that was his day off. He went to play golf. There was no question about my mother wanting to do something. She was always home with us. My father went to the business. He left early in the morning and came back very late at night. My father went to Japan and had to go set up relations with people in Japan after the war, and it was all business. Even the golf was with good friends, but they were business related, whereas my mother's responsibilities were to take care of the school that we went to. We went to church; she took us to church. She was in the parents association of the school and in the parents association of the church. My father never ever went to the school. He never ever went to the church. He went to the Japanese church, but he did not go to Riverside Church where my mother thought that it would be better for us to go to a — quote — American church, rather than going to the Japanese, even though we went to the Japanese church before the war and after the war. All of the churches had very modified activities because a lot of the people were sent back to Japan. The Buddhist church was closed, but the Japanese American churches — there was a Baptist one and there was a Methodist one, and they stayed open, and I think probably because they were tied to the national Baptist and national Methodist churches, and I think they probably helped support them during the war.

Whatever my father said about business — that was not questioned. Whatever my mother said about school and church and things at home — it was not questioned. So there were very definite designations of what we could do. And then my sister and I were brought up fairly strictly. We didn't go out and date the way other kids did in junior high or high school. That wasn't heard of.

The school we went to was the laboratory school of Teachers College. All the kids in the neighborhood went to this same school, and it started in the kindergarten, and you went through twelfth grade. It was a beautiful plant. It was built by — I think it was John D. [Rockefeller] the first. Anyway, one of the early Rockefellers built the school because their children needed to go to school, and also they were

supporters of Columbia Teachers' College. So they knew that they needed a school for the children in the neighborhood. But more importantly, they needed a school for the teachers being trained at Teachers College to have an experimental situation where they could practice. John Dewey was at Teachers College, so the early Dewey education system was tried out in practicality in that school. So we went to the school.

So my mother knew all the parents of our classmates, and my father knew nobody except the people in the neighborhood — I mean, in our immediate apartment building or, you know, ones nearby, where my sister would bring her friends home, and I brought my friends home, and vice versa, or we went to the other friend's house, and sometimes my parents went. But they did not socialize as neighbors would do with people, and certainly not with the Japanese community during the war. Then afterwards they began to socialize more, but it was almost divided between business things —

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My mother was involved in the Japanese American community organizations, like the association that was helping senior citizens or helping housing for people. There was a major influx of people that came — When the camps closed, the war was over, a lot of people came to New York to live. They were told, Do not set up little Tokyos. You will be prey if there's any other thing; they can pick you up. So scatter. At one point, in 1968, I will not forget. We did a study of the Japanese American community and how many would be eligible for senior citizen status and help, and the Japanese community lived in 99 postal zones in the greater New York area, which is tremendous. There was no concentration of the Japanese anywhere; they were just scattered all over. So there was, A, no political power and, B, no place where there could be a senior citizen program because they were so scattered. The answer for the New York City Department of the Aging was, Well, there's a program in Chinatown. You could have them go there, to Chinatown. Now, it was obvious that this woman — she was well-meaning, and she thought, you know, Asians should go with other Asians. But she didn't know some of the things that happened during World War II, and that the Chinese senior citizens would not be particularly welcoming the Japanese senior citizens coming into their program, and, defensively probably, the Japanese wouldn't want to go. So it worked both ways.

As girls growing up, we were brought up, I would say, more as Japanese girls than American girls.

ROSS: What was the difference?

PORTS: Well, we had jobs we had to do. For example, we had to learn how to clean the house. So one week my sister cleaned the kitchen floor, I cleaned the bathroom floor. One week I vacuumed the living room, she vacuumed the bedrooms. I mean, it was we had specific jobs that we had to do, and my mother checked to see if we had done them and if

we'd taken everything away from the floor and scrubbed the whole floor. And it wasn't using a mop. It was getting down on your hands and knees and scrubbing it. To this day, I appreciate the fact that she really taught us how to clean a house. I don't do it now by choice, but at least I know how if I had to. (laughs)

We always asked permission from our parents if we could do this or that, and a lot of kids did things — We would have a little radio, and my sister and I would talk to each other through the wall sometimes, but, you know, if we went to bed and you were supposed to go to bed, we had this — in those days, we made a little crystal radio. It's got a little condenser, and you can put your earphones on, and you hear this little radio, and you only got a couple stations. Eventually my mother said, "You can't sleep with those on; you might get choked with that." So we weren't allowed to listen to the crystal radio.

We grew up having to listen — On Saturday afternoon the Metropolitan Opera was broadcast. My sister and I would try and get our Saturday chores done, and then we'd say, Oh we want to go out and visit with so-and-so, so that we could get out of the house before my mother would turn the opera on, and then we'd hear Milton Cross and the Metropolitan Opera. Texaco was the sponsor. I could tell you probably every one of the ads that they had because we heard it every Saturday. So we grew up listening to the opera on Saturday, and then the rest of the time classical music.

Now, if my sister and I wanted to listen to jazz or some popular music, we had to go in our room, turn it very low, shut the door. I do the same thing now. When my kids were growing up and they wanted to blast this horrendous music, I would say, "When I'm not home, I don't care how loud you listen to it. The neighbors may care, but I don't care how loud you listen to it. But when I get home, the door has to get shut, and I can't hear it from the kitchen or my room," or whatever. So it does — patterns do continue. (laughs)

ROSS: I'm curious about your having grown up in Harlem. What were Black-Asian relationships like?

PORTS: There weren't any.

ROSS: There weren't any. What does that mean?

PORTS: There were very few Asians. We were probably the only Japanese American family within four or five blocks. Morningside Park was sort of a dividing line, and the Columbia community was the west of Morningside Park, and Black Harlem was on the east of Morningside Park. Black Harlem and some of the beginnings of the Latino community were north of Morningside Park. The Latino community was definitely south of Morningside Park, and there were very few Blacks south of Morningside Park. So when we grew up, there were a few Chinese restaurants. After the war, there was one Japanese grocery

45:00

store, and that was kind of funny when you walked there, because there would be some Black women who were war brides of American GIs, and you'd hear this Southern accent saying, "I don't know what I have to put in this sushi." You'd hear this Southern drawl trying to say Japanese words, and it was very funny.

ROSS: So these were Black women who had married Japanese men?

PORTS: No, [Japanese women who were married to Black or Caucasian GIs] but who, in some cases, had a Japanese friend, so that there were a few Japanese Americans who moved to New York who were in the war. The majority came to learn — to go to graduate school or go to college on the GI Bill. That's how most of the Japanese young men came back to New York. There used to be a group that lived in International House, and they played touch football in their bare feet, and people in the neighborhood would come up and watch these crazy guys play football without their shoes on. And they played baseball.

The Harlem neighborhood was so separate. But after the war there were two families, the Kochiyamas and the Iijimas. They had children who participated in civil rights issues, who participated — They themselves lived in neighborhoods that were considered Harlem. There were a few Chinese, there were a few — there were almost no Korean. There were few Filipino, mostly nurses, and they didn't live in the area. For a while, until after World War II, anybody Black walking in the neighborhood where we lived, anybody Black — you knew they were either somebody's housekeeper, somebody's doorman, somebody's super, somebody's janitor, or worked as a delivery boy or something. They were not professionals at Columbia. Now it's changed. I won't say that there's no hierarchy now; there still is. The majority of the doormen, the majority of the janitorial staff are Black, but there are lots of professors and people in the professional capacity at the university, in the education.

ROSS: That didn't exist back then. Can I back up a little bit? Can you tell me more about Yuri?

PORTS: Yuri Kochiyama moved with her husband. Her husband was of Japanese ancestry, from Hawaii. My family knew him from Hawaii. My dad [and mother] knew his father. You know, there's a very close tie between Hawaii and California and New York, if you're related. If you have friends, you might as well be related. But so close that when my mother went back to Japan and took two of my children, they went and visited Bill's father in Japan. My kids said that was the best food that they had had the entire time they were in Japan, because he went to the beach and he picked some clams, and he took the kids and they went clamming. He fixed these clams, and he fixed real Japanese home-cooked food, and they just were stunned at how wonderful it was. Compared to one of the cousins in Tokyo who said, "Oh, we've got a

surprise for you.” The kids were so excited. They were wondering, you know, what kind of Japanese goodies — They had gone and gotten Kentucky Fried Chicken. Well, the Kentucky Fried Chicken probably cost ten times more than if they served a Japanese [meal] — But they wanted to do something that they thought was special for these American kids. So they said, It was terrible, Mom. It was not crunchy, it was soggy. (laughter)

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Bill Kochiyama came, and they lived, first, in a housing project down near Lincoln Center. Then they wanted to get the kids in a different school, and they moved uptown — Manhattanville Houses was a lower-middle-income development that was going up, so they applied for that and got in. Yuri, from the very beginning, was one of a few — There were only about five women of Japanese ancestry who were very involved in organizations outside of the Japanese community, or outside of the white community, where people went to send their children to schools and so forth. Yuri, early on, had a sense of dropping the bomb was wrong — rather, dropping the bombs.

ROSS: Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

PORTS: Hiroshima and Nagasaki. She realized early on that it's one thing — My sister and I grew up and we saw various changes, but we grew up with Blacks, with Hispanics. We sort of took it for granted. I mean, our school was totally mixed, totally integrated, and that was different than the culture shock of moving to New York and seeing the division of Black and Hispanic and white, and only Chinatown. There wasn't even a Chinatown in Brooklyn. There weren't Asian communities anywhere, with the exception of Chinatown. And that's in part due to the really terrible racist immigration laws that this country had, and also the citizenship laws. But Yuri saw this as something really wrong, and something that she didn't want her children growing up with in an artificial way. So she moved into a neighborhood that was integrated. She sent her children to integrated schools, and so they eventually intermarried between Black and Asian, which was very, very controversial in any time.

My father used to say, “She invites all kinds of people, but she doesn't know some of the people she invites to her house.” He found that very perplexing, because they had had to stop inviting Japanese people to the house because of what the FBI said. And that, I think, got my father somewhat controversial in the sense of, he was very matter-of-fact: you had to know exactly who was coming into your house. So he wanted to know who my sister and I were bringing home. Who were they, and who were their parents, and so forth. I think that affected my parents in a way that probably wouldn't have affected a lot of families because they didn't have the FBI house-arrest situation. But Mary had a sense of, when she had an open house, it meant an open house, so the neighbors could come by. She didn't have to know them, she just welcomed them.

ROSS: Now you call her Mary. Was her name Mary, Yuri –

PORTS: Well, everybody gets an English name and a Japanese name, and we knew her as Mary when she first came out of the camp. Everybody wanted to sort of be assimilated, so Mary was Mary. But eventually, as people got used to and feeling comfortable being Japanese Americans, she took back her Japanese name of Yuri. But her husband was always Bill. He never changed his name.

Mary was interesting. She was as vehement a civil rights advocate as she was a typical woman — doesn't have to be of Japanese ancestry. She did not know how to write a check, she did not know how to go to the bank. Her husband took care of all those things. So she wouldn't have known how to pay the rent, make out a check, any of those things. Her kids had to teach her all of those things, and to go to the grocery store. She was perfectly able to stand up in front of a whole room full of people and discuss any civil rights issue, any injustice that happened in the community — and there were lots. But know how to go and buy something in the store? Forget it. She knew none of that. But she was very accepting, and she was accepted, but it was partly because she was so unique.

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One of the pictures that flashed across the world was when Malcolm X was shot, and Mary happened to be in the front row. It just didn't occur to her to do otherwise. She rushed over and cradled his head in her lap so that it was not on the floor the way it would have been when he was shot. And so the picture of her holding this Black man's head and supporting this dying man was quite astounding to the entire Japanese community because they did not know that she knew him. They said, How did she know him? They assumed that by her holding his head, there was some familiarity. There was, but there wasn't. I mean, she did automatically what anybody would do when somebody got hurt: you'd go and cradle them and say — oh, you know, whatever it is you would say. She was an extraordinarily militant woman.

ROSS: Well, what impact did she have on your thinking and your consciousness?

PORTS: Well, we sort of came up in different tracks. So she was an adult coming after World War II and getting involved and seeing these things. I was this very sheltered kid who went to a private, independent school of the Teachers College, but because it was a learn-by-doing school, we had a lot of things we had to do. For example, we were required to go to the next-door hospital that was one block from our house, Sydenham Hospital, and we were required to go and volunteer once a week. I came home and told my mother, "I saw a baby, and its face had been chewed by a rat." Well, my mother and father said, We don't want her seeing those kinds of things. Why is the school teaching her those kinds of things? And they went down to the school to say that's not a good

thing for little children to see. The school explained to them, It's a very important thing for them to see, how other children don't have the protection, the safety, you know, the kind of home that you have. So my parents were very convinced by the school that we had an obligation to learn all kinds of things.

One of the biggest arguments I heard my parents have was when the Hiroshima maidens came from Hiroshima to have plastic surgery done in this country. A group of them were sent to New York, and they needed places for the women to stay, and everybody was asked to put up one or two ladies. My father said he did not want one of them in the house because it would scare my sister and me, and that we would be too scared, it would be very traumatic, and he didn't want us to see how ugly — My mother said, "They should see it." Well, eventually they didn't come to live with us, but my parents had them for dinner all the time. So they developed compromises in how they looked at things.

One of the things that was, I think, an indication of the difference between Mary's activism over here in the Black community, specifically with some of the civil rights cases, some of the issues that came up. Whether it was somebody getting shot in Detroit because the laborers there thought he was a Japanese autoworker taking their jobs, and he was in fact a Chinese man —

ROSS: Vincent Chin.

PORTS: But, you know, they had no idea.

ROSS: Right.

PORTS: And so she went out on a limb to defend him. And a lot of the Japanese community said, Why are you doing that? He's Chinese. And she said, "But he was mistaken for being Japanese, so we have an obligation to help him." Which helped the Japanese community to learn some of these things.

My sister and I had an opportunity to go to college, to go away, and so we came back with a different mind-set. My sister did not get married. I got married. I got married to somebody who was from Pennsylvania, from a Pennsylvania Dutch, very conservative area. I wrote to my parents when I graduated from college. In those days, recruiters used to come up to the college, and you didn't have to go anywhere for a job interview. You just went to College Hall, where they had offices, and you had college interviews right there on the location. I decided this group sounded very interesting — I was an education major — so I applied for a job with the Near East College Association, and I got a job in Turkey. My best friend, who I'd grown up with — and we had grown up since we were three in the neighborhood, and we had gone to school together — she did the same interview at her college, which was Oberlin. She got assigned to a school in Greece with the Near East College Association.

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Our parents got together and said, Oh no, you are not going to Greece and Turkey. You are going to the same place if you insist on going overseas to your first teaching job. I guess they sort of thought it was a lark too, but they said, You have to go to the same place. So we went to Turkey because we were very — Oh, we were so embarrassed. We had to go into the office in New York City, of the headquarters of the Near East College Association, and admit our parents wanted us to go to the same place. I mean, here we thought we were fairly sophisticated, going for our first job, and then we had to go in and say our parents wanted us to go to the same place. They said, Well, we don't have two jobs in Greece, but we have two jobs in Turkey. So we went there.

At the same time, a friend of mine said, "Hey, a buddy of mine up at Williams is going to Turkey, too. What's with all you people going to Turkey?" He said, "You ought to look him up." Well, eventually we met, and I wrote to my parents and said, "I've met this person, and we are getting engaged." My mother wrote back and said, "We believe you've been in Turkey. You don't have to bring back a living Turkish souvenir." Well, I thought that was very rude, and I wrote back and said, "Don't worry. He's not Turkish." Because I immediately thought it was the Turkish she was objecting to, and that he was not Japanese. I said, "Don't worry. He's from York, Pennsylvania, and his parents are Republicans, and they're white, from York, Pennsylvania, and his father is a lawyer." My mother wrote back a letter that I wish I'd kept. It just said two words, "So what?" That was all the letter had in it. (laughter)

ROSS: That's a perfect story. We're going to take a break here, and then I'm going to backtrack some, because I want to hear more about how you ended up selecting the undergraduate college you ended up going to.

63:13

END TAPE 1

## TAPE 2

ROSS: This is the interview with Suki Ports. This is tape two. Suki, I'd like you to tell me a little bit more about your educational experience. You talked about going to this special integrated high school. How did you decide to go to college, and what college did you decide to go to?

PORTS: Well, I grew up in the area that's called — Columbia calls it "the acropolis of America," where there are lots of institutions of higher learning. But all of their children had to go to school, and they developed this school that was built by a Rockefeller. It had facilities that taught us many things that most people don't learn in a lifetime. There was a ceramic studio, so we learned how to make ceramic things, practical and impractical. There was a leather craft shop, so we learned how to make — I made my first purse. I thought it was gorgeous, but, you know, you learned how to use leather. We had a woodworking shop, so I made a table. It wasn't too stable, but I made a table. We had a sewing room. The sewing teacher told my mother I was the only one who put pockets in backwards. But that's all right, you could still get your hands in the pockets even though they were this way. And then we had a cooking class, and we learned how to make all kinds of things, and they weren't just practical things. We learned how to make rolled sandwiches for holidays — red and green cream cheese — you know, all kinds of things. So we had a practical education in learning about every art possible. There was a silversmith shop. So there were workshops in every area of the arts.

Then, in our education itself, we had poetry, we had social studies, we had history, we had, you know, all of the various subjects. But they were within the context — Because it was a Dewey Teachers College, Dewey learn-by-doing education, we didn't just study the Middle Ages, for example, we had to make a big castle, and we had the place where the serfs lived and where the horses were and the orchards. So we learned, but it stuck in our heads a lot more than just simply rote learning. We did learn how to find something, but we really did not learn how to memorize.

I'll never forget the first zoology test I took in zoology at Smith College. I got a flat — I don't think it was even graded, I think it was so bad. And the zoology professor said to me, "Did you study for this?" And I said, "Yes, I thought I did." So he said, "Well, you obviously didn't know how to study for it." I'd never really memorized from a book every bone which we were supposed to know, what bone connected with what bone, and whatever. Then he taught me some little rhymes: Never lower Tilly's pants, Grandma might come home. Well, these are all the bones of the hand. So when you put it in context, that was sort of the way I had learned. He was the first professor who actually recognized that there was something terribly wrong with this student at Smith who did not even know how to memorize something.

My education really was very special in that we had — this school had a backyard that they used to flood in the winter, so we had ice skating all winter. We went out to the field and we had soccer and field hockey and basketball, and so we knew all of the sports. We knew all of the various things in the city that were culturally important for us to learn about.

It was in the fall of 1948 that there was a new public housing development that went up, and there was a need for a public school in the area. So Teachers College sold the building to the public school system, and we all had to go to high school someplace different. So my parents said, Well, I think you ought to go to a decent high school, and they sent me to [The High School of] Music & Art. Now, Music & Art — you went in either as a music student or an art student, and because I had only taken a little — ba-da-la ba-da-la — piano lessons, I was proficient in doing some artwork. So I made a portfolio and went to Music & Art for two years. But that was when there was a teachers strike going on, and there were all kinds of activities. I came home and I told my parents, “You know, there were some students that got very angry, and they pushed the principal off the stage.” Well, my parents’ eyeballs got quite big, and they said, Well, you can’t go to that school anymore.

5:00

Well, when I was at the school, I had learned how to be the GO president or the GO secretary and the GO — the Student Government Organization. We had gotten tickets to the Yankees, and we had gotten all kinds of things as a student organization.

So I went back to the school that the parents had started, that was the continuation of the lab school that we had gone to. Some parents thought, Oh, it’s terrible that their children won’t be able to continue in school. So they set up a school, and I went back to that and graduated from there. My parents hadn’t wanted me to go there originally, because they said, Oh, you can’t go to a new school. They don’t know what they’re doing, and it doesn’t have any kind of record or reputation.

But when my sister went away to college — she’s four years older than I am — they said, You must go to a girls’ school. When I was ready to go to college, they said, You must go to a girls’ school. So I applied to different girls’ schools.

ROSS: Why?

PORTS: Don’t ask me. I think –

ROSS: Why did they want a girls’ school? To protect you from boys?

PORTS: I think that was probably some of the Japanese-ness coming out, that at a girls’ school, I wouldn’t be exposed to all kinds of — And it’s interesting, because my father went to an Oregon — a large state college, my mother went to Washington State College. Both of them

were integrated — there were boys and girls — and both of them were large. I think maybe they saw rowdy fraternity stuff, or maybe they saw stuff that they figured that they didn't want their daughters to be exposed to. I don't know. They never discussed it, and we never discussed it. There was a lot of stuff you didn't discuss with your parents. They sort of said things, and that was it, and you sort of accepted it or didn't.

So anyways, I applied to Smith, and I was accepted, so I went. It wasn't that I had any great desire. I didn't pick Smith out as any place that I had a burning desire to go to. It was a girls' college, and my parents said I had to go to a girls' college, so that's what I did.

It was very interesting. I learned later on that I was in a dormitory that was sort of the oddballs dormitory. I was an Asian student; there were several Jewish students in the dormitory. There were fewer Jewish students in the dormitories around the administration building and around the center of campus where visitors would be more likely to come. There were some fairly less sophisticated — There was only a handful of what I would call the debutante: very wealthy, white with blonde hair, very wealthy, who had had a coming-out party, and so forth. It was a pretty sort of cut-across-America group of women, but without that very wealthy — There were a few very wealthy people in the dormitory, like one whose family was very wealthy, but she liked horses, and she had a horse in the stable down at the stables, and she rode her horse all the time. She was clearly different, and so I think they figured this different young lady, even though she was wealthy, could go live in this dormitory. It was very interesting.

I didn't know any of this. You're very sort of oblivious of this until graduation time — or many years later and you're at reunions and you start talking about — We were talking about the fact that we didn't know — I mean, when Northampton got to be known as the lesbian center of New England, we didn't know at the time — I don't think any of us knew what the term *lesbian* was.

We had one young lady who was engaged, and we were quite surprised that she used to come in late, after the curfew, and she never got caught, and it's because one of her friends let her in. We had one young lady who was engaged, and she had such a big engagement diamond that she used to put it in the safe and she only got it out on the weekends when her fiancé would come and she felt safe walking around with him with the diamond on.

So we had extremes of people, and I'm picking out just the, you know, most extraordinary cases. I wrote and called my parents crying the first couple of weeks and saying, "I don't know if I can last here, there's so many different people." And I wasn't sure if I could really deal with this. The girl in the room right next to — I said, "You know, Mom, her mom writes to her every single day. She gets these really big letters every day." And my mother said, "I'm too busy to write you every day." She said, "You call. That's enough, isn't it?" I said,

10:00

“Yeah, but it would be nice to have you write once in a while.” So she wrote once in a while.

After graduation, we found out that her mother kept her abreast of the soap operas. These thick letters were the daily wrap-up of the soap operas that she used to watch when she was home. So here we thought her mother was, you know, discussing all kinds of things and there were all these — You know, you never thought to ask, What does your mother find all to write to you about? Because everybody had noticed she got a letter every single day, and of course the mail didn't come on Sunday, so you didn't notice. But it was quite interesting.

It's interesting because there were about five women who — we got to know each other very well, and we got to be very close friends. We are still very close friends, and two weeks from now we will be getting together. We used to get together every year at reunion. Then we started going to the fifth reunion. At one of the five-year reunions we said, You know, we spend so much time trying to catch up. We ought to have a reunion in between so that we can catch up on what's going on. Because there were all the activities at the college, and we really didn't have time to catch up until ten or eleven o'clock at night.

One of the reunions, I think, that was sort of the tipping point, was we were in somebody's room and we were having — those that had wine were having a little wine, and we were sitting talking. At one point we broke for a little bathroom break, and we figured we'd get into some pajamas, and so we broke. They always have two underclassmen sitting in the hallway, so if any alumna needs some help with something, or if there's anything they need. We heard one of them saying, “Did you see? They all had the same kind of nightgown.” And the one said, “My mother has the same kind of nightgown.” “And they all went to the bathroom at the same time. And did you see? They didn't go to bed. They went back there. They're still in there talking.” Well, we realized what a difference there was between the —

But we still get — There were seven of us. We're down to six because of the cancer death of one of them. We mostly meet on the West Coast now, because the West Coast people say, Listen, we've had to come to the East Coast for all those years, so you guys can come to the West Coast. We've gone to Yosemite, we've gone to Hawaii, we've gone down to Watsonville. We've gone to various places to see something that's of the countryside, and also, you know, go to whatever they're known for in that area.

ROSS: Why Watsonville? Which is known, of course, for the labor movement, you know, the farm labor movement.

PORTS: That's exactly why we went, because we figured we knew nothing about that segment of U.S. life. So we went and we looked at the strawberry growers, and we saw the fact that there were no bathrooms, no place to wash their hands. A few years later we were talking about that, and we said, Hmm, no wonder they're having E. coli outbreaks

among the vegetables and the whatever. If you don't have a place to wash your hands, and you go to the bathroom in a field, what else? But we've done things where we've either looked at some natural wonder, like Yosemite, or in Hawaii we went and looked at the natural but also the number of different kinds of peoples in Hawaii.

ROSS: So who were — What year did you graduate, in the class of —

PORTS: I graduated in the class of 1956.

ROSS: And who were some of your other classmates?

PORTS: Well, I think the only very worldwide-known person in our class was Gloria Steinem, and Gloria is a person of great debate. I mean, there are people who think she should have been made a trustee [of Smith College], and those who didn't agree with the fact that she was made a trustee. There are people that think she is too way-out in her opinions, and those who think she could be wayer-outer. We were in the generation that really was the silent, complacent, sort of uninvolved '50s. It was not a very active kind of time. So I think the —

It's been very interesting. The friends that I have are very accepting of the fact that I'm of Japanese ancestry. They are interested in learning about some of my ancestry which is different from theirs. The interesting thing is that I was the only woman of color born in the United States in my class of — there were 640 of us, I think, that graduated together. I think there were closer to 700 that entered the class, and then with attrition — some attrition and some transferring into Smith, so it came out that I think there were about 640 or 642 of us that graduated.

At our recent fiftieth reunion, I think there were about 300 of us that got together; it was about half the class. It was a very spectacular turnout, and it was very good. One thing that — I don't know if it's just Gloria, but there are other thinking people in our class. We always have some sort of panel or some sort of discussion at our reunion, and trips to the art gallery or the new science wing or whatever. We, you know, try and get caught up with the college. We did get a chuckle out of the difference between our class — At the reunion weekend, they have all the graduates of the pending graduation line up on either side of the road, and the alumnae returning, starting with the oldest, and there's usually somebody in a wheelchair or with a cane or something. We said we weren't going back when we have to go to the infirmary. The very oldest class they put up in the infirmary, and we said we're not going to do that.

Anyway, we had to laugh, because you're supposed to wear white and white shoes as a graduate. As the about-to-graduate, they wore white, but they could wear black shoes. Well, we were hysterical because the black shoes included flip-flops, which is just a little thong, or army boots. They wore black boots that were laced-up boots or very

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stylish black boots, but they were still boots of one kind or another, and then, you know, little pumps, or whatever. Whereas we were pretty much the same kind of hair, same kind of skirt and blouse or one-piece, and white, kind of plain pumps, or something. Whereas some of the young ladies had on a — I think maybe perhaps they borrowed their mother's tablecloth and cut a hole in it and just put it on over their head. Or very fancy chemises that looked as if they'd just taken their mother's slip out of the drawer and put it on. Or very chic, obviously a very designer dress; maybe somebody had made it, but they were very, very chic white dresses. And then, you know, something that just looked as if, oh, could you be bothered to unroll it and put it on? It just looked like it was so wrinkled and whatever.

The variety and the individuality of the Smith women now is so pronounced, and every other group — there were Blacks, Hispanics, Asians. Every mix in the world: tall, short, obviously sort of way-out in their attitude towards clothes and way-out in the other direction. There was one particular group that was laughing as we were coming by, and we were laughing at them, too. But this group was laughing, and I said, "Are you by any chance laughing because we all look alike and I'm the first person of color that you've seen?" And they said, How did you guess? And I said, "Well, you weren't quite pointing at me, but you were certainly looking in my direction, and you were all having a good laugh." I said, "Yeah, well, I was the only person of color born in the U.S." And they couldn't believe it. They said, There were no Blacks? And I said no. They really had a hard time, you know, dealing with that. But I said, "Well, you know, you're lucky it's changed. It's very different." There was a person who said, "I entered Smith as a woman. I am now a man." And we said that was certainly a major step for the college, because there are a lot of colleges that might not have — But they made a concerted policy effort that anybody entering Smith as a woman, that's the qualification. What they do during the four years is their business.

I think that the one thing that came up in our discussions that's different now is the assumption that we did not know about lesbians. That's a major difference now. I think that's quite different.

ROSS: Did you encounter any discrimination or prejudice while you were at Smith that you can recall?

PORTS: Well, it's a funny kind of prejudice and a funny kind of discrimination. You know, you have a little freshman book, and it has everybody's picture in it, and you go away for weekends, and people, you know, look at the book. Boys' colleges have the book, and they look through it, whatever. It was inevitable that classmates of mine, not just in my dormitory but in other classes, Oh, I met this neat Chinese guy at Yale this weekend. Oh, there was a guy from — wherever — and you've got to meet him. I would sort of say, "What is this? Everybody's taken it

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upon themselves to be a dating group, but only of Asians.” They don’t say, Oh, I met a neat guy; maybe you’d like to meet him.

ROSS: It’s their own way of policing the borders of racial interaction.

PORTS: Yeah. Well, it was very interesting that — you know, sometimes it was interesting, sometimes it wasn’t. One time there was a young man from Japan who was very Japanese, and I was too American for him. I mean, it was still chivalrous in those days to open the door or hold a chair or whatever. But he always did it with a deference that was different, and he would make sure that I was seated, that the door was open, whatever. That was one kind of difference I learned very early, because I think it’s the first time I had actually dated somebody who was Japanese Japanese, not a Japanese American. So he didn’t know some of the expressions, and I would have to clue him in on a word I might have used. I didn’t have such colorful language in those days, so I don’t think it was a word I had to explain to him, but from the point of view of it being in quotes, you know, expletive deleted.

But on the other hand, my parents had tried to fix me up with this young man who was at Harvard. They arranged something that, when I went over to — I had to go to look at the art in the museum — Boston Fine Arts or the Fogg — and we went over. This young man was from Hawaii, and my parents and his parents knew each other, and they went — Well, I said to my mother, “Forget ever trying to do that again.” Because this guy was so worried that I would say something to my parents, who would say something to his parents. He was so boring and so proper and so — you know. I said, Oh, forget that. So when it’s somebody that’s been fixed up by your parents, that’s not a good idea either. He was of Japanese and Hawaiian ancestry, only Hawaiian from place of birth, not because he was ethnically Hawaiian.

There were times when there were things said that I think it was just unimportant because they were out of ignorance. People had not lived with somebody Japanese American before. I mean, I think — You know, that I never wore my shoes around the dormitory. I was always barefooted, and I think that was different. Oh, the first time that everybody went out to drink. My father thought it was just horrible that I could not hold liquor, I could not drink. I mean, he and my mother and sister could all have a scotch or wine or something, but I would just get this flushed red and get sick or whatever. So the common thing was for young ladies to go down to this bar and have a drink on the weekend, but young ladies weren’t supposed to go down and do that really. You were supposed to go out if you were having a date or something, that was all right, but not young women going down by themselves. So we came back from the — Rahars it was at the time, and I had this bright red face. And our housemother — we had a housemother at that time, who was an elderly woman who was responsible for us. And she said, “My dear, you’re sick. We’ll have to get you to the infirmary.” And I said, “Oh no, I’m fine.” Feeling no

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pain, saying, "I'm fine." She said, "But you're so flushed." I said, "Oh, that's okay, I always —" I almost said, "I always get that way if I've had something to drink." But I said, "Oh no, that's all right." She said, "Oh no, I'm going to take your temperature." And I said, "No, no. I'm going to go up to my room. I'm fine." So everybody else said, Next time, you either go back ten minutes earlier before us or stay ten minutes later, and don't give us away, because I gave away the fact —

You can tell Asians who have had a liquid lunch or a cocktail or whatever. In Washington they call it the blush, but it's — you just turn red. There's some, you know, [enzymes] that don't — or something that doesn't keep — Some people get a red nose when they drink. It's not that. You just turn red all over.

ROSS: I never knew that, but then I don't drink, so I don't know what happens to people who drink. So you didn't encounter any marked acts of discrimination?

PORTS: A few years later, when my oldest daughter went to Smith, she went for a year and she just couldn't take it. She didn't like it at all.

ROSS: Why not?

PORTS: She went to a group, and it was a group of Asian students, and they said, What are you doing here? And she said, "Because my mom is Japanese American, and I'm part Asian." So they said, And what's your father? She said, "He's from Pennsylvania; he's white." They said, Oh, one of those white men. This was just in the era of Black is beautiful, and you do not mix. Asian is Asian, and you do not mix. And so there was this really sort of hateful anti-white feeling that she was discriminated against, she found out was — And one of the other things is she did not go over to a fraternity and spend the weekend, which some of the kids did. And so some of the girls said, you know, Was she a lesbian? She said no, but she just didn't want to spend the weekend without knowing the person she was going to spend the weekend with.

And then, when she first got there, her roommate was from Southern California, from Orange County, who was a very racist young woman, who said to her things like, "Well, which half do you date? Do you date your Japanese half or your white half?" And, "I suppose it's nice to be Asian, because I suppose I should be lucky because Asians are supposed to be polite." So, you know, after a while of this, my daughter really got tired of it, and she called and she said, "Mom, I can't hack it." So I called the dean, and she said, "Well, Suki, I didn't expect to hear from you this soon. We're only two weeks into the semester." (laughter)

ROSS: Oh my goodness, that's special.

PORTS: So she encountered some [discrimination]. And it was interesting, because one of my good friends in this group of six that we get together, her daughter started the same year. Her daughter and my daughter didn't spend that much time together, but when we had family weekends or something, they knew each other. She also didn't stay in dormitories on the weekend, fraternity houses. She also didn't do some of the things that some of the — So they sort of commiserated with each other and they both dropped out after the first year.

ROSS: Now, in terms of your marriage. Of course you were marrying into a white family. Were there issues?

PORTS: Oh, absolutely.

ROSS: Tell me about how that happened. First of all, you met in Turkey. How did you fall in love and decide to get married?

PORTS: We met on the ship going over to Turkey, and he happened to be dating somebody up at Smith, and I happened to be dating somebody up at Harvard. In those days, you called it being pinned. But anyway, I think sometimes when you're in a foreign country and you're thrown together with other people, you get to know people faster than if you were staying at home. My best friend growing up since we were three in the neighborhood went over, and we all — a group of us, all the group of American teachers got together and did things on the weekend. So we got to know each other and eventually decided that we enjoyed each others' company.

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I did find it very difficult to deal with his parents. It was my first very personal, directed-at-me racism that was very hard to take. When we first got back, after my parents got over the fact that he was not Japanese American, when they finally got over that, they figured, Well, if this is who she's picking — And they were very nice to him. He was very lucky. He had a wonderful mother-in-law and father-in-law on my side. They planned and had a very nice wedding for us. These folks did not come until the night before, and did not tell us they were coming. As a matter of fact, they said they weren't coming and they changed their minds, and they came the night before and came into the house, and sort of — it was like they looked my parents over. And I said, "Well — " My husband said to his brother, "You're here. Do you want to be the best man? Do you want to be my best man?" He said, "Oh yes, I was counting on it." So I chimed in with, "Well, you're not going to be in the *New York Times*. The article already went in, so our friend is going to be listed as the best man."

ROSS: You were feeling it then.

PORTS: Oh yeah, I just sort of had to give a dig that — But they came and looked it over, looked the situation over, and commented that my

parents had a nice reception. Well, I guess they did. They had a very lovely reception. We had it at something called the Nippon Club, which is a Japanese club that business people belonged to mostly, and some professional people. We had a lovely lobster reception, and it was very nice, and I think they were a little surprised that it was so civilized, that we could, you know, have something.

It started off very badly, because my father-in-law was an attorney, and he really wanted his son to go and be an attorney. He really thought it would be great to have, you know, father-son — So my husband hadn't really decided. We liked teaching when we were in Turkey for the year, but when we got back, he said all right, he'd give it a try, and he went to the University of Virginia law school, which is no slouchy law school and, you know, good classes, I'm sure. But he really didn't like it; he thought it was boring. And freshman year, they give you a lot of routine stuff, so he thought it was boring.

So as soon as he got his draft notice he said, "I'm out of here. Bye!" And his father said — It was interesting. His father said, "Oh, you don't have to worry about that. We can take care of the draft board." In those days, wealthy people used to pay the draft board, and their sons, once they got their notice, they didn't have to report. My husband said, "Oh no. I will go and serve my time just like everybody else who can't afford to have their daddy buy off the draft board." So my father-in-law said, "It's not that. You're just interrupting your studies, and it would be good if you — "(gestures talking with hand) na na na na na na.

So he went into the army. And what was ironic was that, when he died — he died of melanoma when he was 36 — and when he died, it was in the middle of the Vietnam War. And my father-in-law, who I hadn't planned to have as part of the service, said, "I want to say some words about my son." So I figured, Mmm-mm. He got up, and he had the nerve to shake his finger at the young people. He said, "Those of you who want to avoid the draft," he said. "My son served proudly in the United States Army." I wanted to jump up and say, "You wanted to buy him off! What are you telling this boloney to these kids who are resisting because they believe in something?" But he said, "He served proudly in the United States Army. And those of you who get drafted should do the same instead of burning your draft cards." And I thought, Oh, you hypocrite.

It never ended. I mean, they didn't really understand what we were about, and the racism was perhaps the most pronounced — They had a large country farm where they went for the weekend, and, I don't know, it was 600 acres or something, I don't know. It was big. And it was bordering the Susquehanna River, and there were woods, and it was very lovely. They had a swimming pool. I was on the school board in Harlem at the time, and so my husband called his folks and said, "We'd like to bring the school board down in a few weekends." My father-in-law said, "Oh no, I think that wouldn't be a good idea." I never heard my husband get quite so directly irate. He said, "It doesn't rub off in the

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pool, Dad. And if they can't come in the pool, we can't come." Then he put the phone down. I said, "What was that all about?" He said, "Dad said his friends wouldn't be comfortable if our friends came down and used the pool!" He was just furious, and I think that sort of made the — In those days, you didn't object to what your parents did. You were a good boy. You know, you did things subtly that were maybe a little defiant, but you didn't —

A few days later they called and said, We've decided that we're not going to encourage any of our friends to come down that weekend, but if you want to come down — And I think that was the kind of prejudice that they had for our relationship with each other and our friends, because I was on the Harlem school board and I had Black friends, and they didn't have any Black friends. They were not comfortable with it, and they were probably right when they said their friends wouldn't feel comfortable. But it was a form of teaching our children something that was so bad.

ROSS: That's how racism is passed on generation after generation. Now what year did you get married?

PORTS: We got married in 1958.

ROSS: Okay. And what year did he pass?

PORTS: Nineteen seventy-one. So it was a fairly short marriage. Our kids were two, ten, and twelve when he died.

ROSS: So you became a single parent.

PORTS: So when I got involved eventually in the AIDS field, I had learned very well what it was like to be a single parent and have to deal with everything, which was not always possible. I didn't. At one point, my son was at kind of a rebellious age. He was ten when my husband died. When he was just in high school, he was having a hard time, and so one of my Smith classmates said, "Well, you know, why don't you have him come live with us for a year and see what it's like to be with other boys?" They had a son. My son didn't think that was so great. They were fairly more conservative than our household, and it was living in Newton, Massachusetts, and it was totally white, and he felt uncomfortable. But then the following year, when he got involved in scuba diving and he decided that that's what he wanted to do, my closest friend said, "You know, they have some of the best scuba diving out here in California. Why don't you let him come here and see if this is what he really wants to do?" So he went to Palo Alto High School for a year, and I think that was good for him. He kind of got into deciding that that wasn't what he really wanted to do, but he had a chance to go swimming all the time and really, you know — He went swimming in Boston Harbor a couple of times, and he found out it was so cold and so

dirty that he didn't think scuba diving in New England was going to be the greatest. So he was very happy to go to California to try.

ROSS: Okay. Now in this narrative — Oh, before we leave the family, what about your children's relationship with their grandparents on your husband's side? Did any ever really develop with them?

PORTS: No. It was very sad. My brother-in-law had three sons. It would have been very easy for him to say, "We're going camping, we're going down to the farm for the weekend, why don't you send Terry?" That never happened. My in-laws never really — One weekend, when they were out of school — it was the Easter vacation I guess, something — I said to my in-laws, "You know, it's very hard for me to get out of work. Would you take the kids for the Easter week while they're out of school? It would be good for them to spend some time with you." I thought it would be, actually, a good thing for them. Mistake. My son came back. The worst thing that happened, he said, "One night Granddad said I had to get a tie and a shirt and a jacket and get dressed up." So he said, "I thought we were going someplace." He said, "We went to McDonalds." He said, "Do you know what kind of a jerk I felt like at McDonalds with my tie and suit jacket and everything?" He said, "Nobody goes to McDonalds with a tie on." Oh, he was just incensed.

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As far as the very littlest, she was only — maybe she was three. My mother-in-law called and she said, "Do you know what your daughter just did?" I didn't have the foggiest what she could have. She said, "She just turned all the TV knobs. I had to get the TV repairman in. She turned our nice color TV into a black-and-white." Well, we only had black-and-white. We didn't have color. And she thought there was something wrong with the TV, (laughter) so she turned all the knobs and got it back to the black-and-white TV, the way she thought TV should be. So it was, you know, several worlds apart. My first example of how they just didn't, you know —

It's different when it's your first grandchildren. I think you allow them to do different things, or you don't. I was sort of amazed when the first child, who had never — she had always lived in an apartment. She had never had a chance, in the house, to go up and down the stairs, and the stairs were sort of a semicircular set of stairs to go up to the second floor to all the bedrooms. She had a ball going up and down the stairs, crawling up, but she would hold the wall as she was going up, and my mother-in-law said — One day I saw her with a little damp cloth, following Lyn up the stairs, and I said, "What happened?" And she said, "She's putting her sticky fingers on my reproduction of an authentic Williamsburg wallpaper." And I thought, Oh my God, oh my God, the kid has put sticky fingers on the Williamsburg wallpaper. First of all, a little kid is so low, who's going to really see it? But so what? I couldn't believe that that was her major concern. But they never, you

know, they never clicked. My kids were just not, just weren't — And I guess I didn't —

My sister-in-law would tell my mother-in-law, "Oh, that's a beautiful dress." And then after she'd leave the room, "Wasn't that hideous? Have you ever seen anything so hideous?" But, you know, my mother-in-law was used to being coddled and told she was beautiful and her clothes were beautiful and everything was wonderful. I was not of that ilk. I mean, if I thought something was pretty, I would say it, but I'm not going to say it and then turn around and say, "How hideous."

ROSS: Pretty amazing story.

PORTS: I was a pretty good cook, but even though when we first got to Georgia, as I mentioned — But when my first child was baptized, my mother-in-law and father-in-law wanted to have her baptized at their church. So my mother came down, and my sister and our best friends, and so forth. And so, with their family, there were going to be about 40 people for dinner. They said, Oh, we're going to have dinner at the farm, we'll have a turkey — and blah blah blah. Well, the night before, my father-in-law arrives at the farm with this big turkey and stuff, and he said, "Mother isn't feeling too well. If you don't mind putting the turkey in the oven — " Well, I did mind. I had never cooked a 40-pound turkey, or whatever. Thank goodness my mother was there and I could ask her, "How long do I have to cook this thing?" At one point, I had gotten the turkey in and everything was started, so I went down to have a swim, cool off, and go back. My mother-in-law said, "You're swimming? Who's going to baste my turkey?" You know, I thought, Oh my.

A little later in the dinner, one of the aunts said, "Suki, what did you put in the dressing? It's wonderful, it's very different." So my mother-in-law is dissecting, looking at the stuffing. She said, "Well, carrots and celery." So her sister turned and said, "Don't even try it, Catherine. I know you didn't make it, so don't even try." But you know, these are very funny people. They will lie, or they will try to seem like they're continuing their usual routine, and she wanted everybody to think she cooked the dinner.

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So it was one of those situations where they never really cared about the kids. And I don't think they really, once their son married this person — I hate to think of it, but after the funeral, my mother-in-law said, "We're not coming back to the house. I couldn't stand to see his empty chair." And I thought, Okay, that's sort of too bad for the kids, that their grandma is not going to come up, and their grandfather. I tried to always put on a different face for the kids with the grandparents. I wanted them to, you know, have a different relationship, but it never happened.

ROSS: So your husband's full name was —

PORTS: Horace Gonder Ports, Jr., a very good Pennsylvania Dutch name.

ROSS: It sounds like an amazing relationship. He probably was escaping from that kind of family when he met you.

PORTS: Well, he did. You know, it was clearly — One of the things my mother-in-law used to say was, “Your husband would sit under a tree and read while his brother was mowing the lawn. Or he’d sit in the house and read a book while his brother was shoveling the snow.” I said, “Well, if his brother didn’t force his brother to go out and help him, that was his too-bad.” But John was always the good boy, and my husband was always the — you know. So from the time they grew up, he wasn’t the same. He went to college. His father wanted him to go to Gettysburg. He was a trustee of Gettysburg, and he wanted him to go there. He went for a year and said, Oh, it was terrible, so he changed colleges and went to Williams. But these folks just never — It was their loss, because they could have gotten to know three sort of different kids.

ROSS: So tell me the names of your kids.

PORTS: Well, my children are Ailyn, who was named after my sister. I have one older sister, Ailyn, and Ailyn is the name that my grandfather gave to his first grandchild. *Ai* is the Japanese character for *love*, and *Lyn* is the Japanese character for *neighbor*. So her name put together is *love thy neighbor*, which is a very lovely concept. And so we named our first child after my sister. She is Ailyn technically, but so there wouldn’t be total confusion, we call her Lyn, the L-Y-N part of the word for short. She’s now 49. She’s about to hit the 50 mark.

My second child is Lewis, who was named after our friend Lewis Leibowitz, who was a good friend of mine in college and high school and junior high, and a friend of my husband’s at college. Lew introduced us to each other, and so we named our first son after Lew. Lew died of meningitis while he was in the navy. My son is 47. He will be turning 48 next month.

The youngest is the baby, who is Sumi [Sumiko], and her name is Sumi Takai. She’s named after my mother, who was Sumiko Takai, and she’s the baby, she’s only 38. She went to Williams, so she went to her daddy’s school. I think it meant something. She was only two when he died, so she really had no relationship to him other than knowing what the kids have told her. But she spoke perfectly at age two because she was home all the time with my husband, who was home the last couple of years. He was pretty much housebound. So he talked to her all the time, and she talked to him all the time. So more than a child would have a constant, he would sit in his chair and be reading, and she would be in her playpen or running around the house next to him. So she spoke very clearly. I was a little sad when she started school and she started talking baby talk because the other kids talked baby talk. So

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after she had this perfect language at two, when she started preschool she started sucking her thumb and talking baby talk.

ROSS: Reversion is not pretty, when the kids can actually do something differently. So you talked a little bit about being on the school board. So let's start easing into how you became an activist and what was going on.

PORTS: Well, you know, my Smith education was as an education major. So I had some kinds of training from the Smith Education Department, plus my training from my elementary and junior high school — This John Dewey do-things-while-you're-learning, I think, gave me a different sense of — that you need to roll up your sleeves and do something if something is wrong.

When my children were old enough and we were starting to think about where they were going to go to school, I went down to the school that I had gone to, and it had been this very fancy, well-appointed building with all the crafts shops and a swimming pool. How many kids in New York learned how to swim at an early age because the elementary school has a swimming pool? So I went down to see the school. There had been 500 of us when I was in that school, from kindergarten through twelfth grade. So we were spread out. There were all kinds of extra rooms, a beautiful cafeteria, a beautiful auditorium, three gymnasiums, a swimming pool. I mean, there were a lot of facilities in that building. I went down, and I nearly had a heart attack on entering the school. The building that we had gone to that had 500, had now 2,100 children on a double session: some from 8:30 to one o'clock, and the others from 12:30 to four o'clock, or whatever it was, I don't remember. The swimming pool was used to stack up excess furniture; the gyms were not used. The cafeteria was — all the beautiful brown molding was taken off, and the brown woodwork all over was taken off. How you can make a beautiful building, that has marble floors, marble bathrooms, all kinds of — how you can turn it into a puke-green institutional building — Well, they did. I mean, it was amazing how they turned this incredible building into this hideous, institutional, overcrowded school.

So I went to the local school board and said, "What are you people thinking about? Why is this school so overcrowded? Why don't you have a new school? What is wrong with you?" And they said, Lady, you don't like it? Why don't you come and help us get a new school? So I said, "Well, as a matter of fact, all right, I will." That had to have been the most trial-by-fire entry into getting involved in a government-related institution I've ever experienced.

ROSS: Approximately what year is this?

PORTS: About 1960, maybe. Sixty-two, maybe. Something like that. Anyway, I really used my Smith education for this project, because they put me

on the school board, and my job was to get a new school for this neighborhood. I called the major school systems that I knew had — Newton, Massachusetts; Grosse Pointe, Michigan; Scarsdale; Long Island; Palo Alto. I called some of the wealthiest communities because I knew that they would have good schools. Princeton. I said, “If you were building a new school, what would you put in it?” And they said, An early childhood school: build one just for the little tots. Put a bathroom in every classroom. Don’t have a big building like you have in New York; make some small cluster buildings. Don’t make an auditorium; little kids don’t need it. Make a central play/multipurpose room. Don’t make a cafeteria; little kids don’t need it. Put the tables up in the multipurpose room for lunch and take them down for reading or whatever activities. Every single superintendent, every single curriculum person — every single person unanimously said the same things all throughout the country. So I thought, Well, okay, let’s go for it.

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So I came back to our local school board, and I said, “This is what I found out from the best systems in the United States. These are the things they recommend.” Well, we had a school superintendent. The local school board superintendent was this very tough, very proper Irish lady who, every time, came in her white gloves, her little hat, and she sat at the meetings very properly. She was a team player. She would never go against anybody in the hierarchy. She was — You know, it was like the little Catholic schoolgirl never came out of her. She was always just — And she said, “Mrs. Ports, we do not have early childhood schools in New York City.” And I said, “But I think we should have one, and that’s what everybody else around the country says.” And she said, “Well, we don’t have it in New York.” And I said, “But Miss [Marion] Clark, the president of the New York City Board of Education lives in Great Neck.” That was one of the schools I called. “He has an early childhood school in his own district where he lives. Why don’t you and Miss Weil” — Miss [Trude] Weil was the head of curriculum for the New York City public schools. “Why don’t you and Miss Weil — ” Miss Twilda Weil used to have a hat and she used to wear her gloves, but she was Austrian, and she was very proper and very — I said, “Why don’t the two of you drive out and go look at this Great Neck system?” We laughed later because we would have loved to have been a fly on the wall in that car, seeing these two little ladies driving along in their hats and gloves, going out to Great Neck. The next school board meeting, she came back and she said, “I am pleased to announce this district will have the first early childhood school in New York City.” So I said, “All right!” She looked at it, she saw that it was good; she saw the benefits of it.

So we then had the battle of where to put it, because Columbia has everything taken up, mostly, in the neighborhood, and who would be the designer, what would be put in it. Well, we got a wonderful — people have to do bids on contracts like this, so we got a wonderful father and son I will never forget: Corwin and Fred Frost. They bid on

this, and they won the contract. So we had to go down to the Board of Education and tell them what we wanted for our new school. At this table were Augie Gold, the head of construction; Mr. Pekarsky, the Bureau of the Budget of the City of New York who had to approve of these things; our school board; Miss Weil of the curriculum. So we sat there, and we said, This is what we want. We want three small units with a central core, and we want a toilet in every room, and three small playgrounds. Not one large playground, but three small ones above each one of the buildings.

Well, Mr. Pekarsky of the Bureau of the Budget — I thought he was going to — He said, “Do you know how many exterior walls that is? Do you know how many curved walls that is? Do you know how many bathrooms that is? What’s wrong with the kids in Harlem that they’ve got to have a toilet in every room?” Well, we tried to explain, but, you know, you don’t explain a curriculum need to a number cruncher. Anyway, we had a break for lunch, we came back, and Mr. Pekarsky was not there, and we said, “Where’s Mr. Pekarsky?” And Mr. Gold said, “He said, ‘I’m not coming back as long as those crazy women are here. They are asking too much, they don’t know what they’re talking about, we’re not going to do that, and I’m not coming back to meet with those crazy women, and don’t ever ask me to come back when those crazy women are there.’” Oh, we ended up, all of us, pounding on the table, But we need it! If you could write sort of a caricature about that meeting it was —

Well, persistence works, and eventually we got a toilet in every room. We got our three buildings with a central core, we got three little playgrounds. But we didn’t have a place to put it, and so we had a big battle. Columbia first wanted it on their side of Broadway. They wanted to put it over on Riverside Drive, and they said they could zone it from 125th all the way down to 110th, which meant that all the white children of the white professors at Columbia could go to that school, and all the children on the other side of Broadway, which included the low-income project and some of the Harlem kids, would be going to the old building.

At the same time that we were trying to get this early childhood school, integration was getting to be the buzzword in the North — it had been down in the South — so that Princeton University came up — and Princeton, the town — came up with something called the Princeton Plan, which was, when you started a new school, you sent all the children of a certain age — and in this case it would be building an early childhood school, so you sent all the early-childhood age children from all over the town to that new school. Then the older school — you sent all of the older children to that one. So no particular neighborhood was going to get a new school, and no particular age was being discriminated against because they had to go to the old building. So every young child got the new one. And so we said, We’re going to adopt the Princeton Plan.

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Well, Columbia would have none of that. They wanted to have — So they came up with three sites: on the Columbia campus, in Riverside Park, one on Tiemann Place. They came up with all these sites for their primarily white children. We had one professor at this Teachers College meeting. Oh, all of the university institutions got into this, and one professor, who shall remain nameless because I can't believe he said it, said, "We can't have this kind of situation. Having a school sited adjacent to Harlem would mean downward mobility for all of our children." That was so jarring, because it was said in this professorial elocution that was so proper and so absolute. It was like he was pronouncing — Well, I couldn't believe that.

And then, because I'd lived in the neighborhood and I was known as a neighborhood person growing up — a kid in the neighborhood, then older — and was now on the school board, I was invited to a meeting over on Riverside Drive at one of the homes of one of the professors, along with the head of the Urban Renewal Group and the head of this, that, and the other thing. Anyway, we were in a room full of whites, and they tried to persuade me that I really should understand why they're concerned about having Black children in their school, and how they didn't have the same learning goals, and blah blah blah. And, You should know, you grew up in a school that was a wonderful school, and you should want our children to have the same experience you did, and blah blah blah. So I really learned how horribly hypocritical and racist some of my neighbors were, who had been friends, but when your children are involved and you want to start talking about education, it's a different story.

ROSS: Absolutely. We're going to end this tape right here.

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END TAPE 2

## TAPE 3

ROSS: This is the oral history interview with Suki Ports. This is tape three. Suki, I'd like to know more about your political activism. How did you become socially conscious, and what was some of the early social activist work that you did?

PORTS: Well, you know, I think most people get into something because the issue means a lot to them personally, or it's of great concern that, if they've had a concern about an issue and they see something wrong with how the issue is being treated, or the people, or whatever, you get — I don't think most people get involved in sort of an isolated way. And I think I clearly see that when I wanted to send my children to the school I'd gone to, and my husband and I believed in public education, and I went down to the local school, I saw that it was not going to be possible for me to send our children to that school. So I would either have to do something about it, or find a private school for them to go to.

I think the saddest day was when I felt I had to take my children out of public school, and that was because a seven-year-old little girl was raped at the lunch hour, and she came into the school office and said, "A man was playing with my pussy." And she had blood streaming down her legs, and she was crying. And the school principal, who was a woman of color, told her to sit down on the bench, went into the office, shut the door, and talked to the Board of Education legal department to see what her legal liability was in the case of this child. Nobody hugged that child. Nobody cleaned that child up. Nobody called that child's mother. Nobody called the police. They left that child for one hour sitting on the bench crying, and letting the blood keep down her legs.

It was not until the next morning, when I had brought my children to school, and my husband was home sick, and I was standing in front of the school chitchatting with a few of the other parents. Somebody — who I promised I would never divulge who it was, somebody said to me, "You don't know what happened in the school yesterday, but you'd better find out quick. Let me tell you, a child was raped," and proceeded to tell me, and said, "You'd better do something about it because nothing is being done about it in the school." So I said, "Well, what are you doing about it?" Well, of course he kept walking down the street when I said that.

So I talked to the parents, and I said, "We've got to do something. This is what happened." And everybody was outraged. But I realized what this little girl must have gone through. Nobody hugged her and said, That man was wrong; you didn't do anything wrong. This school principal convinced the mother to take her out of the school. And I realized how young women are not treated in a respectful way for what their feelings are or what happens.

Now this was only one case, but as we were standing out there talking, a car came cruising along, and it was the local community

relations policeman, and he was this wonderful Irish guy. He got out of his car, and he said, “Well, Suki, what are you doing standing out here?” I said, “You know damn well what I’m doing out here. I’m telling the other parents what I’ve just heard about what was going on in the school yesterday.” So he said, “Oh, you heard?” I said, “Yes, I heard.” He said, “That bitch!” And I said, “Excuse me?” He said, “She could have called us. The kid gave such a description of that man, we could have picked him up in no time because the kid gave such a good description of what the man looked like and what the man had on and what he smelled like.” He said, “We’re furious.”

I said, “If you’re so mad, would you, please — you’re in plain clothes — would you please go walking around the school and see who stops you, and check all the doors, see if they’re all locked.” So he said, “Well, you know, they have to be able to open them from the inside out.” I said, “Yeah, but I want to know if they’re locked from the outside so the guy can’t get in. He got in somehow.” So he went around, and he said, “Nobody stopped me. Half the people don’t know who I am. Some of the people know who I am.” Some of the administration knew him, but the average teacher didn’t know him. He said, “Nobody stopped me.”

Now this was the day after a very serious issue. So the parents — we got together, and we said, Well, we’re going to have to stop everybody from going in the school. We discussed, What are we going to do? Finally we decided, Okay, we’re going to have armbands on all the teachers, and we’re going to tell the children they may not talk to anybody who doesn’t have an armband on. And if somebody doesn’t have an armband on, they should tell their teacher they saw somebody and give a description. And nobody can come in the building unless they agree to have an armband put on. Well, you know, you’d think this would be a perfectly reasonable solution. There were teachers who refused to put an armband on. “I’m not going to wear something like that.” Well now, if it had been their child that was raped, wouldn’t they want to do something? We couldn’t think of anything to do without disrupting the educational program, but we thought this would be perfectly simple. Teach the kids somebody was hurt in the school and not everybody in the school should be in the school.

So I learned about the stereotypes of — A teacher doesn’t necessarily care about the children she’s teaching; a teacher doesn’t necessarily care about the issue. And so we ended up having to go to court because a few teachers pushed, shoved, accused us of pushing, shoving — you know, got into a thing. Well, eventually the hearing officer, the judge, chastised the teachers for not doing what they should have been doing, and thanked us as parents for taking an interest. And that even annoyed me, because I thought, Why do you have a stereotype that parents wouldn’t have an interest in their children? But there are so many ingrown concerns that people have about other people and how they act or don’t act. And so we ended up closing the street, we ended

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up doing all kinds of things to have demonstrations, and finally they agreed to having somebody on patrol.

Now, this isn't now, where you have guns being looked at or security things going on with the children. This was a little seven-year-old girl, and nobody protected her and nobody said, We're sorry. And she was whisked away, and she was sent to another school.

ROSS: About what year was this?

PORTS: This must have been about, oh, maybe 1966, '67. You know, I don't remember.

ROSS: But it was in the mid-1960s.

PORTS: Yeah, probably. And so I got an early lesson when we were working on the new school. My Smith education was sort of idyllic. It was sort of in another world. There we were up in Northampton — And yet, we were asked to give some standardized tests to some youngsters in a school out in the hinterlands, and it turns out a lot of the children were of Polish ancestry, and they didn't know some of the terms. So in the vocabulary on the standardized tests, they didn't do too well in some sections, and that was because it was totally not culturally sensitive, and it was totally not the language of the children in that area. So even though we had these sort of very small classes that we did practice teaching in — it was pretty much educated children and educated parents from the Smith faculty, we had some things brought to our reality about language, about culture, which one would not necessarily think would happen. But I think our Smith education gave some certain underpinnings that eventually came in very handy.

When we were getting the new school, we were assigned a principal, and I happened to have known that that principal was invited to the White House as part of Lady Bird Johnson's program to highlight public education in the United States. And this teacher said, "Oh, the poor children in my school — they're so neglected, and they come to school without breakfast. And I have some children that are early-age drug addicts; they're nodding off, sleeping in school." She said, "It's not like children who have a nice little school and live in little homes." Then she criticized the children, when that school happened to be one of my assigned schools.

So I went into the school and I said, "I want to know what children are nodding off. I want to know why you haven't done something about it, why there hasn't been a discussion in the parents association about kids on drugs, why young children are on drugs and you haven't said anything, but you would say the message down in the White House." Well, it turns out that the child that she finally gave us as an example of nodding off helped to earn money. He delivered newspapers at four o'clock every morning in the neighborhood, and by the time he got to school, he was sleepy. He was tired. He'd gone all

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over the neighborhood delivering newspapers, walking up and down a lot of walk-up apartments, and she hadn't bothered to find out. This same woman was slated to be the principal of our new school, and I thought, Oh no, this is not going to happen.

Well, we said to the Board of Education, We don't want this woman, she's not appropriate, we don't want her in the school. And they said, Oh no, we know best. She's worked in a Harlem school, she knows Harlem schools, she knows Harlem children. And I said, "Oh yes, she certainly does. She talks about them in the White House."

But anyway, the only way that we finally got her to agree not to come to the school is we asked for a meeting with the parents association, and we invited Leonard Buder, who was the education reporter for the *New York Times*, and we asked him to come and sit in on the meeting. We sat all the way around the room, and some of us happened to — the big circle came in front of the door so nobody could get out the door, but that was just happenstance of people sitting in a circle. So when the principal thought she was going to leave the meeting, when she'd had enough of this meeting, she couldn't get out because the door was blocked by the people sitting in the circle. So she sat back down, and the news reporter asked a few questions. He remembered the article about things that she'd said at the White House. So anyway, eventually she decided that this was not the appropriate school for her to go to.

I think that if my education department hadn't been so nurturing of the idea that children should feel safe in their school, they should be educated, that that's what they were there for — When my young son came home one day from school and he said, "I'm not going back to school," I said, "What's the matter? You love school." He said, "I'm not going back." I said, "Oh, come on. Have your lunch, and we'll go back." He said, "I'm not going back." I said, "Well, what happened this morning? What did your teacher do?" "She wasn't here. We had a substitute teacher." So I thought, Oh, okay. So I said, "All right. What did the substitute teacher do?" "She put my friend Johnny in the garbage can." I said, "Don't make up stories. No teacher is going to put your friend in the garbage can." He said, "Oh no?" And he marched to the kitchen, took the bag of garbage out of the garbage can, and sat down in the garbage can with his little legs sticking out and his head back this way so his little butt could get in the can. And he said, "That's what she did to my friend." I said, "Okay. What did he do?" "Oh, he talked up." So then he said, "And she also put so-and-so in her locker." Well, those lockers are quite tiny, and the kids were small, but, you know, it's got to be kind of crowded. So I said, "Okay, we're going to go back to the school and see what's at the bottom of this."

Well, the assistant principal of course denied that this had happened, and I said, "You know, my son is not going to lie to me. No child can possibly make up how a kid looks in the garbage can. He had to have seen that." So anyway, they said, It's not true. Well anyway. So I called this education reporter of the *Times*, and I said, "Would you

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please send somebody up to look at what's going on?" So he sent a young cub. The assistant principal was able to convince him, Oh, that's just a parent who's disgruntled. Don't worry about it, nothing happened. So I called the education reporter back, and I said, "Look, how could you believe that young reporter when he came back — that he said one thing and I said something else?" So he said, "Well, you know, Mrs. Ports, you could be a little bit tough maybe." So I said, "No. Nobody's going to make up a story like that." I said, "But seeing as you believe your cub reporter, I'm going to go up to the school, and I'm going to take the teacher and put her in the garbage can, and then you will write a story about, Parent in Harlem goes berserk, accosts teacher, puts teacher in the garbage can." And he said, "You cannot blackmail me into doing something." I said, "I'm not. I'm just telling you." He said, "You can't cook a story up and tell me." I said, "Well, I'm just telling you this because you don't believe what went on, so I'm going to make a news story for you." He said, "Okay, okay, okay." So he went up to the school, he found out what was going on, and that Saturday it was a tiny little article, but it was in the *Times*, about a teacher, a substitute teacher who threw a child in the garbage can, put another one in whatever, and had been transferred out of the school. But the parents were not happy that the administration had not acted faster.

I got a phone call. I get the paper early in the morning, and somewhere around nine or ten o'clock, I got a phone call from the principal. "How dare you call the *New York Times*!" So I said, "How dare I? Why not? It affected my child, and I felt very strongly that my child had to understand that if he came home and told me such a cockamamie story, I would do something about it." So she said, "Do you know how embarrassing it was for me?" She said, "I am at a conference of all the principals in New York City, and they came up to me, 'Oh Edna, what happened in your school? What did you do? Why didn't you do something? Who was the parent that ratted on you?'" So she was more concerned about what the other principals said than the initial cause for this whole brouhaha, of a substitute teacher being allowed to do something and then covering it over.

So when I started seeing some of these stories, one by one, I began to see that, unless you're very vigilant, and unless your child tells you something, you don't know half the things that go on in a school. You don't even know a tenth of the things that go on. So that's, I guess, because I got initiated by my own children, because I went down to find out what the school they would go to — And then when I found out some of the things that were going on in the school, and as a member of the school board I realized I had a responsibility not just because of my own children but other schools.

Just like a junior high school with a very beloved principal. Everybody loved the principal. He was an older man who was nice to the kids, was nice to everybody, but he had no discipline in his school. Everybody loved him, including the winos who sat in the back corridor

and drank wine, including the guys who were pushing some marijuana or whatever in the schoolyard. Everybody loved him. The kids came into his office in the morning and threw their coats in his office because they knew they'd be safe. They said if they put them in their lockers, sometimes the lockers got broken into, so they would put their coats in the principal's office.

One day — And I know there was, you know, a lack of educational supervision, because I was sitting in on a class and I saw a teacher writing, "A fish has iridescent scales," and she was spelling iridescent, oh, totally incorrectly, and the kids were sitting there, you know, Yeah, yeah, yeah. Now, if she had brought a fish in and showed them what she was talking about and showed them this fish, not only would they have smelled the fish, but they would have seen what the word *iridescent* was. They had no concept. Because if you spell it on the board, that doesn't get across what iridescent means.

ROSS: Especially if you misspell it.

PORTS: Anyway, there were all kinds of things going on in the school. The kids knew that you could get wine on the staircase, you could get pot from this other — And so it got to be such a bad situation, we told the principal, Listen, you've got to cut out this stuff. If you need help, we'll get the police to get in there and clean it up. But you've got to do something about it. So we ended up getting the police to go in there.

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Well, the police came in just about the time the local school board public relations woman came into the building, and she was very well dressed and she had on high heels. Well, the police picked her up as a hooker in the school and were carrying her out to the squad car, and she was yelling, "Let me go! I am the community relations officer of this school board!" She was screaming, and all the kids were yelling out the window, Goodbye! Goodbye! Have a good time! So we had to get her out of jail, we had to explain what this whole commotion was, and yet it could have been so avoided if there had been some discipline, some sense of the other teachers wanting something to be done, and not just putting all the blame on this very friendly old principal who was about to retire and needed to have some help.

Well, you know, you see these things and you just know that — you can understand why there are so many kids going out of the New York City public school system who are illiterate. They get out of twelfth grade and they cannot parse a sentence, they cannot write a sentence, they can barely write their own name. I mean, I'm exaggerating but, you know, it's really very serious.

So we — And now I'm talking about when I was on the school board. We tried to think of some other situations where we would integrate the school. We had one school that was opening that eventually got an award for interesting use of unusable space, which was a school which was built without windows so that they wouldn't hear the traffic noise of the New York Central Railroad that went to and

from, every day, right next to the school wall. It was a solid brick building. So with the exception of, on the first floor there was some glass in the hallways. When the school was about to be opened, the principal wanted to put the kids in for the summer school, and we said, No, you haven't checked the air conditioning system. "Well, what better than if we put kids in there?" he said. "They can tell us where it's hot." We said, You can't put kids in a building that has no windows and test to see if the air — " This was the first totally air-conditioned school in New York City, the first one without windows, and you're going to put kids in there to see where the bugs are? And we said, No, that's not going to happen. However, we suggested that, because the train was so close and you could get off at 125th Street, we suggested busing some kids from the upper Bronx schools, that were totally white, and sending them on the train down to the school, and sending some of the Black and Hispanic kids in the school up to fill the spaces in the predominantly white [school]. Oh, you know how well that went over — with anybody. The teachers didn't like it, the principal didn't like it, the parents didn't like it. But there were no serious attempts at really getting some integration into the public schools.

ROSS: So how did all of this experience as an education activist lead to other activism?

PORTS: Well, you know, one by one different things come up. My children and I grew up in Morningside Park. Morningside Park is a beautiful park, designed by Frederick Law Olmstead, and it was one of the parks that was built because New York City is built on a grid system, so the streets are all — but this has a huge precipice and a huge rock embankment that you can't build a grid pattern there. So they had to stop the streets at the park and just turn this big rock pile into a park. There were stories — and I remember growing up — where somebody was murdered in the park, and our gym teacher was the one to see this. So she was a very tough lady, and she stood in front of the park and she said, "No! Go around! You can't go in the park!" And she kept us from seeing the dead body until the police came and they removed the body. But because there was such a demarcation of Black on one side and white on the other, lower-income, more menial-job people living at the bottom of the hill, and more professors living at the top of the hill, it was considered sort of a no-people zone.

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At one point, Columbia put gates at the top of the park so nobody from Harlem could come up and go onto the campus part of Morningside Heights, which incensed a lot of us. We thought, This is not right. If you're going to put gates on the park, put them on the whole park so nobody can go in the park. Why do you just put gates so you're keeping some people out? Well, Columbia decided that one way to solve this was to put housing in Morningside Park, and then move the park over so that you moved some of the Black community over a few blocks, put another buffer zone of another park. And, well, of course

that didn't fly too well, because that did get a lot of political people incensed that they would try that.

But they did settle for putting their gym in Morningside Park. They decided that they needed a space for a new gym, and that they would put the gym in Morningside Park. Well, having grown up in the park, I thought, This is a crazy use of a park, to put a gym in here. It's a beautiful landscaped park. People around the country have idolized parks that had been designed by Frederick Law Olmstead. Well anyway, Columbia went through the process of having it approved.

Morningside Park was a land-grant park, so it had to get approved by the New York City Council and the Board of Estimate, which then had to send a message up to Albany. The state legislature had to give the park land up, and then it could be turned over to Columbia. So they went through all the motions of going through the hearings. A group of community people — We set up the four communities around the park — the Manhattanville, the Harlem, the Morningside, and the Manhattan Valley — all the four areas around the park. We set up a committee with people from those communities, and we went to the hearings.

The very first person to speak was the legal counsel for Columbia, and if he ever sees this tape, I'm sure he would not appreciate it, but this man got up, very, very proper in his pinstripe suit, and he said, "My name is John Wheeler of Thacher, Proffitt, Prizer, Crawley & Wood. We are legal counsel for Columbia University. And the reason that we would like to have this gym in the park is because it's not used by people safely anyway, and we would like to have this gymnasium. So I've been asked why we can't have more than the basement for the community youth." And then he said, "We can't because upstairs the students will use the gymnasium for their ROTC practice, and we will be storing the guns of the ROTC in the park in that gym."

Well, he did it for us. First of all, we didn't have to do any public relations or mottos or picket signs or anything. He created for us the plantation gymnasium where the white students went in the front door, the community went in the back door. The white students were upstairs in a large gymnasium, the Black community had a little half-court. I don't know if you know that, in basketball, you can have just one basket and play on a —

ROSS: Yeah.

PORTS: They had a half-court basketball and, like, a diving pool. It was just a small little pool. And there was no way to get from downstairs upstairs, so he explained. First of all, they made the plantation idea come to our head, and then — This was the middle of 1968. This was the Vietnam War time, this was all kinds of unrest. It hadn't started, the unrest hadn't started — we've been blamed for starting it, the gym in the park. But to think that a public park would be used to store guns. Now, I

don't want to malign any Columbia students, but there are students who have gotten drunk. In the history of students, there are students who have been unwise in their choice of activities. Who's to say that, all of a sudden, there will be such supervision and such security on those guns that they wouldn't get loose and some student didn't make some mischief with some of those guns, either to other students or people in the community? Who knows? It just was — So they did all their publicity.

30:00

At this particular hearing, we did have a good time, because I assigned each person — I said, “Now you go up and say you would like to question what Mr. Wheeler, Thacher, Crawley, Thacher, Wood.” I said, “Each person has to — ” I mean, he was so clear in saying, “Thacher, Proffitt, Prizer, Crawley & Wood.” So we just intertwined all the names, mixed them up, got them all — By the end of the hearing his face was so red. He was so angry and just horrified that we could just — I mean, this is one of the big white-shoe law firms, and that we are ridiculing this white-shoe law firm and, in essence, ridiculing him and the Columbia process. But anyway, they won, and they got their gym in the park.

One night I said to my husband, “You know, we've gone to every hearing. We've done everything we could. We've written to Washington.” I actually got a lovely letter from Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas, because I wrote to him and I said, “Listen, you're an alum of this university, you love parks, you love nature. Can't you do something about sending — ” Well, he sent a lovely letter saying, you know, this is not something that — He did feel badly, because he spent many a day enjoying sitting in Morningside Park, or whatever.

But I said to my husband, “You know, we've done everything that you have to do. We've gone to the hearings, we've written letters. We've written to every politician. We've done all the things that we could. I think the only thing we can do now is to just sit in front of their bulldozer and not let them bulldoze that park.” And my husband said, “Well, dear, if you feel you have to sit in front of a — ” He said, “I don't know. Is that really the only thing you can think of to do?” So I said, “Think. What do you think?”

So we really couldn't think of anything to do. And so I called a few friends, and the next morning we went in at seven o'clock and sat in front of the bulldozer. The construction people came and said, you know — They used some rather colorful language to the effect of, What were we doing there? And we told them, and they said, Well, you know, they've got to do their job, so would we please get away from the bulldozer? We said, We can't. We've got to do our job. Well anyway, eventually Columbia came, and a lot of their people came, and then eventually they called the police and the police came. And this was perhaps the turning point, when our friendly community police officer said, “Suki,” like this (folding her arms across her chest), “you know Columbia wants me to move you.” I said, “I wouldn't doubt it.” I said, “But listen, we could get carted off to jail, and nobody would know that

we were there. Can't you wait until our newspaper people get here? Because somebody has put a call out to have the press cover this, and they will probably be here about ten o'clock because they want to get back to the offices by eleven, twelve o'clock. Can't you wait?" He said, "No, we can't wait until the newspapers come." But he said, "But I know that you want a woman police officer to arrest you, don't you?" I said, "Absolutely. I wouldn't have a man police officer arrest me." He said, "Well, we don't have a woman police officer in our precinct." I said, "You don't?" And he said no. He said, "It will take us maybe an hour or two to find a woman police officer to come and arrest you." And I said, "Well, I'm sorry, but I really would feel better if a woman police officer arrested me." Well, they had to have found the dizziest blonde woman this side of the moon. She did not know how to write my story up, she did not know how to put the cuffs on. I mean, she was really — it was very funny.

But anyway, eventually we got arrested. And the interesting part was that my uncle called my mother from Hawaii, and he said, "Oh, I am so glad my brother is dead, that he does not see the shame brought to our family. We were sitting, watching the news, and we saw our niece being arrested and put into the van. Oh, we're so sorry for you. You must be just feeling so bad." And my mother said, "Who do you think is home taking care of her kids? We all played in that park. They all grew up in the park. Of course I'm not embarrassed. I'm glad she's protecting our park." Well, I know my uncle at that point thought, They're all crazy in New York, because he thought he was going to just sympathize with my mother, and that she was going to —

Well anyway, it was the first time, I think, that there was a demonstration to save a park. We showed them — the reporters — that it took three of us to get our arms around a couple of the trees. We kept them from sawing them down. Eventually they got some of the trees down.

35:00

ROSS: A literal tree hugger. (laughs)

PORTS: Yeah. But you know, it was those things that, when you saw how the base of it was really such a disregard for the Harlem community, and it was such a disregard for people who would not necessarily have the opportunity to organize and do it in a way so that — You know, we did have a good time. I'm very sad to say we did have a good time mocking this attorney. But what was really very funny later — Many years later my apartment building was up for becoming a co-op building; our landlord wanted to make a few million dollars. So it was one of the first buildings that was proposed to go co-op in New York City, before any laws were put in place. So anybody could be evicted. If he got 25 percent — or 23 percent, or whatever — of the building to buy, then he could evict everybody else. So we had to do a lot of organizing to get people not to buy, so he didn't get his — whatever percentage it was.

There was one little lady in our building who was just so nervous. She said, "Oh, what is going to happen to me if I'm evicted?" We reassured her that if we stuck together she wouldn't get evicted. Anyway, one night — And she told me about her nephew who sometimes uses her apartment as a little pied-à-terre because he has some meetings at Columbia, sometimes he has to stay late, and he comes. One day I was coming home, and I was carrying something, and I saw this man getting in the elevator, and I thought, Oh no, this is that attorney that I made such fun of. It turns out he is the little nephew who stays in her apartment. Well, I quickly put my head down because I wouldn't want to have had her know that this person who had made such fun of her nephew was the one protecting her — in quotes — and trying to convince her not to want to buy. She assured us that her nephew could pay for the apartment if she wanted to buy it, and we said no, no, you don't have to do that. You can be safe without his doing that. But anyway, it's funny how things come in a big circle.

ROSS: Small world. Small world, even in New York City. So when did your activism turn towards women's issues?

PORTS: Well, I think, you know, all of the things — Education is a women's issue, because it's the mothers who have to look at what's happening to their children's education. A lot of the fathers in many communities are, but they're very often the school board member, or they're removed slightly by being in a supervisory category. It's usually the mothers who are on a day-to-day homework basis with what goes on with the kids. So as a women's issue, education is definitely critical. And recreation and parks where children play is definitely a women's issue because you have to be sure they have a safe place to play. So this gym issue was really a very major issue in the community, but it had an underpinning of protecting the children from the Vietnam War issue of the guns. They were not issues that said, We are fighting for a women's issue, but it was women dealing with a lot of the issues that are basically having to do with our children, with our community, the well-being of — And certainly an issue like the racism of a university is critical.

But there were other issues that came up and that eventually you got involved in because they were things like jobs, and women who need to have jobs, and if they can't get their own day care then they can't go to work. And yet a lot of middle- and upper-class women have the opportunity to hire a babysitter or send their children to day care because they can pay for it. So they have the lower-income women of color taking care of their children. And yet these same women can't get their own children taken care of by somebody else. So the cycle is repeated, over and over again, of people who can afford to pay for something can get a better deal for their kids because they have a babysitter. Then they have, after, a nanny; then after the nanny, then a day care; after the day care, a good independent school. So the issue of jobs and women having the opportunity to go out and get a job, means

40:00

that they have to have had an education, and if you've come through the miserable education system in New York City —

I have not been involved recently, so I don't know about some of the school issues. But I do know that just last year a parent called me from one of the schools and said, "We understand that you had something to do about getting our new school." And I said, "Well, yes." And she said, "Well, you know Columbia wants to take the top floor of the school and make it into a special science school." So I said, "Well, let me find out about it."

So I looked at some of the Columbia newspapers and went over to the school, and I said to the principal, "Do you know the history of your school? Do you know that Columbia fought against our having this school in this building, and they fought against the early childhood school, and now they want to put junior high school or sixth-graders on the top floor of this school that we fought so hard to get as an early childhood school?" Well, it turns out Columbia is in the process of taking over — I don't remember the exact number, but if the Columbia campus is 22 acres, they're trying to take over 22 acres in Harlem to add dormitories and science buildings and a science lab and all kinds of office space and whatever. So as a sop to the community, they're doing little things like, Oh, we're going to help with a science school; we're going to help with this or that. I said, "If you let Columbia come in and take those little children's toilets out and put big children's toilets in, we'll never get — We fought so hard to get little children's toilets. Why would you let them do that?" Then the stair risers are a little bit lower for smaller children. "Why would you have these little children with these big children going galumphing up and down the stairs? It defeats the purpose of it." So we talked about it, and I talked to the parents association about it. Well, they got themselves organized, and Columbia's not going in with that science school. But it only has to do with because it came full circle from when we had to fight to get that.

I have to tell you one funny thing. You know, I think I told you that there was a man from the Bureau of the Budget who asked, "What's wrong with the kids in Harlem that they've got to have a toilet in every room?" Well, one day at the Board of Estimate, which was the governing body of New York City at the time, one day he was sitting up there, and he did this (beckoning gesture), and I didn't know who he was doing that to, but I looked around. He said, "You, Mrs. Ports." And I thought, Oh no. I heard that voice. I knew who it was. He said, "Mr. Pekarsky. Remember?" And I thought, Oh yes, I do remember. "Well," he said, "I want you to know that I now work for the Bureau of the Bronx. The Manhattan school kids got a toilet in every room. Well, now that I'm in the Bronx, what's good enough for the kids in Harlem we're going to get in the Bronx. Every new school is going to have little toilets in every room for the kids in the Bronx." Well, I thought, if nothing else, if in the entire history of doing anything it meant that I got toilets for the kids so that they didn't have to stand in line — The reason that all the other school systems around the country said it's just

natural for the kids to just get up, go to the bathroom, and come right back — It's not natural to have a whole class have to get up, go stand in line, go to the bathroom one by one. You waste an awful lot of time.

So sort of the persistence of getting something. If we had given in right away and said to this man, who was at the time working for the Bureau of the Budget, All right, you don't want toilets? All right, we won't have them, he would not have toilets in the schools in the Bronx when he changed jobs. I think it just goes together. We had —

And it's a very small world. We had a situation where — We stopped the gym in February. It was the George Washington — that Presidents' [Day] week that we sat — February 22nd we sat in front of the bulldozer.

45:00

ROSS: What year was that?

PORTS: Nineteen sixty-eight. And Columbia blames that particular demonstration against the gym in the park for getting the students more mobilized than they might have been. So one of the things that Columbia did was, when the students got very involved in the war and stopping the war and stopping the industrial complex that they called Columbia, Columbia cut off the egress for some of the students that were holed up in some of the buildings, so they weren't going to get food. They figured kids want to eat, so if they stop them from getting out to get food, they would stop this sitting-in on the various buildings. So some of us started a food brigade and, you know, some big cook pots have a handle that goes up this way. So we tied a rope and then filled it with chili or spaghetti, or whatever you could mass-feed these kids. So we took turns in the neighborhood, and everybody was assigned a night to fix food for the starving students upstairs. So they were pulling the rope up, and this man came along and said, "Mrs. Ports, what are you doing?" I said, "What does it look like? I'm tying a rope onto this pot for these kids that are hungry." This was Augie Gold, the man who had been in charge of construction for the Board of Education.

ROSS: Really?

PORTS: And so this had been maybe six or seven years before that we had an interaction with him on the school. He said, "You're feeding my kid. I was just walking by because my kid's up there, he's hungry, and his mother is very worried that he is not going to have anything to eat. I'll have to go home and tell her, 'You'll never believe it. Mrs. Ports is giving him some spaghetti.'"

New York City really is a very small community, and a series of small communities. So it's like a lot of little villages, and it's not a huge city that's totally, you know, unrelated. I think maybe less so now. I think there are a lot of new people coming in and a lot of big buildings, and people haven't maybe coalesced because a lot of the younger people don't have children in school yet. The parents association is a very

uniting, a very coalescing kind of organization for parents to hear what's going on. Sometimes they're not aware of what's going on because the school deliberately keeps them from finding out. But it is a possibility.

And I think that's one of the things that helped us in the AIDS crisis, was the older women who were involved in the AIDS situation, or older men who may have had some other political — were used to working with people of all different kinds: were used to working with some smart, some you wonder where the lightbulbs are. You know, there are some different kinds of people that you worked with. Whereas the young gay men who were involved at the very beginning had only worked with gay men, for the most part, and they weren't used to having any tolerance for other people and other people's ideas. So they figured if you didn't support exactly what they said, you were homophobic, which was so wrong, which was so incorrect, and yet there was a lot of misunderstanding in the beginning of the AIDS epidemic.

ROSS: Well, I want to get to that, because when I met you in the '80s you were working on AIDS, and I'm not sure what happened in the missing years between 1968 and the '80s. What shifted you to AIDS?

PORTS: Well, what shifted me was the fact that, in 1971, my husband died, and I had to immediately go to work. I could not continue just doing community activism — getting involved in community issues, working on the school board, working on various things. I was doing all these community things because I was home with the kids; my husband was working. I wasn't working full-time. You know, I was really working a lot because the volunteer work was taking a lot of time, but when he died in 1971, I had to immediately get full-time employment.

I first started working at Barnard because their library was right behind our apartment, and so I could have vacation time with the students the same as my children at home, and, because the library was right across the street, I could get home and get supper, supervise, or whatever. So what really changed was the fact that my husband died, and I had to go to work. When I went to full-time — Not that these activities weren't work. Getting the new school was horrendous work, and getting the gym settled was major work, but they were all, you know, unpaid, so I could work day in, day out on them, and it didn't matter. I didn't have to meet a deadline.

When my husband got sick, he had Blue Cross Blue Shield. He was an employee of a school system, so he had insurance, health insurance. He was in [Memorial] Sloan-Kettering [Cancer Center], and he got all kinds of benefits from having a third-party-payment insurance kind of health care. You know, little things: matching sheets, matching curtains. The curtains that divide the beds were clean and matching; there were towels in the bathroom. But one of my jobs was working with Title XX.

50:00

ROSS: What is Title XX?

PORTS: Title XX is one of the federal titles that deals with social services and issues that poor people have to deal with. Schools have to deal with certain Title XX equal opportunity issues. It's a pretty umbrella kind of — But I then did a few federally funded, you know, time-limited — The settlement house had a juvenile delinquency prevention program, and I saw how disjointed these programs were. You know, they were sort of an hour out of a kid's life, and how did it connect with the school and the home? There were a lot of things that — I had a lot of jobs that were for a year or two, and I was trying to just — The Barnard job was interesting, but it certainly did not pay enough that I could support three children, and so I had to look for something a little bit more lucrative.

One of the things that was happening was that Reagan had cut back on a lot of not-for-profits, and a friend of mine, Fran Barrett, who had something called the Community Resource Exchange, and I thought it would be great for people to be able to get together and talk about some of their job problems, some of their — what were they doing now that Reagan was cutting back on the funds for a lot of not-for-profits? How could they combine? How could they share opportunities on employment? How could women work part-time, maybe, and share the jobs so that they'd have some income? There were some pretty desperate things going on that people had to — All of a sudden they were without a job, and it was pretty much in the social service, not-for-profit world. It didn't make much news because they were the small community groups that were trying to help in a little housing project, or a little here or there.

So we started a conference program for not-for-profits to be able to, you know — Hilton Head has a big conference program, and executives can go and have a strategic planning meeting, and whatever. Well, we founded the equivalent in New York City, Wave Hill, which is a little city-owned park that had a large building that was used for concerts and dance programs and various nature programs. It's a large park in Riverdale that was partly owned by the city, but a family had owned the — It had been the Perkins estate, and it had all sorts of very notable residents. Toscanini came and lived there during World War II when he escaped from Italy. We asked the director, Can we use your large conference room during the week when you don't have these weekend concerts and programs? Can we use it for a conference program? And New York Community Trust — at that time it was [led by] Terry McAdam — and we said, Listen, Terry, we need to maybe help community groups do this. Would you like to experiment with us? Maybe we could have 20 conferences a year. He said, "If you can get 20 conferences, go ahead."

So, well, the first year we had, I don't know, 28, 30 conferences. The second year it got to be 40, 50. I mean, people desperately needed this, and it was a great way for people to get away from the city. It was in the city, but it was in this idyllic — overlooking the Hudson and the

55:00

Palisades, within a beautiful garden. It had a beautiful greenhouse and plantings, and [Marco Polo] Stefano was a master at planting and planning this beautiful garden, and the family clause was that if you keep the garden beautiful and you let people use it and it's — all right, then you can continue to have it. If you don't, we'll take it back.

ROSS: Okay.

PORTS: One of the groups having a conference was the New York City Council of Churches. They were having some difficulties with chaplains, and so forth, around the city, having need for more funds, and so forth. Well anyway, one of the conferences was the New York City Council of Churches, wanting to have a conference about AIDS, because they said their chaplains were having a hard time getting the straight story from hospitals about what was wrong with some of their parishioners.

ROSS: So about when was this?

PORTS: This was [1985]. And so the Council of Churches — I mean, it's all in who you know — was headed by the Reverend Polk. When he was a Union Theological Seminary student, and when he was a student minister at Riverside, the doorbell would ring around quarter to six, and my husband would say, "Three guesses. I bet it's Bob." Well, he, as a young seminary student, about once a week he needed to have a home-cooked meal. So he'd stop by. "Hi. I was just calling to see how you were." Yeah, right. Because we had young children and we always had dinner pretty much at clockwork, at six o'clock. So I'd say, "Bob, you hungry? You want some dinner?" "Oh yes, that would be very nice."

So he became the head of the Council of Churches. So he said, "Suki, I need to have a conference on AIDS." This was — let's say the first part of October. He said, "I need to have it before Christmas. I need to probably have it before Thanksgiving. So I need this conference on AIDS because our chaplains are going crazy not knowing what is going on," and so forth. I had never planned a conference on a specific subject that I knew nothing about. I knew nothing about AIDS. The education system was one thing that, yes, I knew about, but the health-care system I knew nothing about, except the very special care my husband got when he was in the hospital. Okay.

We had this conference, and it was very clear at that time that when I said, "My name is Mrs. Horace Ports," on the telephone, people at the other end did not imagine an Asian woman at the other end of the phone. So I called the New York City Department of Health, and I said, "I need a speaker for a conference that we're holding on the 25th of November," — or 23<sup>rd</sup>, or whatever — "and I need somebody to speak about minorities and AIDS." And the deputy commissioner for AIDS said, "Why would you want to have a conference on minorities and AIDS? It's only about white gay men and drug addicts." Now, drug addicts, it seems to me, come in all types, and it seems to me there are

gay men of all types and colors. So I thought, This is a real strange disease. But anyway, she said, “Okay, I’ll let you have Miss Cozier, who is our education person, and she can come up and talk about it.” She said, “I guess she can talk about it because she’s colored.” Now I hadn’t heard that in a long time, but anyway, okay.

Then I immediately called New York State Health Department, and I asked the man in charge of AIDS in New York State — I said, “I need to have a speaker from the state come and talk about minorities and AIDS.” You would think I was in an echo chamber because he said, “Why would you want to have a conference on minorities and AIDS? It’s about gay white men and drug addicts.” So I said, “Well, I need somebody.” And he said, “Well, first of all, who are you having talk about the medicine?” And I said, “Dr. Beny Primm.” He said, “Oh yeah?” He said, “Well, you tell Dr. Primm to use the CDC [Center for Disease Control and Prevention] slides.” And I said, “Well, I’ve just invited Dr. Primm, and I understand he’s quite an expert on this, particularly from the point of view of substance use, and so I’m not about to tell him what he must use or not use. I was just going to leave it to his discretion.” He said, “Well, I’m funding him. You tell him that I’m going to come and listen to his presentation, because I give him a lot of money and I want to know what he’s doing with it, and I want him to use the CDC slides.” So I thought, This is really very — an odd way to talk about somebody else.

60:00

ROSS: Particularly one of his own grantees.

PORTS: Yeah. So then I got several other people — a minister from St. Luke’s Hospital, who was a white minister who was ministering to a lot of people in the hospital. He had a lot of confidences that they gave to him, and he’d written a little book about what was going on. He had it anonymous, so he said he would read some of the direct quotes from some of his patients without giving the names. I said fine, just don’t give the names.

So we had this conference in 1985, and it was clear that there needed to be something done about people of color. At that time it was called minorities, and minorities and AIDS was clearly a problem, but we didn’t know enough about it to know how big a problem it was. So after this conference, they decided that something — At the conference they said, We’ve got to do something. We ought to set up a little taskforce. And that’s what the church had, little taskforces, you know — a taskforce for this, a taskforce for that; left foot, right foot, right hand, left hand. Anyway, they decided to set up a taskforce on minorities and AIDS, and they asked me if I would set it up, which I did.

It was a very interesting situation because, luckily, I’d been involved in urban renewal, I’d been involved in schools and the park, and whatever, so I was able to call a woman who had a lot of buildings. It was a West Harlem community organization, and they had a

kindergarten, they had day care, they had housing, so we knew each other from a lot of different points of entry. And she said, “Oh sure, I’ll get you some space somewhere.” She said, “I don’t know where.” But then she said, “Wait a minute. There’s an empty apartment in my building.” She said, “That’s a good thing because if anybody gives you any guff, I’ll be able to tell them — ”

So we got a space. I was going to have a big press announcement that we were going to have this new minority organization. None of the TV cameras wanted to cover it because they said, Well, what’s going on? I mean, they almost said, If you’re having a riot, we’ll come, but if you’re not having a riot, why should we come? So it didn’t get any coverage. So we just opened.

And no sooner did we open the doors than we were overcrowded. I mean, we had people coming in from every aspect: gay men, women, women with children, women without children, rather well-off people, and absolutely poor people. We had no blueprint other than — The group that had all the programs and the money was Gay Men’s Health Crisis. But we didn’t have any blueprint for what our clients needed, and one of them was a place to put — A lot of them were homeless and they lived in crack houses. Now if you leave your bag of goodies in a crack house, it’s not going to be there. Somebody’s going to sell the contents before you get back. So everybody carried their little belongings in a gym bag wherever they went. So when some people needed to be taken to the emergency room, needed to be — Because at the early outset of the epidemic, there were no drugs to put anything off, so you got pretty sick, and then you were dying. I mean, it was just very little time. So when we took people to the hospital, we had to set up a place where we stored their gym bags.

63:45

END TAPE 3

## TAPE 4

ROSS: This is the interview with Suki Ports, tape four. Suki, the taskforce had just been launched in the mid '80s. I think you said 1984.

PORTS: Nineteen eighty-five.

ROSS: Nineteen eighty-five. And a few years later, you were a featured speaker at a conference called "In Defense of Roe," which was a conference organized after the 1989 Webster decision from the Supreme Court that really returned the power to re-regulate abortion back to the states. So somehow, in that intervening four-year period, you got deeply attuned to gender oppression, particularly around HIV/AIDS and women, as well as reproductive rights. You were a featured speaker at that conference. So what happened during those four years, and what was going on with you?

PORTS: I think that there was such a misunderstanding at the beginning of the epidemic that this was about gay men, and that the disease was gay men having sex with other men, and primarily white gay men. The white gay men were from all levels of income, all levels of education, but primarily many had a job, many had third-party-payment insurance because of the job, and had a home, very often insurance. So this disease was one that affected people's losing their job with the AIDS phobia that was rampant. Losing a job, losing a home where landlords were particularly ignorant and did not know that you could not live in a house and give the house AIDS, so that you had to get rid of the tenant. There were people who lost their insurance because the insurance companies suddenly saw that they were going to lose lots of money, or people who couldn't get insurance as a result of this. People who lost a partner or a loved one because that partner or loved one was nervous that they would get this disease. So there were a lot of people who had a lot to lose from this disease.

Now, there was another group of people who were way behind the starting line, had not had an education that was very broad, and therefore had not gone to higher education and had not had an opportunity to have a good job that would give them the higher ability to have a nice home, to have insurance, to have medical insurance, to have the amenities to lose. Many of the people who were poor did not have a home. Many of our first clients lived in crack houses in abandoned buildings — no heat, no cooking facilities, no amenities of a real apartment. They had not had the education, so they didn't have the job, they didn't have the house, they didn't have the medication, they didn't have the opportunity to have a doctor. It's very different if you have a doctor who sees you regularly, and you go, and suddenly you've lost weight, and they say, Wait a minute, what's wrong with you? How come you've lost so much weight? Let's look at your chart. And they immediately look at the chart, and two months or five months before,

you'd weighed 150, and now you weighed 120. There was a sizeable loss in weight in some of early cases of AIDS when people had not only trouble digesting food, but had very serious diarrhea. And so the doctor did something about testing and finding out that the person, yes, indeed had AIDS, gave them medication, whatever existed at that particular moment in time, whether it was anti-diarrhea medicine, or whatever.

But the people who relied on not having a private physician went to a hospital emergency room and said, I don't feel good. I think I've got the flu. Emergency rooms do not have time to look for the record. First of all, it would take a long time to go get the record, and that may not be the same place that the person lived near, or it may not be the same facility. They may not even have a record. So there was no record. The doctor would focus on whatever particular complaint. "I have diarrhea." So the doctor would give them an anti-diarrhea pill and send them off. Nobody, at the very beginning of the epidemic, looked at poor people who had X symptom and said, "I wonder if you've got HIV? I wonder if you've got AIDS?" They gave the very specific medication for the specific complaint, and nobody looked that this man was 20 pounds lighter than when he'd come a year ago; this man shouldn't be X or Y — or woman.

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So very early in the epidemic, I learned that the people we were seeing had a very different kind of care, but also a very different kind of need. I had middle-class friends who were in the best hospitals in New York, and their AIDS — every need that they had was met because they had third-party payment. Whereas the hospitals in the poor sections of New York were overwhelmed with problems. They had people coming in who didn't have a place to go to, so they couldn't just release them to the streets. So they had patients who were there in the hospital for many days and weeks, it turns out, for some of the people who were homeless. There was no program to provide homeless people with AIDS a place to live in New York. That came eventually, but it all took time, because the first care models were based on middle-class people who were losing things. So it was a battle to get the apartment back. It's different from trying to fight to get your crack house, your abandoned place back; that no hospital can release somebody and say, Oh, they're going to the crack house two blocks down from the avenue.

We found that there was such an inequity of care. And I found that — I was appalled that I had not that long ago buried my husband and saw the kind of care that he had. Very often he had too much care. They were doing too much experimenting, too much giving him different medications, trying different things. Early in his disease, one of the doctors said, "Oh, we're so glad you're so young and able to give us the reactions of how you feel with different medications. We have some people that are in here who are barely literate, or they speak a different language, or they're older." Well, thanks a lot. You know, we're so glad you're so happy he could talk English and he's young. You know, there were some things that were in the name of good care that sometimes they went overboard with.

But I learned early on that not only was there a difference in the care people got, women very often got terrible care. The first Asian woman that I had was in a hospital. She had all these various symptoms, and she was in a hospital where the majority of patients were gay men. She was a woman who had a job, and so she had insurance and she was in this good hospital. They really took about a month to finally figure out they should give her a test, that she might have AIDS. But their care of her — She was so alone in this place, just surrounded by men. They did not put her in a ward with other women with other problems; they kept her isolated. So she finally said she wanted to go to a public hospital where she knew there would be more women. Now, that's sort of an ironic thing, to want to go to a public hospital where you know you're not going to get some of the same care, but you're going to be with other women.

Before she died, she went into a partial coma, and so she would sometimes doze. But sometimes she was awake, and she heard the doctors talking about her AIDS and about how she was close to dying and so forth. Because she was Asian they figured she couldn't speak English.

ROSS: Oh no.

PORTS: So she heard them talking in a way that no one should hear somebody talking about them. So when we came to visit her that evening, she was in tears, you know? She said, "Oh — " Well, she died soon after. If you can die from a broken heart or from being disappointed, she did. I mean, it was so sad. At her funeral, which I had performed for the family because they were too distraught, all the things that I said were translated into Chinese for the Chinese people who couldn't understand, except the discussion of AIDS. That was not mentioned to the people because this was the first case and they would have been ostracized; there would have been all kinds of repercussions probably, we don't know. But anyway, nobody — her father, nobody knew that she had AIDS; they thought she had stomach cancer. Who's to say what is the right thing to do?

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Another woman was very badly treated because she was a drug addict. She had a record, as the lawyer I eventually got for her — a record as long as his arm. He said, "Good grief, what kind of client are you sending me?" I said, "One who needs you." She had three children, and when she was in the hospital because she had some medical problems that needed to be taken care of, her live-in partner probably abused the three-year-old. And she was so hysterical when she got out and the little kid told her what Pop-pop did that she called the child-welfare people. The child-welfare people came and got the kids, instead of the man, out of the house. So all the kids got their schooling disrupted, they got their lives disrupted.

It was just horrendous, but there were no policies involved for women, so you could tell that one after another — Here she was sick,

and the children were not, with the exception of one. One child was HIV positive. That child had a child-care worker. The mother had a worker for an adult. The two women didn't coordinate their shopping, they didn't coordinate their cooking, and the worst problem was that they couldn't agree on which soap opera to watch in between hours. So this woman was distraught. She said, "You should hear them fighting in the kitchen. I just hear them fighting all the time. And then they're fighting over the TV. And then I say, 'Hey, hey, wait a minute. Hey, I want to watch this.' And they argue with me about what I want to watch." She said, "Whose TV is it?"

Well, you know, when you're sick, you're not supposed to have a lot of stress, but a lot of women were having stress because of the policies set up by the city. They weren't meant for women with AIDS. They were meant just as policies for who takes care of children, who takes care of adults. They didn't have the single social worker who took care of everything. There were a lot of things that I quickly learned about when we set up this minority taskforce, because it just didn't make sense to see some of these things. So we had to get quite vocal on some of these issues.

Another woman wanted to have her tubes tied, because she knew that — she'd had a couple kids, and she knew that she did not want to have any more children because she was HIV positive, and, at the time, there were a lot of problems. Now, you know that one of the problems that poor women had was not being able to get an abortion if they wanted one.

ROSS: Right. But they usually would voluntarily or involuntarily sterilize them.

PORTS: But in this case, this woman who wanted her tubes tied, her next-door partner in the bed next to her called me one night about nine o'clock and said, "Listen, I got your number from my roommate. She's having such pain, and they won't give her any more pain medicine." So I went over to the hospital to see what the hell was the matter. Well, the doctor said, "Well, I thought she needed to have a hysterectomy." So she gave her only the medication for a tube-tie because she didn't want anybody to know that she'd given her a hysterectomy.

ROSS: So she'd actually done surgery which involves incisions, but didn't want to give her the adequate pain medication.

PORTS: Mm-hmm.

ROSS: Okay. There's a dehumanizing kind of objectification of people with AIDS that you're describing.

PORTS: Well, this is the thing. You can't see one case and not wonder who else is being affected like this. There was another woman I came to visit,

and she was a young woman, and I brought her a balloon and some little things and some cookies. At the beginning of the epidemic, we made cookies like crazy. We thought everybody wanted homemade cookies, so I took her homemade cookies. And the woman across the way said, "Hey, honey." And I looked over and I said, "Yes?" She said, "How come I didn't get any cookies and a balloon?" Well, I looked at this woman and I thought, She's got to be 170. So I said, "Well, you weren't my patient, but I'd be glad, next time I come, to bring you a balloon and cookies if you want a balloon and cookies." Because I was thinking, This is just an older woman who was feeling — It turns out she had AIDS. I said to her, "I'm sure Jane will share a cookie with you." So I said, "Can I give one to her?" She said, "Oh sure." So I took a cookie over to her. She said, "Honey, next time don't put these nuts in here." I said, "Oh, I thought it would be nice to have some pecans in here. I thought it would be a nice treat." She said, "Yeah, it would be a treat if I had some teeth." But she said, "I don't have any teeth." She said, "I put my teeth next to my bed when I went to bed, and somebody threw them away or something." She said, "I don't have my teeth anymore." She said, "I haven't had teeth for a month. I've been in here, and I've just got to have nothing but just their horrible hospital food with no teeth." So I asked about her teeth. Well, they didn't have a dental program in this hospital for people with AIDS, and they couldn't transport her because they didn't have a process for transporting between hospitals for a dentist. So they couldn't fit her with dentures, and so she had to just eventually die without her teeth.

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So of course I made her cookies that were soft, without nuts. But then we got to know each other. Her family wouldn't let her grandson — She wanted to see her grandson. He was about nine, and she wanted to see him. She said, "I want to see him so bad before I die." So I said, "Well, let's see if we can't get you a visit with him." Well, they wouldn't let her go down to the first floor, and they wouldn't let him come up the stairs. Nobody under 14 — And I really basically knew that because my kids were under 14 and they weren't allowed to go up and see their father before he died.

So when she died and her funeral was held, they dressed this little boy up in this beautiful gray suit that must have cost them an arm and a leg, and a little tie, and a little shirt. They said, There's your grandma. Now you can say goodbye to Grandma. But the funeral parlor had a piece of glass over the coffin, so the typical — where you go and you kiss somebody's cheek when they die — they couldn't do that.

So we had to have a process of going to the City Commission on Human Rights and making enough complaints, and getting all the AIDS groups together to say that some of the funeral parlors are making \$1,000 per person with AIDS by saying that, to handle the cases, they have to have a piece of glass to protect the workers. So my question was, Well, are the workers trying to get into the coffin with the person who has died of AIDS? Were they trying to get in the coffin to have sex

with them? Or were they trying to get blood out of them, to share a needle with them? Because those were the only two ways. They certainly weren't having a baby with the person, and they certainly weren't nursing the person. So only sex and — Well, of course it was so ridiculous, but nobody had the time or thought about going to the funeral parlors and saying, Look, do not try and get away with \$1,000 for glass, because you're perpetuating the ignorance about this disease. I would say probably half of the workers did not really believe they could get AIDS, but the other half found that it was a great way to make money.

ROSS: And so what you're describing is that, as the disease transitioned from predominantly affecting gay men into affecting vulnerable women, then the focus of your program had to shift and change. Is that what you're describing?

PORTS: Yeah, except that, you see, what happened was that those vulnerable women were there from the very beginning.

ROSS: Yeah, they were already vulnerable. Okay.

PORTS: The press. When I was planning this conference in 1985, there were only two articles that I could find in the press. One was written by Larry Altman — Lawrence K. Altman of the *New York Times* — who was their AIDS expert. And he had an article about the green monkey in Africa, the possible link to the green monkey, and I was wondering if people were eating green monkey sandwiches. But that's beside the point. That was the question of the day: What was the tie with the green monkey in Africa and so many cases of AIDS?

But the other article was Wayne Barrett in *The Village Voice*, who wrote an article on the connection between drug addicts and the high number who were actually not dying of an overdose but were dying of AIDS, and it was not being detected. So in 1985, this information was known, but it was not paid attention to because of a lot of things. I think poor people's medical problems aren't taken care of unless somebody makes a fuss about it. It doesn't make news, so it's not newsworthy. The families were suffering the effects of the stigma of the disease and the ignorance of it, so people didn't want to have people know that somebody in their family — So they didn't complain about it, they didn't complain about the situations, and only until we found out about things like the glass cover and the \$1,000 and various things.

So I think that it's been a problem for women all along. But all of a sudden, this woman who had the hysterectomy against her will — she was out, so she didn't even know that this was being done. It was only later, when her pain was so great. There was another case where a woman was a drug addict, and she had a major crisis because the doctor who was taking care of her wanted to give her a medicine, and she said,

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“Well, what’s the interaction between this AZT and my Coumadin?” Because she was a drug addict, she had a blood thinner because her veins were pretty much shot. The doctor said, “Never mind. I’m prescribing this; you just take it.” So she called me and she said, “Do I have to take this? Because he won’t give me an answer about what the interaction is between my Coumadin and my AZT.” Well, this was another clue that in a lot of public hospitals, you have foreign interns and foreign residents who are trying to learn our medical system, but who have — whatever attitude they have about women, they bring to this country with them, and in a lot of cases it’s not what we would like to think is our American way that women should be treated.

ROSS: Mm-hmm.

PORTS: In this case, this doctor told her, “It doesn’t matter. I prescribe it; that’s what you take.” So when she called me, I said, “No, I don’t know what the interaction is. I’ll call somebody.” Well, at the time I called somebody at the CDC and said, “Hey, what’s this?” So he said, “Well, I don’t know. I’ll have to call the man who is in charge of medicine up in Washington and find out from Sam Matheny what the story is.”

So he called Sam. Sam was at the theater. Sam didn’t get home until around midnight. Sam finally called Gary Noble back, Gary Noble called me, and by this time it’s almost midnight. So he got the number at the hospital, and Sam Matheny, the head of AIDS medicine for the United States of America, calls this little Harlem hospital ward and says, “I want to talk to the resident there in charge of Mrs. Joan Smith’s — ” whatever — “case.” He was told by the resident, who told the nurse, “I don’t need to talk to him. I don’t know who that is. I don’t need to talk to anybody.” So he refused to talk to him.

So Sam — indeed Sam said to the nurse, “Get that patient to the phone. I want to talk to her directly.” So the nurse went and got this woman to the phone, and she started to say, “This mother-fucker — ” So the doctor snatched the phone and said, “What, I — ” So Sam said, “I don’t need to talk to you now. I tried to talk to you first. You did not want to talk to me. Please get off the phone.” So he got back on the phone to the nurse and he said, “Put her in an office, shut the door, and do not let this man interrupt again.”

So Sam told her, “I don’t know the interaction between the two of these. We have not had that question put to us. I will call Burroughs Wellcome in the morning, and then I will call back and let you know what I find out.” Burroughs Wellcome said they don’t know the interaction between very clogged veins and Coumadin and their AZT, so she can toss a coin and decide which she wants to do. So she decided, Oh, what the hell, she’ll take both and try and keep the veins unclogged, and take this medicine that they say she should take.

At the beginning of the epidemic, not only the medicine and the care, various things were just not — It wasn’t even that people were deliberately giving bad care, it just was not the things that affected

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women — Even though they had had women's cases early on in the epidemic, only now you hear people using phrases like *the changing faces of AIDS*. It's not changing. At the beginning of the epidemic they only looked at white gay men, but the women of color and the men of color were there, but nobody was really looking or caring for the sequence of their care.

ROSS: Now, it seems that you were endeavoring to make policy changes, and you had to reach pretty high up into the U.S. government, even to the surgeon general. Can you tell us how that came about?

PORTS: Well, that was a very surprising issue, because for years many of us feared Dr. [C. Everett] Koop. Dr. Koop's ideas of abortion and reproductive rights were quite, we thought, conservative, and so when he was named surgeon general, some of us thought, Oh, why did they do that?

But there was a conference held in Washington in, I believe, maybe 1986, something like that. It was the first AIDS conference of minorities and gays, and there was a group of people at the meeting, and we said, You know, we really should go over and talk to Koop, because he hasn't said anything about minorities. So somebody called his assistant, and his assistant said, "Okay, I can give you a half hour. He's got a half hour between — " Let's say 12:30 and one o'clock. I don't remember what it was. So we went over, and we only had a half hour, so we were saying, Okay, you say this, you say this. I mean, we sort of parceled out what people were going to say, and so each person had a little parcel of what they were to focus on. Midway through our — And we all talked very fast because we wanted him to get all this information and learn about all the problems we were having. So everybody was just, ba da da da da. So he turned to his assistant and he said, "Cancel the rest of my afternoon. I want to listen to this without our being so rushed."

So we spent the entire rest of the day with him, discussing what all of the problems were. He had no clue how all this had affected communities of color, and especially in poor communities. Eventually he put out — the rest of the government didn't want him to do it, and I think even as high as the White House they said don't do it, but he did it. He put out the only piece of mail that has gone out to every household in the United States except for the tax form. The tax form is the only thing that gets sent by the U.S. government to everybody, to every household. Well, he sent out a booklet about AIDS to every household in America, and he included people of color in the pictures. He had women, he had children, he had people of color, he had people who were gay. But they didn't have a label that said, I'm a gay man, or, I'm a woman with drug use, or whatever. They didn't have any labels, but they were pictures of people who had HIV and AIDS.

He was a very quick learner. He understood exactly what we were saying. He just hadn't thought, really, about some of the

implications of what this was. He was forever always accessible to us. Whenever we had a problem, he would call. And I think there were some people who were very, very compassionate, and sometimes some of the people at the very top were more compassionate than some of the people lower below.

One of the cases was the case of a young Asian man who found he had AIDS, and he didn't want to embarrass his parents, and he didn't want to have them feel the shame of his having AIDS, or feel badly or feel sorry for him. So he took a water pistol and went to a bank and held it up to get money so he could escape and get care, or get away from his family and not embarrass them. So, of course, you hold up a bank, it's first a state offense, and then it's a federal offense, and you have to serve both times. So he got sent away to Walla Walla prison in Washington State. But he ended up teaching, including the corrections officer and the head of the Walla Walla prison and all the prisoners. He became the AIDS expert. He got materials sent to him. He taught everybody about AIDS. So when it was time for him to get released, the prison superintendent said, "We're going to miss him." That he has been wonderful, and he was a model prisoner.

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Anyway, his mother wanted him to die at home. He was close to dying. She wanted him to die at home. She said, "I want you home. I want my son home. I want to take care of him." We'd heard about this, but we also heard that he was being sent to St. Louis. The process is that when you served a state term, then you have to serve the federal term. Anybody that gets put in the federal system has to go to their main hospital in St. Louis, Missouri, and be examined. If it turns out that they guess that you are three days from death, you can go home; you do not have to stay in prison. But we tried to make the point to — it was Dr. [James O.] Mason who was the ASH [Assistant Secretary for Health] at the time — that it was stupid for him to go from Washington State to St. Louis, Missouri, to be diagnosed as being so close to death, when his mother wanted very desperately to have him die at home. Couldn't he just go from Washington State to San Francisco where his mother was?

And Dr. Mason just tried to — you know, was perusing what we had said, was contemplating what his answer was going to be, and he said, "You know, I think that, medically, we would put this young man in danger of getting pneumonia. The air in a plane is not so great, the traveling to and from. If he's in that weak a condition, he should not be making that long a trip just to turn around and come back to San Francisco. So I think, medically, he should not." Now that's maybe stretching it, maybe it's very creative, but it was certainly very compassionate that he took the concern of his mother and said, "I want the state to send him to San Francisco." Because if he got sent to St. Louis, he would get sent at the expense of the state to St. Louis. But then his mother — if he was three days from death, his mother would have to go to St. Louis and pay for him and an extra bed to come back to San Francisco. This way it was taken care of by the government, and

she didn't have to pay for his going to and from the hospital, or her trip to go and pick him up.

So we found that there were some people who were creative. And that was truly creative, but it was also very kind. So we saw that there was a difference between those who really gave it some thought and who cared about what the outcome was. There are some true heroes in this, and we couldn't label — I mean, Dr. Koop had such a reputation about his reproductive rights attitude that we were quite, you know, almost attitudinal about what his opinion was going to be. So we went, and here he was one of the people that did the most for the most people in the United States by sending that material out. That was a strong stand on his part. But he also got the message across that AIDS was more than white gay men; it was all the different people that he had shown in his booklet.

ROSS: It also teaches us a lesson about not evaluating people based on one single litmus test.

PORTS: Yeah, yeah.

ROSS: Now, a few years later you spoke at the "Defense of Roe" conference in April of 1989, and you were talking about how there were 30 Asian and Pacific Islander women at this conference. What did it mean to you to see so many API women working on reproductive rights issues together at that time?

PORTS: Well, you know, one of the saddest things that I think World War II did was to take a group of women and turn them into very good Parent Teacher Association parents, who went to the schools, did the right thing for their children, but who became politically totally inactive. They did not raise a bit of sand. They did not say a word about anything that had to do with the government, or criticize. There should have been a terrible outcry after the bomb was dropped in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. That was not necessary. You could take an island and say, "Look, folks, you see that island? Here today, gone tomorrow. We'll drop a bomb, and we'll show you what this bomb can do." They could have eliminated some atoll somewhere out in the middle of the Pacific, and they didn't have to do it with people, including older women and children and older men, and everybody that had nothing to do with the war. Anyway, that was our — well, anyway.

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But I think that not only was there a large number of women who were sort of rendered inactive, but they influenced their children. And a lot of their children were beginning to speak up and say, Wait a minute. How come — There are such stereotypes about Asian women. How come we're treated in such a different way? We're objectified as these little prostitutes and geisha girls, and whatever title, after Vietnam, after Thailand, after World War II, the Philippines, all kinds of places. Asian women were not only thought of as sex symbols, they were

thought of as the willing partner in a sexual act that had nothing to do with respect or with love or with a long-term relationship. It was just a one-night-stand gratification.

I think that the traditions of Asian women having a role of some gentility, some not rocking the boat, so to speak — some of these stereotypes were developed by servicemen who didn't know where a lot of these countries were, and didn't know a lot about Asian women, but through war learned about them. There were a lot of people who wrote about — One of the most famous books about a geisha was written by a white man. You know, there are a lot of attitudes and stereotypes about Asian women that have been developed.

And I think it was very exciting to see that there were women — and young women — who were beginning to say, Hey, I think I want to speak for myself. Now it's very interesting that some of the same women profess to be lesbians. This is something that I've noticed; that some of the more active women, some of the women more willing to speak out about various issues, not just reproductive rights but the rights of women, period. Not just in their body, but in their ability to speak up for themselves, their mind. For too long I think it's been just the body, but now it's finally the mind, and the mind has said, You've done such things to us that we need to speak up.

The stereotypes about Asians have been so vast partly because there's very little education about Asians. When I was at Smith there was a wonderful course on — in those days it was called oriental history, that Mr. McSherry taught, and my father came up to visit on fathers' day. I begged him. I said, "You have never come to my school, and it's fathers' day of senior year. It is your last chance to come, and would you come up?" Then I mentioned my best friend Jerry at Smith and this and that. I said, "He's coming, and whatever, so you'll know somebody there. You can go play golf, or you can go out and have a drink with the other fathers. We've got time scheduled for you to be fathers with each other." So my daddy came up, and he sat in on my oriental class, and he closed his eyes. He said, "I don't think I would have known it was not a Japanese person." Because Mr. McSherry talked in Japanese illustrating some example, and my father was so impressed. But that was *the* course in oriental history.

Then, the year that I was there, for the first time there was a course in oriental art that was given, and it was a professor from Mount Holyoke. Smith didn't have its own professor of oriental art, but she came over from Mount Holyoke, and so I took that course. But there were only two out of the — But of course that was not so uncommon, because there was only one African course, and there was one professor, Dr. Carter, who taught the one course on Africa. So in the mid '50s, the colleges were beginning to awaken to the fact that they needed to have some things other than European History One, Two, Three, Four, Five, Six, Twenty, One Thousand — all the different courses in European history — European art, European this, European that — that it began to be a more multidisciplinary study available, but it wasn't much.

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I think American schools have, for the most part, totally ignored the history of Asians and Pacific Islanders. And by doing that, there is very little understanding about the fact that there are over 60 different ethnicities of — in quotes — Asians, and over 20 of Pacific Islanders. What that means is people tack on Asians and Pacific Islanders, and most people don't know what that means. If you superimposed the entire United States on top of the part of the Pacific Ocean where there are some of the islands that are American territories, or federated free states now — Samoa, the Marianas and whatever — you superimpose the United States over that, there's still lots of ocean that is beyond. So if you were going from one island to the other, in a lot of cases it's by a little boat, and it would be like taking — if you went into labor, it would be like taking a train from New York City to San Francisco before you could get to your doctor, who would tell you that there was some complication and you better hurry up and get to a major medical facility.

ROSS: How did you get invited to the “In Defense of Roe” conference? Do you remember?

PORTS: Oh, I really don't remember. You know, in a lot of these conferences somebody says, “Hey, will you go? My friend is doing this conference, and she wants you to speak, but she asked me to call you because you know me and you don't know her, and you might say no to her, but you wouldn't say no to me.” I mean, a lot of times you don't know necessarily, or you don't remember necessarily, who invited you.

ROSS: Well, to add a little bit of context. This was before any Asian American or Asian Pacific Islander organization existed, that worked on reproductive rights issues. I mean, Asian Pacific Islanders for Choice was not formed until later in that same year, after the Webster decision. So I suspect that people like Lynn Paltrow, who organized the conference —

PORTS: Oh yes, that's probably the person who —

ROSS: — reached out to individual —

PORTS: Yeah. Yeah, because Lynn was involved in some of the issues in New York City, where we were having serious issues with abortion rights, with reproductive rights. You know, there were a lot of problems in New York City, and then with AIDS. But now that you say the name, I would say, oh, of course it was Lynn.

ROSS: It probably was Lynn, yeah. Were there other API or Asian American women that you were aware of who were doing similar work to yours at the time?

PORTS: In AIDS, no.

ROSS: Or reproductive rights?

PORTS: AIDS is related to reproductive rights.

ROSS: Right.

PORTS: We keep trying to have people put AIDS in the larger context of women's lives, of people of color's lives. So while my focus was primarily on AIDS, it included the fact that reproductive rights was clearly an integral part of what had to be looked at. You know, I talk about that women have to have a top doctor and a bottom doctor, and the top doctor and the bottom doctor don't always talk to each other, just like the top of the body doesn't always work in sync with the bottom of the body.

It's the same with a lot of the issues: that Asian women haven't had the opportunity to feel free enough to break out of this age-old tradition that you don't challenge authority, you don't question somebody who is supposedly an expert. That you should be somewhat humble and you should remain polite at all expense. You should not be looked upon as being rude or questioning, and by questioning somebody, you are challenging their correctness. And by challenging their correctness, you're probably making them lose some face. And if you lose face, that is bad. So the only way you can lose face is to go back and challenge the person who is making you lose face and make them look bad. So there were a lot of women who didn't want to get into that position, of looking bad or being questioned or having their family or anybody question what they were doing.

So there were a lot of times when, you know, I've had people ask me questions like, Well, how come you speak up? Or, What makes you think that you should, you know, speak for them? You know, there are questions that are basically, You don't fit the mold of the (imitates someone laughing and hiding her face) ha-ha-ha, polite little — ha-ha-ha — self-effacing little — ha-ha — oh, I'm so shy. That's just a stereotype. But on the other hand, there are women who are taught to be good entertainers and good wives, and by not challenging certain things, you would be a good wife, or you would stand by your man, and that means, in any way, whatever he does, it's okay. But, you know, in a lot of cases, it's not okay.

ROSS: In terms of the conference, do you remember the conference at all, what it felt like to be amongst all those hundreds of women of color, working on reproductive rights issues?

PORTS: Well, I think that one of the things that is very hard to accept is that — For example, your SisterSong had a conference where there were several hundred Black woman, a sprinkling of other women, so much — enough sprinkling that it didn't look like a solid Black audience, but you

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had a majority of several hundred Black women. To be embraced by a group other than your own is a very humbling situation, because you realize that somebody has understood what you were trying to say to all people, but which some of your own people don't understand, but that other people get it.

To be accepted as somebody not of the same color, the necessarily same background, it's a very — it's a very special feeling. And when you're in a room with a lot of people trying to work on the same issue, and the differences in color disappear, that's pretty exciting. But it is very rare — all too rare. I mean, very often it is a majority of white women talking about reproductive issues, with a token smattering of those of us who are easy to identify. And I kid around about, you know, we all look alike, but, you know, there are so few of us in some situations that they may not know who we are specifically, but if you say the name, "Oh yeah." That conference and the recent one of SisterSong and meetings where I have been accepted for what I have said and not for who I am, are a measure of sophistication that a lot of other people don't have yet.

ROSS: Now you obviously have been a pioneer in the API or Asian American community on AIDS. What has been your reception by your own community, the community that you identify?

PORTS: Well, here's an example that's very radical. I mean, it's the most — when I say radical, I'm not using it in terms of politics. But our neighbor, who knew my mother, and because my mother refused to have anybody coming in, I wanted her to have a social worker, somebody come in to be with her part of the day, make her a cup of tea or something. My mother refused to have some stranger coming into the house. After my husband died, we moved to a different apartment. A friend of mine said, "Oh, there's a big apartment that's about to be empty." And in those days, you went quickly, paid the super a little bribe, and he kept the apartment for you. That's how it was done years ago. Well, I paid the super a little gift, and he kept the apartment. So we moved in, and it was big enough that — my mother was living alone as a widow at that time, and I said, "Come live with us." And so she was happy to come live with us. And eventually she got cancer and she died of lung cancer. But as she was dying and weaker, one of our neighbors came up and made tea for her in the afternoon, and they sat and chitchatted for a little while. Not every day; not so much that my mother would say, "Hey, did you put her up to this?"

50:00

When my mother died, this same neighbor came up and rang the bell and said "Okay, it's time for you to stop doing that AIDS stuff. Respect your mother and stop doing that." Well, it really wasn't so much respect my mother because my mother knew what I was doing, and my mother sometimes didn't understand some of the things, but she, you know, thought it was an important thing to do. And so much so that there were a couple of times I had some women with children come to

the house, and some neighbors said, Is it smart for you to have people with AIDS in your house? You've got young children. These are college professors, doctors, all kinds of people who questioned. What they were really saying was, We're not so sure we want them in our building, and you're bringing them in.

So I got on my high horse and I took all the kids trick-or-treating. Well, that really set them off. I said, "Trick-or-treating is for everybody, and these kids aren't safe in their own neighborhood going trick-or-treating, so I think it's fine for us to do trick-or-treating." Some of my neighbors — I mean, I carefully selected a few neighbors and said, "Would you give the kids some candy if I ring the bell?" When this lady said, "Stop doing that in respect to your mother," she was invoking the old Japanese tradition of, Respect your parents, don't do anything that would embarrass them. And now my mother is dead so I should not do anything that might bring embarrassment to her.

There are some people in the Japanese American community who think I'm nuts. You know, Why do you do that work? Then at one point there was a conference in Yokohama that was the first international conference on AIDS held in Asia, and it was held in Japan, and I was invited to go. I think the Japanese Social Services Committee selection team had met me at another conference, and they were, I think, so fascinated that there was this old Japanese woman doing AIDS work in the U.S. that they invited me to come. It turns out it was sort of sad, because one of my American friends came up to me afterwards and said, "That was the most boring, disgusting talk I've ever heard you give. It was so boring. Why were you so boring?" I said, "Look, I had to submit my speech a month ago so it could be translated into German, Japanese, French, Spanish, and so I couldn't stray from this." Now usually when you give a talk, you can add some little thing about the weather, or somebody who's picking their nose in the back of the room and, you know, you can make some ridiculous little comments here or there. So I couldn't make any of those comments, and I had to just read it because I was just reading this presentation. Well, I'm sure it was boring.

But I said to this board of the Japanese Association in New York, that I thought we, as a goodwill gesture, should send some people to this Japanese conference who are not Japanese, who would learn about Japan, and who would appreciate having scholarship money from a Japanese group. I said, "I think it's a very important thing for us to do." Well, some of the men said, Suki, what are you asking us to do? Contribute money to people we don't know? How do you know they're going to go to the conference? And then there were all kinds of questions. Then one doctor got up and said, You know, she doesn't have a bad idea. It might teach some people about the Japanese, but it would also teach the Japanese about some other people. So we sent one Black person, we sent one Hispanic person. The Native American had to back out at the last minute because her kid got sick. And then we had one Asian, Paul Kawata.

55:00

So we sent these people, and they learned a lot about Japan, but the Japanese also learned a lot about stereotypical Americans. Here, Miguelina brought her board chairman, who was a Wall Street lawyer who had to wear a three-piece suit every day. So going to Japan he said, "I'm not there on business, I'm not part of the conference, and I'm just going with you all." So he wore his comfortable jeans and shirt, and all the young Japanese girls that saw him just — Oh, look at him! Oh, he was so cute, he was so this. I said to a few of them, "Don't bother looking because he's not looking at you." And then I said under my breath, not within their earshot, "If you have a brother, he might be interested, but not in you girls, so stop — " I mean, I didn't say stop giggling and trying to flirt with him, but some of the Japanese girls were trying to get his attention because he was nice looking.

So there is this man in total blue jeans and old shirts, old cotton t-shirts that were faded but they were comfortable. You know how you have a few shirts that you just love. Well, he did not look the stereotype of an American. Then Paul Kawata who was — Japanese men do not wear shorts unless they're wearing their little white tennies to go play tennis, but he was in shorts and bright silk Versace shirts, or some bright designer shirt, so that he did not look like the stereotypical Japanese man in the business suit, or the khaki pants in the summer, or khaki suit, or whatever, but, you know, he didn't look like a typical Japanese person. Marie Saint Cyr, who — I warned her before she went. I said, "Marie, now you know, this isn't meant to — don't take it personally. But the Japanese probably have never seen anybody with breasts the size of yours, so you are going to get a stare or two or more. Do not take it personally, but it's not just going to be men. There are going to be women who look too, because they know that they're flat-chested and they cannot believe what you are endowed with. So don't take it personally, but you are going to have some people staring at you." And Miguelina, who is Hispanic but, you know, you look at her and you're not quite sure. And myself. Now, as a Japanese older woman, I should have a somewhat stylish dress and maybe carry a Louis Vuitton bag. That's the stereotype. But the everyday woman walking down the street doesn't necessarily have a drip-dry, two-piece dress on that is a travel suit or something. It was a little more stylish than I might have been, or I was. So it was a very interesting reaction, of people who would see the five of us walking down the street and go, Oh, oh, ooh, oh.

But, you know, there are all sorts of stereotypes about Americans just as there are about Japanese. But I think for the most part, a lot of Japanese traditions are so counter to what has happened in the AIDS situation. It's not a common tradition to talk between mother and child, father and child, and then girl-child and father, boy-child and mother. There's very little intercommunication. Sitting around a table, one does not talk about sex, one does not talk about the baby that's coming. My kids all thought that I didn't know how babies came, but they're there, so I guess I did. They said, How can you take on a job

that has to do with AIDS? You don't know anything about sex, Mom. They thought it was very funny, but anyway.

There are a lot of traditions in Japanese culture, but also, to some degree, same or slightly different variation among Korean or Chinese or various things. One of the things that showed them the great disparity in the education about our various Asian ethnicities is the fact that people in health care did not know that if you are giving somebody an AIDS prevention brochure, and you are Chinese and you get given something in Korean, it's like giving you a piece of gibberish because you cannot read Korean. If you are Korean and you get something written in Hindi, it doesn't do any good. So just like finally America has gotten to the point where a lot of things are translated into Spanish. It is not the same in Asian culture. So the health departments not only have called us *other* and don't call us *Asian and Pacific Islander* — Native Americans and Asians have been put together as a group called *other*, so a lot of data is put as *other* and we don't — you can't write a proposal and say, Our data is based on *other*.

60:00

So we have the problem of people not understanding that specific AIDS education has to be in the specific language, but that also the customs are very critical. And you have to respect not only the traditions and customs, but you have to respect what has happened, for example, during the war — and I say the war meaning World War II, but it could be Vietnam, it could be, you know, what went on in Korea. In a war situation, just like Abu Ghraib and different things that have happened with American soldiers terrorizing and raping and doing things that soldiers feel they have a right to do when they're in another country. It's a man thinking that he has the right to rape a woman of another language. That happened in World War II. In the case of World War II, very often it was the Japanese soldiers going to China or the Philippines, and so you have people there who hate the Japanese, rightfully so, because of what they perceive to be such a dehumanizing situation.

Those same people — if, for example, I spoke Japanese or spoke English with a Japanese accent, and I went into a group and tried to give them AIDS 101, they would be thinking to themselves, What is that Japanese woman — look what the Japanese did during World War II. What is she talking to us about sex for? The lesson would be lost. They would be reliving World War II. And it's just like, I'm sure, some Iraqis will be reliving what's going on now. And even though we deny that things happen, we deny that we — we do do things during war, and it's a man-woman thing, it's a conqueror mentality. There are a lot of different theories of what it actually represents, but we have come a long way for Asians to finally have some voice, but it's very limited.

ROSS: All right. It's time to stop.

62:30

END TAPE 4

## TAPE 5

ROSS: This is tape five for Suki Ports. Suki, you have obviously been a pioneer in the Asian American community, in support of people around educational justice — now I'm learning — reproductive rights, HIV/AIDS justice. What changes have you seen, over the last couple of decades, in the building of a movement among Asian American women, that impress you or maybe disappoint you?

PORTS: I think that what's very exciting is to see some younger women who are free to speak for themselves. Who I listen to sometimes and say, "Wow, I don't think I would have had the guts to say that at their age." And who I think are wanting to go back to school, wanting to learn more, and recognizing that if they had a PhD or a doctorate in public health or something, they would get respected more. I think that education has been very important in the lives of Asian Americans because that's the only way they could lose their Asian face.

ROSS: What do you mean by lose their Asian face?

PORTS: There have been a lot of stereotypes about Asians, and Asian women have always been looked upon as a sex symbol, a compliant or a less-than-assertive person. You know, there are all kinds of cases just to prove that's just a generalization, that's not fair, but there are a lot of traditions in the Asian communities, whether it be any one of the 60 or more ethnicities.

I think that for Asians to be accepted, they have had to do something that was different than somebody who is white, for example, who may have had the same background, same intellect, but the Asians have had to somehow prove that they are worthy. There's a lot of lack of trust right away in some Democratic or Republican — or it doesn't matter the administration. If there's something wrong, it has to be that it was the Asian person's fault. It wasn't the societal fault or the societal interpretation of what that Asian person did or didn't do, but is accused of being X or Y.

There have been numerous times when, if a non-Asian person had done the same thing, they would not have had the same treatment. There is a scientist who was, at 70 years old, chained to his bed because he supposedly stole a computer and used it at home, that might have had national security implications. Now, I don't think that same standard would have been applied to somebody who — It would have been characterized as, Oh, that person had a lot of drive and was very conscientious, and he took the work home because he wanted to accomplish or see the job done. That's not sort of the tone that is used for an Asian that's done something that somebody thinks is inappropriate or questionable or competitive, or there are a lot of things — You know, jealousy.

5:00

There are a lot of people who think that Asians should not be in any minority category because they've gotten so far ahead in many cases. They haven't gotten — There's a very definite glass ceiling on Asians. There are very few who are at the top of their profession. I know a very famous cancer specialist who took care of some first ladies, who took care of all kinds of people with cancer, but he was never named the head of the division at Sloan-Kettering because they were waiting for somebody non-Asian to be the head of their department. There are a lot of Asians who have worked very hard to make their boss look good, who have been the second-in-command, and who have been very hard workers and have done all kinds of things, but they don't get promoted even if the boss leaves.

And so to see some of the younger women want to go into various fields that are different, like public health, for example. Twenty years ago, if there was a woman who was going into surgery or going into some elite profession in the medical world, that would have been acceptable. But now there are people going into public health service, which is pretty exciting, to see that they want to do something in a slightly different way and not just — I'm not saying all surgeons are just in it for the money, but it's different for the Asians who have not been — There have been many Asian women teachers, there have been many Asian women in various professions, but they haven't gotten to the top of their corporation, or whatever else. There are just very few heads of corporations in the United States who are Asian women or men.

ROSS: Are you a member of any Asian women's organizations?

PORTS: Well, I belong to the Japanese American Association, which is both men and women, and I belong to a group called Asian Americans for Equality. I'm on the board of that also, but that is also both men and women. Those are two that have been around for a long time. The Japanese American Association — we just celebrated our 100th anniversary this year. Asian Americans for Equality — I think we just celebrated our 30th year, or something like that. There is a group that is Asian women in business, but I don't totally fit in that category of business. Yes, AIDS is now a business, but it isn't really in my eyes.

ROSS: We wish it weren't.

PORTS: Yeah. And so that organization that's beginning to grow is not where I really belong. And then there's another group, Asians Americans/Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy, and they have offshoots of that. I've been on the board of The Sister Fund and the board of The New York Women's Foundation, but those are multiethnic, multirace. There is one group that, for a while we had a little money, and it was Asian and Pacific Island Women in AIDS, and that was very exciting. But we ran out of money, so we sort of couldn't get together. We can

talk to each other on the phone once in a while and see each other at conferences that somebody else has planned.

ROSS: There is, of course, the exciting group of National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum knockoff, which is kind of like the fastest growing API group in the country right now.

PORTS: Yes. And it's in Washington, D.C.

ROSS: Right.

PORTS: It's very exciting to watch what they're doing and to see them developing. They were recently doing a search for that executive director.

ROSS: Miriam Yeung has taken that.

PORTS: I don't know.

ROSS: She lives up here in New York. She worked at the Lesbian and Gay Center [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Community Center] running Causes in Common. I mean, that's a whole other story, but she's taken that new job, so you'll be hearing more from her.

PORTS: Well, it's a group that I've been watching with interest. One of the sad things is the majority of organizing has been in California. There's a lot of stuff going on in California, and there's also some stuff going on in Washington, but with the little fund-raising that we can do, it really doesn't include much for travel if you need to get to places. And if you don't go when they have a conference, and you don't go when they're having some kind of planning meeting or something, you're sort of out of it. We are somewhat limited in our very small budget.

ROSS: And well, here in New York, of course, there's CAAAV, the Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence, which grew out of the Vincent Chin murder and has gone on to organize around domestic workers and sweatshops and stuff.

10:00

PORTS: You know, there's the sad line between being very encouraged to see younger people start things, but then there's the older part of me that sort of cringes when somebody screams at somebody else in a way that I might think is unfair or unjustified, and you think, Did you do that when you were that age? Or there are some things that some of the younger people may do that you don't necessarily agree with, and yet they've got to do their thing. So I think there are some things where you have to learn where to keep your mouth shut and be encouraging in your mind, but your body doesn't have to be there.

ROSS: Exactly. Well, there is a difference in how young people see social change, and I think every generation has the right to define and determine the struggle on their own terms. But there is an arrogance and a rudeness and a presumption of — a self-righteousness that lacks the humility and the self-questioning and the doubt that characterizes previous generations at times.

PORTS: Well, I think one of the things is that there is sort of almost an attitude of, Well, if you don't agree with us 100 percent, then you're not with us. That there's no room for thinking, Well, all right, she agrees with 50 percent of what we're saying, and she agrees with 30 percent of how we say it, but, you know, we'll tolerate the old lady, she's not going to be around that much longer. You know, there's not that kind of, Well, maybe she doesn't totally agree with us, but, you know, if she agrees with us partly, maybe that's okay. It's almost 100 percent or nothing.

ROSS: So tell me about your current work. When did your current organization get founded and why?

PORTS: Well, in the early '80s, I started the Minority Taskforce on AIDS for the Council of Churches, and we worked at that for a couple of years. The Council of Churches had some financial difficulties, so it was not particularly good for me to continue to work there. And I decided that also the issues of women were so neglected that I would start a group that would focus more on issues of women of color. So in 1988 I started putting a board together and getting the incorporation and all that stuff. So in 1989 we opened as the Family Health Project.

The Family Health Project does not have the implication that the Minority Taskforce on AIDS did because some people said, Hey, don't put *AIDS* on the envelope. The mailman's going to look at it, and everybody's going to see that I have something to do with AIDS. People were very nervous that the stigma of AIDS would get transferred to them through the envelopes that they were getting. So we decided to call it something very innocuous like the Family Health Project. Who could that hurt? It turns out that for some people it wasn't specific enough: Why didn't you have AIDS in the title? How do we know that you do anything about AIDS if you don't have AIDS in the title? So, you know, you have to weigh one and the other.

But we started that in 1989. It was primarily to say a lot of care is being given now to people with AIDS. There are drugs being developed, there are protocols being developed. People were beginning to talk about whether women had the right to say whether they wanted to have a baby or not, or whether they were coerced into not having a baby because they had AIDS. I feel that people should have had the choice. I don't think forced abortion — It's just so ironic that some of the same women who wanted so badly to have an abortion at one point — in their particular economic or stage of life or whatever, they wanted an abortion. Then when AIDS came along, and in some cases women

15:00

didn't want to have an abortion but they were coerced into — or in the case of one woman, an abortion was performed — or a hysterectomy leading up to.

But, you know, I think that we started this to try and get more general policies changed. But the general policies had to be changed with the idea that it was not just against men. And that was what was so hard to get across to some of the people in the AIDS field: that if you're supporting women's issues, it does not mean that you don't want gay men to get service, and there shouldn't be any big competition going for who gets service. Everybody should get service. But there was this feeling for a long time that if you didn't support gay men and men who had sex with men, and say it at the same time that you were saying that you wanted changes for women of color, you were being homophobic. Well, you know, I can't — that's people's perception. I can't deal with that. I'm sorry that that's how things got misinterpreted.

I think that this disease has left room for a lot of misinterpreting, a lot of hurt feelings, a lot of stereotypes. I know at the beginning of the epidemic, there were times when you had to say, Look, it's not just about gay men. You have to give it up. It's not your disease, you don't own it. And yet, you know, if you speak up and you're somewhat harsh, you're looked upon as homophobic, you're looked upon as arrogant. A lot of the things that were said about Asians being so sweet and nice, I've had labeled at me. How come you're so anti this? And, you know, Asian women are supposed to like Asian men and all men, and how come you seem to not like men? Please. What kind of nonsense is that? There are a lot of things that have happened in this AIDS epidemic that have created very clear lines of people who are for or against, and it doesn't matter what you're talking about.

I think that one of the sad parts of the AIDS epidemic is that there has been a lot of lack of understanding or compassion or concern about people who aren't like you, and I think that's sad. So on the one hand, where I think it's very exciting that some of the young Asian women have gotten involved, and young Asian men, in some cases I just think that, you know, you can't always agree with everybody 100 percent. As I say, a lot of the issues are, I think, very involved in societal change. And if we don't make some major changes in the way we look at education, in the way we look at the rights of —

Somebody told me the other day that they were going to get involved with a group that was just forming, and they were going to look to make societal change. And I said, "I think that's great, but where are you starting? At what point are you starting?" She wasn't quite sure what I meant, and I said, "Well, there are certain basic things that are human needs. Everybody needs to eat, everybody needs to have a place to sleep, and everybody should learn something about themselves and their culture and their language." So beyond that, then you have the things that make life simpler by having a government system somewhere that coordinates things, that does something for the spirit, and we call that religion or however you want to talk about

spirituality. But those are — If you didn't have a religion or you didn't have a government, you still need food, education, and a place to sleep, and in some climates, something to wear.

I think that we're not looking enough at what is going to make societal change mean that we are going to have the ability for everybody to have something to eat without having to ask for the largesse of somebody who has either money or leftovers, and that's what some of these harvest programs are about. That's wonderful — they go to the restaurants and they get the leftovers, and they give them to poor people. Well, I'm not sure if that's my idea of true charity because I'm not sure, A, that they're all the leftovers that have not been touched, or whether it's everything's been — You know, I saw a pig farm, and I saw once all the stuff being thrown in the trough of all the pigs that the piggies ate. It evokes in my mind, what are people getting? Other people's leftovers and whatever. I'd rather they have fresh food or the money to go buy something. I know we waste a lot of food in this country, but still.

20:00

I would like us to be able to have people eat without having to beg, or to have a roof over their heads without having to beg. That is major societal change. Because we won't have the education for everybody unless we have the housing that puts everybody together so that they won't mind living with somebody else or having their children going to school with their children.

*Brown v. Board of Ed.* is such a perfect example. That was decided in 1954. And how much difference has there been in the public school system being segregated or not segregated? It has depended upon the largesse and the legislation of primarily white legislators and primarily white communities to say, Okay, we're going to build a middle-income project in the middle of our project. We're going to build low-income housing not in huge buildings that nobody wants to live in, including the poor people. But we haven't made those basic changes of where we live and how we educate each other. So, you know, we have a long way to go.

And on top of all that is, then, what kind of health care do we have so that you have people in New York who can be flown from one part of New York to a hospital, land in Central Park with a helicopter, go get special surgery and save part of a finger, and it makes the big news because it's been the child of somebody who it was important to save that child's finger? And yet there are people who can lose their whole hand, their arm, their leg, their whole body, and nobody's helicoptering them somewhere because it's not important. That child would die anyway, or the child would lose it anyway. I mean, there's sort of an attitude about, Well, they wouldn't have lived anyway.

ROSS:

Well, I seem to detect in this country an all-out attack on public hospitals and the provision of health care for poor people. From city after city, I'm seeing that same kind of assault. Do you see that in New York City as well?

PORTS:

Oh yes, and I see burnout of some of the people who have been very strong advocates. There was somebody who was very, very active in talking about the public hospitals, and he died. Somebody else who was wonderful moved to California and is helping out in California. There are so many problems in New York. How can you save somebody who has had 51 bullets pumped into their body? Yes, you can save somebody who may have one bullet in some part of the body that wasn't life threatening, but we've lost a lot of young Black men — and not so young. But we've lost a lot of people because we haven't either taught our police better marksmanship, or that you don't have to pump 40 bullets or 20 bullets or ten, or whatever, into somebody to stop them from doing something.

I cringe because I have a grandson who just graduated from the Police Academy. Now he graduated — The top member of the class was a woman, a young gorgeous woman from Harvard who decided she didn't want to sit behind a desk. So she went to the Police Academy in New York, and she was the top person. She seems to be a big jock, she seems to be able to do all kinds of things, she got the top grade. My grandson got the second, which is very exciting. And yet I worried about him working in a precinct — They put all the young people in the precincts with the highest crime because they figure if they flood the precincts with the highest crime there with young police, they're going to stop. But they don't have the experience. They don't have the wisdom of when to shoot, when not, when to do this or that.

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So I'm very nervous about this grandson of mine being a policeman in this high-crime district, and it was the wrong thing to worry about. He was coming home the other night — he has a shift — Well, they also give the kids the shifts that the older people don't want, so he has from six o'clock at night until two in the morning. So around three in the morning, he was rolling himself home, and wearing his little hoodie and jeans, because you don't walk in your uniform to go home, you change in the precinct. He was walking along, and some cop stopped him and said, "Where do you think you're going?" He was just half a block from our house. He lives with me because there's such a low salary, and when he was going to Police Academy, there was no way for him to live. So he called, and he said, "Grandma, can I come live with you?" So I said, "Hmm, did your mother throw you out of the house already?"

But anyway, he lives with me, and there he was, half a block from my house, where I wouldn't worry about crime, and the police stopped him and said, "Where do you think you're going?" And he said, "Home." And they said, "Oh yeah? Put your hands up against the wall." So they started to search him, and the one says, "Gun!" So the other cop instantly went into action and pressed him against the wall hard, and they came across a shield in the next pocket, and the cop said, "Oh [expletive], he's a cop." Well, I said to him, "Why didn't you instantly tell them you were a cop? Why didn't you show them your

shield?" He said, "Grandma, if I'd reached for my shield, I wouldn't be here telling you this story." Now how sad is that?

ROSS: Oh my goodness.

PORTS: But I see, in a lot of our society, a lack of concern for the civil rights of people. I think we've gotten immune to civil rights. The Iraqis don't deserve civil rights, even if they're not the terrorists –

ROSS: Human rights.

PORTS: And there are the people who do not have any rights, so they don't have human rights. Then there are the people who just don't have the right to live. You know, they just really — We say, you know, Be satisfied with what you have. Why are you complaining? Why is this housing not good enough? And that goes to health and hospitals, where people should be grateful that they're being treated, and the doctors haven't gone the extra mile. And yet there are some who go that extra mile. So every time you criticize something, there is somebody over there who's working their heart out.

But on the other hand, as a whole, I see an awful lot of people who don't get treated nicely, and yet one day, I saw something that just made my heart feel so good. I was there with an elderly AIDS patient, in the emergency room, and I took him in. He was so sick he really needed to be hospitalized right away. But I called upstairs to the AIDS doctor, and I said, "I've got somebody here. I really need to have you see him." And she said, "I'm in the middle of doing something, but as soon as I'm finished with this, I will come down."

So while we were sitting there, the emergency room doctor came over and said to him in this, oh, this just really nice way, "Hi. How are you doing?" Because you could see that he was not doing well. "How are you doing?" And, "Can I take your pulse?" And, "Would you mind if I looked in your mouth?" And he was so gentle with him. And this man was obviously not well, he was obviously probably with AIDS, but the young man treated him as if he was a king. And at that point, two cops came in with a man on the gurney. They put him right next to him and said, "He's probably DOA." So the young man — the doctor, who was a Black man — turned to this older Black man and said, "Excuse me, but I have to see what this is about, what the police —"

So he gave one listen. And to the cops, yes, he could have been dead, but this trained doctor put his ear and touched him and found that he was alive. He quickly got something — whatever it is — and he (shudders) he put the knife or scalpel or whatever it was in his neck, started the blood flowing, starting him, you know, going, and he was fine. But in the meantime, he was sort of patting him gently and checking various things, but he got a gun out of his pocket. (laughs) He handed it to the cop and he said, "Here, I think you should have this."

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So as soon as the man had been — after the doctor bandaged him and everything, he said, “Well — ” and he went to get his gun. The young man said, “We’ve taken care of it, young man. You don’t have to worry about where it is.” But he was so respectful of this man who was obviously up to no good, but he didn’t treat him like, You bum, carrying a gun, whatever. And he didn’t treat this older — And I asked him what his background was. He was in the [U.S. Army] Medical Corps. You know, he had the U.S. — His medical school was paid for, so he needed to give back two years, and — But this was just such a wonderful vision of what that medical care could be if they were all like that. But unfortunately they’re not.

ROSS: Unfortunately not. I want to switch gears for a minute and talk about, what does this interview mean to you? The fact that Smith College has decided that it’s very important that the story of Suki Ports be permanently in its archives — what does that say to you? What is the meaning of that for you?

PORTS: Well, you know, it’s a very mixed — there’s some very mixed feelings I have. When you first suggested this, I was taken aback. I thought, Oh, she’s joking. I mean, I thought you really were kind of, you know, pulling my leg. And you wouldn’t understand that unless you knew that women of color meant nothing in my class of over 600 women, where I was the only Asian American-born person with an Asian face, but I was an American, but I still had an Asian face. And that’s what I meant by saying Asians can’t ever escape being Asian. You always have that face. You can have an accent, you can have whatever. Or you can have no accent. And yet the most common thing I’m asked is, Where are you from? And I say, “New York.” And they say, Well, where were you born? And I say, “New York.” Well, where are your parents now? And I say, “They’ve died.” Well, they haven’t gotten the one piece of information they’re really looking for. You can’t be an American. Even though you were born in New York, even though you went to school in the best schools in this country — some of them. Even though you don’t speak — You cannot be an American: look at your face.

So being the only Asian born American in my class of 640 graduates — whatever it was — there were two other people — they’re called the foreign students — and that was somebody from Korea, Ok Che, and Bansi from India. But they were called foreign students. But there were three Asian women in the total composite of our class. Nobody Black, nobody Hispanic. If there was anybody Native American, we didn’t know.

So now that there is this new archive that’s going to have some women of color — The reason I thought you were kind of kidding or pulling my leg was because I was the only woman of color. So if I’m the only woman of color in my class, maybe it’s because Smith wants to have the only woman of color in my class in the archive. And then I thought, No, I guess they really didn’t do that. It’s really your having

been familiar with the fact that I was active in various issues along the way, and I came to your attention. That it is a different door to go in to the archives.

ROSS: It's actually because of the work you've done. Your ethnic background helps, but it's because of the work you've done.

PORTS: It's because of the work, but you've been familiar with it. Many of my classmates at Smith don't know the work I've done, and it wouldn't occur to most people — with the exception of my own classmate, Gloria Steinem — that this kind of work is even necessary or something that, you know. I'm not saying that I wouldn't have gotten the education I got at any other college, but I got it at Smith, and I am grateful for the fact that I got an education that enabled me to do certain things, to use my brain that was somewhat challenged at Smith. And I say that with some tongue in cheek because there were times when I didn't know if I was going to flunk out. My freshman year was pretty tenuous, but that was my early education of, you know, learn by doing but don't memorize anything. At least learn where you can find the information. It's not information that you need to memorize. So when I got to Smith and needed to memorize some things, I was in serious trouble. Oh, let's see, I guess I can't take the zoology textbook into my exam. I know what page all of those questions that he's asking on the exam are on.

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I think that it was possible at Smith to have had such a mixture of classes, and basically a mixture of people, but they just weren't people of color. I mean, there are some funny Smith mixtures or coincidences. There was a ballet that came here, a Japanese ballet company that did a dance in commemoration of Hiroshima, and they used an American orchestra. The dancers came here, but they used an American orchestra to play the music. I happened to notice, in the intermission, this little phrase, that the conductor was named John Miner. I had a Smith friend [Dorothy Plaut] who was many classes older than I was, but we had met at a Smith event or something — we got to be friends and we were on the same board of an organization, and so forth. And so I called her and I said, "Listen, you live right around the corner from Hunter [College], and I've got these two tickets tonight. Do you want to come with me to go see this ballet on Hiroshima?" And she said sure, so we went over.

She encouraged me; she said, "Go speak to him." And I said, "Oh, it's probably not the same person." She said, "Oh, go ask." So I said, "Well, I don't want to just go up and ask him." And she said, "Oh, go ahead." Well, I had taught, when I was in Turkey, a young man named John Miner. And so afterwards, she kept bugging me to do it. You know, she kept saying, "Go up, go up!" So here's this very much older Smith alum who I was with, who urged me to go up.

So I went up to him. He had already gone, and the orchestra members were putting away their violins and their whatever, and I said, "Do any of you know if Mr. Miner by any chance grew up in Turkey?"

And one of the young men said, “Yes, he grew up in Turkey. He was in Istanbul; that’s where he grew up.” So I said, “Oh, well, I was curious because I taught him when he was in the fifth grade.” Well, this young man dropped his violin bow on the floor and looked up at me as if, I have seen: stegosaurus lives. He looked at me like I had taught him when he was in the fifth grade. It was so funny. He said, “Oh, I’ve got to go get him.” I said, “No, no, I was just curious, don’t go get him.” And he said, “Oh yes, I must.”

And he went and got him. And little Johnny was now big John Miner, the conductor. I said, “I don’t know if you remember me.” He said, “Of course I remember you.” So he said, “How is Mr. Ports?” And I said, “We got married after we left Turkey.” He said, “Oh, I thought you were going to.” And then I said, “Well, I wasn’t sure. I told the young man who was putting away his violin that I had taught you in the fifth grade, and I wasn’t sure as you would have any reason to remember me.” He said, “Of course I remember you.” He said, “You canceled all the classes on the day that Mr. Toscanini died, and you played music that he conducted all day. And our lesson for the day was to hear music that Mr. Toscanini had conducted, and you talked about some of the music that he was playing.”

I had totally forgotten about that. But this child, who was now a conductor, and who, no matter what the coincidence that he was a conductor, but he had been so influenced by this crazy teacher who stopped classes and made them all listen to the New York Philharmonic and whatever — NBC Symphony, or whatever he was conducting at the time. This young man remembered that. Now, something in my Smith education said, Connect what’s going on in the outside world. Make a connection for the youngsters. Make something real. Have your teaching mean something. And so for whatever that was, something clicked there.

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So, you know, you do things on the spur of the moment, and you never have any idea. This must have been — well, if I taught there in ’57, and this was at least five, ten years ago. So it was maybe, you know, 40 years since that child had had me as a teacher. But something in my education and my transmitting that made that child remember. So if nothing else, as a teacher, when you have youngsters remember things, it brings a, you know, a little touch of —

At an AIDS meeting recently, we had a big fund-raising dinner, and afterwards this young man came up to me and he said, “You don’t know me, but I’m so-and-so’s husband.” And he said, “You taught me when I was in fourth grade in New Jersey.” And I looked at him, and I thought, Oh, this was one of the worst kids in my class, he gave me such a headache. He was always on my (laughs) on my list. And I said, “You certainly gave me a hard time.” And I said, “The only thing I think you ever got out of my teaching was when I caught you talking with your friend in the back of the room.” We laughed. And I said, “And you also enjoyed making the knots when we made the ropes for

the Mayflower.” We were studying the Pilgrims and whatever, so we constructed a huge Mayflower the size of the room wall.

But you know, it was so funny. This young man — he had been such a pain in my side, yet he cooked up this whole story about, he was going to France and he needed to learn some French, so would I teach him some French words? And I said, “Sure. You have to stay after school, and I’ll teach — Because the rest of the kids don’t want to learn French, probably, so you stay after.” So every day I stayed with him for a few minutes. He learned a French word a day. Finally, at the parents’ conference, the mother said, “What’s with this — all these French words he’s coming through?” I said, “Because he wants to be ready to go on his trip to France.” She said, “What trip to France?” And I said, “He said you were all taking a trip to France.” She said, “I wish.” But he just wanted some attention, for Pete’s sake.

ROSS: This interview with you has absolutely convinced me that you must live in the smallest world possible, where Istanbul can connect to a ballet in New York, from Smith to New Jersey — I mean, the connections in your life are awesome.

PORTS: But you know, one of the things is that, because I have a name and a face that are unusual, people can remember me. Which is different than if I were Jane Jones who might have done some of the same things but I think, you know, there is some — We may not all look alike, because I don’t think we do, but when people see somebody Asian and they have the same name, they’re tempted to go up and say, Are you my teacher that I had in fourth grade?

ROSS: Something tells me you would be memorable even if you were named Jane Jones. Something tells me that. In terms of this body of work you’ve done, obviously you’ve created a lot of social change in your wake. What would you imagine to be your legacy? Or how would you like to be remembered?

PORTS: Well, I think one of the things that, as I speak to some of the young people who have asked me to write a recommendation for them for this or that, or young people who I’ve met at meetings and follow up with them on something else. I think one of the things I’d like the young people who say they’re learning something is that the most important thing is that what you are saying needs to be trusted. So you have to have the facts to back you up. You can’t just make something up and say, This is right. You have to be able to understand something of history, to see if it’s been done before or said before, or how it’s been said, or what’s going on. I think your facts have to be correct — or facts as best as you can figure them out, because we know that a lot of facts are changing, as none of us thought anybody would be walking on the moon, but that fact has changed.

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So you know, I think that if I have, in any youngster, given a sense of, when you say something, you have to be able to be convincing. That you mean what you say, but it's not just an opinion, that you have some facts behind it, and that they should be able to trust that you've done some sort of work to be able to make that statement. I think trust is the most critical issue that we need to — I mean, I think it's so pitiful that there are a lot of people that I think a lot of us would agree that we can't trust them. It's, you know, maybe a colleague who goes from nine to five, and you can't trust that they're going to finish the job because they're going to leave at five o'clock. That's a form of trust — that they don't see something through.

I think that one of the things I would really hope is that even though we disagree on something, that somebody has looked it up, found out something, and is not just saying something just to disagree or just to be contentious. That there is some fact behind it. And then temper it with a little bit of kindness if nothing else. It's one thing to say, Oh, you're wrong, you're so stupid, you're wrong. And, well, maybe we don't agree, but, you know, there's a way to say — And then there are some people that I don't care if I say it that way. I mean, there are some people in New York City government that I've had very vile discussions with because I don't think they're caring about some of the issues that I care about.

ROSS: What additional information do you think is important in understanding your life and your experiences?

PORTS: Oh, I think one of the things that one also has to learn is that it can be very, very lonely to be an advocate. You can sometimes, in the middle of the night, say, "Why did I say that?" Or, "What am I doing this for?" I think there's a lot of room for questioning what you're doing, particularly when friends or family say, Why are you saying that? Or, What are you doing? That's why I say it's important to have some facts behind you, so it's not just an opinion I've created out of nothing.

I think, for example, now there are a lot of people who have come into the AIDS situation who have done a little reading, who have done a little — they don't remember the day when people were dying. Literally, some weeks I would go to a funeral every day. There were some days where I went to a funeral in the morning, in the afternoon, and the evening. We finally got to a point where we said, We have to check schedules so that we don't have conflicting funerals, so that you're not torn by the fact that you're not respecting so-and-so's family by not going to their funeral because you have to go to somebody else's funeral.

I feel sad that, to some degree, the AIDS epidemic has gotten so sort of businesslike that some of the feelings for the people or the situation are gone. It's just a routine medical issue or a routine social issue. A child should not — To this day there's the Ryan White, where the young man was turned out of his home because he had hemophilia

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and his family was terribly mistreated. But there shouldn't be children now who are teased about their mother having AIDS. And that's because we haven't done enough to teach people about AIDS and how you don't get it or how you do get it. I think that there's a lot that we haven't done. And I think one of the things that I did at the beginning of the epidemic which has given me a reputation, I think somewhat unfairly, but the, Oh, she just yells about something. Well, sometimes it was so infuriating that you had to pound the table and say, "You are wrong!" There are some issues that you're not willing to discuss.

I remember one very funny meeting. It was Donna Shalala's office. There was a big meeting when Donna Shalala was the Secretary of Health, and there was a big meeting on women's issues, and it included reproductive rights and it included women's — the whole fact that a lot of people don't know what the women's reproductive system is, so that men who did not know that women might be having a hard time, or that they were losing their period, or whatever. These are all things that, if you don't know those physiological facts — So at one point I raised my hand, and somebody said, "Suki, stand up." And I said, "I am." You know, I was towards the back of the room, and I'm short, so, you know. So I finally stood up on a chair, and I said, "Okay, now can you hear me?" People around me thought, She's crazy, she's standing up on the chair. But, you know, it was just so crazy when they said, Stand up, stand up, and I said, "I am." (laughter)

I think that some of this is, you have to be able to have a certain amount of a sense of humor that, on the one hand, you want to cry, but on the other hand, you've got to laugh because it's just to silly not to, or you could spend your whole day crying.

ROSS: What has sustained you, to enable you to be here for the long haul doing this work and avoiding the burnout?

PORTS: Well, I think to some degree, and I don't mean this to — I think there were certain things in my childhood. We didn't have the privilege of just wallowing in self-pity sometimes, and I think sometimes there's a certain pampering of self that says, "I'm burned out. I can't do this anymore, so I don't care what my job is, I'm just going to tune out." I think that's begging the issue to a certain degree. And I think that there are a lot of people who have legitimately worked so hard, and this issue is so depressing, particularly AIDS, or if you've been involved in reproductive system without talking about — and talking about reproductive rights, and then having to see what happened in the Supreme Court down the line and all the rest, it has to be depressing and it has to be discouraging.

And yet, I think that, for example, the first election we — My mother, my sister, my father, and I went to the polls in 1956. It was the first time that I was old enough to vote, and it was the first time that my mother was allowed to vote because she became a citizen. In 1952, I think it was, the McCarran Act was passed so that Japanese aliens could

apply for citizenship and could become a citizen. So my mother — oh, my sister and I quizzed her and went over all the questions in the book for citizenship. We got down to the court, and the judge said — the hearing officer or whatever you call it — said to my mother, “Mrs. Terada, aren’t you ashamed of yourself, for raising two daughters in this country and just getting around to applying for citizenship?” So my mother got up to her full four feet ten inches and said, “Young man — ” And my sister and my father and I looked up and said, Oh, she’s going to blow it, she’s going to blow it. She said, “Young man, let me tell you something about your American immigration history.” And he said, “Welcome to the United States, Mrs. Terada, we’re so happy you — ” He didn’t want to — He realized he opened a can of worms and Pandora’s box. He didn’t want to hear anything. She didn’t have to answer one question.

So we were all going to vote, and my father said, “We are all going to vote, and we are all going to vote for President Eisenhower.” And I said, “Daddy, I thought we were able to go into the booth and vote for who we wanted to without having Daddy tell us who to vote for.” He said, “Don’t you forget: Roosevelt put everybody in the camps, and Truman dropped the bomb. They were both Democrats who could have done something humane for the Japanese, and they chose to do just the opposite. Don’t you forget that.” Well, I never thought my father thought about the camps and the dropping the bomb in the same way, but when it mattered, he felt he had to put his foot down and tell us all — Well, don’t you know, I voted for Eisenhower because, you know, certain traditions don’t die. And he was right. He was saying, “We have to do a protest vote.” Not that anybody in the country gave a hoot, because Eisenhower did get elected. I said, “What if it was our votes that — ” But anyway.

You know, the very issues, when you think of what happens in your life and what you do doesn’t make a difference. I know that some of the younger women have said, Oh, I wish I could speak up like you do. And I said, “And I wish you would.” It’s so important for young women to rise to what they think other people can do but they can’t. And so I think, if nothing else, if I can encourage enough young people to stick with what they believe, but be sure what they believe is an honest belief that they’ve come to by doing some research, by doing some looking around, and how did they come to that conclusion of what they want.

I think that I feel badly that, at the beginning of the epidemic, I had to sometimes get very angry at people and call people some names. Some people had no idea that this was a — ha-ha-ha — sweet Japanese lady. They had no idea in the world. They thought this was this nasty, old — and I was considered old before I was old. I mean, I first started this work when I was, you know, 50. Sixty is not so old, and yet, you know, I was already considered a nasty old woman.

There are people now who can make the point — make policy-change recommendations, and they don’t have to start talking about,

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You don't know about women's rights, you don't know about the reproductive rights that women have never had. A lot of people now know that background, and so the women don't — They can start at point M instead of having to start at the first ABCs of not only AIDS but reproductive rights or any kind of human rights.

But it means to me, to be included in this archive — it's very interesting to me that I'm going to be included. It means that I'm going to have to do a lot of sorting of materials, because I don't have somebody who is always filing things correctly for me, so a lot of things are put in the box. So I don't want somebody to find my laundry list, my grocery list — all these things that may be on top. So it's a little work that's going to have to be done.

ROSS: Actually, let me interrupt you there because actually it is not that. Since you do have papers that you'd like to consider preserving at the Sophia Smith Collection, let me tell you what the process is actually like. They actually send a team to take the boxes as is. They sort through all of that stuff, and anything not relevant to the archives they send back to you — your laundry list, your canceled checks. This is what happened to me. They came and took 37 boxes from me, and so I was a little afraid because I thought I'd never find the time to do all the presorting necessary to make my stuff archive-ready. I was very relieved to find out that they don't want me to do that. They would rather do that. And they are very respectful of your stuff because, again, it is your stuff. And after they sort through it, they will respectfully return anything that doesn't go into the archives. So you don't have to do the presorting.

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PORTS: Well, there is some presorting. I mean, sometimes I have a tendency in a meeting, in the middle of somebody's speech, that they're saying something totally ridiculous, I can write, Where in the world did that — expletive — get that? Or, Where did she get that idea? Or, Why does he think he has the right to say that? I mean, I've written some little notes that I think I ought to launder a little bit along the way.

ROSS: Again, this is your material, I want to assure you. I'll have you state for the record that you do have papers that you would consider.

PORTS: Because of the fact that I developed the first total minority service organization in New York City and helped coordinate, run the first people of color minorities meeting in New York, I probably have, sitting in my office, the most complete collection of all of the things about AIDS and communities of color. But some of my collection includes things that are from communities that are not communities of color, and I've underlined or I've kept them because it has shown how devoid the conference or the paper or the meeting is of anything related to people of color, so that there was no concern about people of color. There have been several major publications that have done timelines for the first 20 years of AIDS. You'd think nobody of color was infected at all by

those, and this is — I'm talking about major things, like maybe *Time* magazine or one of those news — you know, *U.S. News*, one of them. Somebody showed me the timeline and said, "Where does anybody of color come into this?"

ROSS: Not even Magic Johnson?

PORTS: Well, you know, maybe Magic Johnson.

ROSS: He can represent all of us, because we're all millionaire basketball players with the highest level of medical care.

PORTS: Well, I'll tell you, one thing he did do that was quite interesting was, Dr. Ho of the Aaron Diamond AIDS Research Center took Magic Johnson and Yao Ming, who is a very tall Chinese basketball player — he took them to China, and they had a conference with the Chinese government. President Clinton was there. And the star power of Magic and Yao Ming just brought — People just went gaga seeing these two big players on the TV in China. This was a big event. But then when President Clinton put his arm around the person who had AIDS who was at the meeting, people in the entire country saw Yao Ming, Magic, this man with AIDS, and President Clinton all standing together, and nobody was afraid that they were going to get AIDS. That was worth a million words, a million things said, to see this picture of these four men with these totally different backgrounds.

ROSS: Okay. In my last minute — You will receive a copy of this interview. Do you prefer VHS or DVD format?

PORTS: I don't know. What's better? I don't know.

ROSS: You can make a decision later. But I do want to say thank you on behalf of the Sophia Smith Collection and Smith College for this interview. This has been a joy.

PORTS: It's been my pleasure and honor.

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TAPE 6 contains only still shots of awards and other items.

END OF INTERVIEW

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