

## DESCRIPTION SHEET

INTERVIEW: Claudia Stucke  
Year: 2018

### DEKALB HISTORICAL SOCIETY ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

NAME: Claudia Stucke  
DATE: July 22, 2018  
PLACE: DeKalb History Center, Decatur, GA 30030  
INTERVIEWER: Samantha Mooney

PROJECT SERIES: Segregation & Desegregation Experiences in the South

**BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION:** Claudia Stucke was born in 1949 and spent her childhood years in DeKalb County, GA. Her parents owned and operated a dairy farm from the 1930's until 1957. Growing up, Claudia experienced segregation in the south, particularly at Southwest DeKalb School which she attended between 1962 – 1967. She can still clearly remember the day when African-American students integrated the high school during her Junior year. This, along with other formative experiences, spurred her to become involved in voter registration during the early 1970s.

**SUBJECTS DISCUSSED:** Information on experiences of segregation; Segregated facilities; African – American voter registration; TV culture; Desegregation; School Desegregation -- DeKalb county; Urban Development – DeKalb County; White Flight; George Wallace; Selma-Montgomery March; Selma-Montgomery March – Tabloid Culture; Ku Klux Klan – DeKalb County

SOUND RECORDINGS: 2 audio files  
(Part One is 26 minutes & Part Two is 50 minutes)

LENGTH OF INTERVIEW: 1 hour 16 minutes

RESTRICTIONS ON USE: Transcription-only; minor redactions

TRANSCRIPT: 18 pages

Transcript of Interview with  
**Claudia Stucke**

**START OF PART 1**

[Some clattering sounds in the background, most likely the tape recorder is being moved]

**SM:** What was it like for you to grow up during segregation and desegregation?

**CS:** Segregation wasn't really something that I was that aware of because, until I guess I was about four or five maybe, before I could read, I didn't know what the restroom doors were or water fountains said. I knew there were signs over them, I remember seeing signs, but I didn't read so it didn't really concern me.

I also remember getting on the bus. I always headed towards the back window because it looked like — There used to be this long bench seat underneath this big unobstructed view through the back window. It made me think of window seats, like in a fancy room or something which I saw in picture books. I thought that would be such a cool thing to sit on that big seat and look out the back window with this unobstructed view which I didn't have from the little side window or even the front. Every time I got on the trolley or the bus with my mom, she would grab me by the hand and pull me down in the seat with her towards the front. I would look up at her as if to say, *what's going on here?* She wouldn't look at me so I knew that I shouldn't ask, but it was a pattern. I didn't particularly notice that white people were in the front and black people were in the back, I just knew that she didn't want me to sit back there.

I didn't learn until many years later that was mandated, it was a law. The only time that we were allowed to “sit in the back there” was if all the front seats were full. I've always been grateful to Rosa Parks for giving me a choice about where I sat on the bus. It's true.

I just think that some legislator decided for me that was my privilege to sit in the front. Nobody asked me where I wanted to sit, nobody asked people of color where they wanted to sit, it was just decided for us. Rosa Parks made it possible for little white girls to sit in the back of the bus if they wanted to which was not nearly as important as her original intention. It is a matter of choice rather than a privilege. Choice is more important than privilege, especially when someone else decides what your privilege is. It's not a privilege if it is not your choice. I probably took too many words to say that —

**SM:** No, no —

**CS:** But anyway. The other thing was the story that I told you [Samantha Mooney] about the water fountain. Going into town twice a year maybe and enjoying air conditioning for the first time, that was wonderful because it was so hot. Even the water, the refrigerated water, that came in out of the water fountain was always a big deal. So I would always go to the water fountain and, as I mentioned earlier, I was tall enough to reach it by myself without getting a boost.

Looking over, I saw another girl, about my size. [We were both proud about] not having to get a boost from our mother's. Then I was embarrassed because my mother boosted [picked] me up and her mother was too. We were trying to figure out what was going on. They were actually trying to switch us around.

The humiliated look on our parent's faces when they set us back down in front of the right water fountain, and the confusion that the little girl and I had. I've often wondered, she is obviously an adult now, if she is still living, if she remembers that moment, and what she made of it and if her mother tried to explain it to her. Mine wouldn't.

They [our parents] were both doing what they were supposed to do, but it embarrassed the hell out of them. I am sure that it didn't just make them uncomfortable, it looked like it did more than that. It looked like it hurt them. I think why I held onto it for a long time is that as children, as adults even, we try to make sense of our world. I keep playing that over and over in my head. *What really happened here?* It kind of stayed in my long term memory and when I realized what was happened, I thought *Oh yeah, that is what those signs were.* It was kind of slow to arrive in my consciousness.

Growing up in Atlanta, Dr. King was actually in Alabama. It wasn't until later, my late teens, that I was aware of him. They say about a prophet in their own town is unappreciated, and I think that is often true. I remember when he won the Nobel Peace Prize [in 1964], I thought that was really interesting but I thought, *I wonder why he did.* I was a teenager but I wasn't even aware of what he was doing because it wasn't that well covered in the local media. [Editor's note: When reviewing the transcript, Stucke noted that "Looking back, it really was on the news; I was too absorbed in my own world and painfully shy."] I wasn't that conscious of what was going on, I didn't put those things together.

I did see on TV about Selma, Montgomery and Little Rock and I did not understand why it was so hard. I did understand that southerners were being vilified and I felt very defensive. [I thought] *Are we all stupid? Are we all ignorant? Are we all violent?* I was very confused by the whole thing and I also felt that people in the North thought we were very stupid. I felt really sad about that. I also felt powerless about trying to — I mean, there were all these laws in place, what are you going to do about that?

In my early twenties, by that time, I was doing voter registration. It was interesting because the first time that I did that I went to work with a registrar in a housing project. When I got there with the group that I was with, she refused to work with us because we were white. I thought, *Well, of course, you don't trust us and why would you?* It didn't make me angry, it didn't make me feel defensive, I just thought that this was a normal reaction.

By that time, I had internalized all that we [white southerners] are evil people, we are stupid, we are hateful, and this is why we can't be trusted. The seventies were really a hard time. What the person, one of the people that I was with, was able to talk the registrar into was to sign all these blank applications. We would just process everybody, and she could leave. Just sign them and —

we weren't really supposed to do that. It was sort of a compromise, the compromise [being that] we will register all these people. *Do you want to put your own feelings ahead of these people's right to vote?* Of course, that was hard to argue with so she compromised by signing them and giving them to us and leaving so that she didn't have to work with us.

**SM:** Was the registrar white or was she black?

**CS:** She was black [slightly muffled].

But, like I said, I understand her lack of trust and I still do. It makes me sad, but I do understand it. She was basing it on her experience. There were probably very hurtful things in her own history that had been done to her.

Again, it's about choice.

[After she became a teacher] Some of my students were asking me, "Okay, we can sit in the front of the bus now. How come, have you ever noticed that when you get on" — these were African-American students — "have you ever noticed when you get on a bus that all the black people are in the back?"

I said, "Yes, but you could sit in the front if you wanted to."

I said, "That's true of most movements like the [Civil Rights Movement]. Look at the Women's Movement, [they said] "Okay, we can join your club now but maybe we don't want to, we just want to have the opportunity to say no. It doesn't mean that we have to." There was no rush to sit in the front, it was like "Okay, thanks, I am fine here." That was another piece of that.

*Brown vs the Board of Education* was in 1954. My school was not desegregated until 1965 which was eleven years later. I think that it was slow because, if my memories serve, it may not because it was a long time ago, there were a lot of appeals trying to put the brakes on this. There were a lot of legal hurdles to get over because there were school districts and municipal, and state suits against — people, organizations and municipalities filing injunctions to slow this down.

[The dialogue at the time was] Don't make us implement this right now, we can't afford to. It's unconstitutional, to force us to do this or whatever. All of that had to be cleared up before schools could actually integrate and they finally did. It took a federal mandate to say Okay, this has to be enforced. The Civil Rights Act really had to put the teeth in *Brown vs the Board of Education* before anything really happened. A year or two later was when the desegregation process really took effect. I had seen, ten years before, the rioting and the white instigated violence in Little Rock on TV.

When my school was integrated, I was a junior. On the first day of school, I walked in and there were all these people — we didn't know, I didn't know that it was going to happen. I imagine that some people did but I wasn't aware that this was going to be happening — I walked in the front door and there were a lot of people standing inside the front of the school, and the football

players were all lined up one hall with their arms crossed like they were expecting some kind of trouble. When I found out what was going on, our principal was having a pep talk with the young people who were going to be integrating the school— this was Southwest DeKalb — they had closed down the County Line school which was the black school at the time. Kids had been transferred to Southwest DeKalb, and this was the first day of school.

You've got these big, white football players with their arms crossed looking angry on one wall, and out walked maybe a dozen of the most terrified looking kids that I had ever seen. There were no police or national guard escorts, it was just these terrified kids.

**SM:** Do you remember what they looked like, other than terrified?

**CS:** They seemed very small to me. They were boys and girls, not making eye contact with anybody, looking down. I doubt very seriously that our principal said anything encouraging to them. I imagine, and I am just guessing by their demeanor and his scowl when he walked out of the office, I'm sure he was very stern with them, like "I don't want any trouble out of you" and that sort of thing, as if in this school of probably 1500 to 2000 people, a dozen kids were going to stand a chance if there were any sort of trouble. They would not instigate anything. I never saw any overt aggression toward them, but that doesn't mean that there wasn't any. I would imagine that there was rudeness and maybe some comments in passing.

I had classes with two people of color. At that time, we had study hall on our schedule, but there wasn't a room that was study hall. What you would do is, your free period, your study period, was spent in another classroom where there was an actual class was going on. A classroom would have maybe 25 to 30 people and another 5 that were study hall. You had to be quiet.

They tried study hall with just people in there that was a study hall period but it was unstructured and they [the students] were too rowdy. They [the administration] gave that up and embedded us into actual classrooms. We had some study hall people in some classes that I was in.

I always tried to make eye contact with the new [African-American] kids, and smile at them, but no one ever made eye contact walking down the hall. I imagine that they felt very uncomfortable and alone. I'm sure they were.

By the time I graduated, 1967, which the following academic year, within a year or two of my graduation, the African-American population had grown tremendously. Kids were on the football team, and some of my younger friends were reporting to me that it was just a different atmosphere: that the school was genuinely integrated, that people were participating in extra-circulars. It just took a year or two for that to happen. That was wonderful.

The reality was that white families were moving away, and I didn't see it because none of my friends were and my family wasn't. Within four or five years, most of the white population had moved to Lithonia, Rockdale County, and Gwinnett County. Of my graduating class in high school, I don't know anyone besides me who lives in DeKalb County.

**SM:** Currently, right?

**CS:** Yes. My family had planned to stay until my step-father became terminally ill in the 1970's. The next-door property, that is the dairy property [which was inherited by her half-brother], was sold for apartments so she [my mother] opted to sell her house as well. She moved out to be near my sister because she knew that she was going to be alone. By that time, the kids were grown. She moved to Jonesboro, which is where my sister lived. Not because of white flight, but because she was going to be by herself and choose to be nearer to my sister.

I was a newlywed myself and living in an apartment, and I didn't know where I was going land so, it seemed to her to make the most sense for her to be where her married daughter and grandchildren were. That's pretty much it. That side of the county has never recovered because the economic base, not just the business but their patrons, their customer base, everybody just up and left. [Pauses, gets quieter] It's disheartening to see that happening.

The rural land had just appropriated for suburban subdivisions and that sort of thing, and some of the subdivisions were only a few years old. Most of them were built in the 50's and 60's, but by the mid to late 70's, the demographics were totally changed. It was a very strange phenomenon.

**SM:** Did you get any sense of what the primary motivations were behind the massive white flight?

**CS:** Oh yeah, oh absolutely. There was a practice called blockbusting, I am not sure if you are familiar with that?

**SM:** Yes

**CS:** Agnes Scott saw this happening, do you know about that, on South Candler Street?

**SM:** I've heard about a little bit, but I would love to hear more.

**CS:** Okay, Candler Road goes into South DeKalb County, and blockbusters would do this — it is an illegal practice, but I guess there were loopholes in the law or they ignored them or whatever, there have been some stronger federal rules about this – they would deliberately go into a neighborhood, a “white neighborhood,” and show an African-American family a house there. [The realtor] would sell it to them at a loss, at a very low price so that they would buy in and move in. Then, the other people in the neighborhood fearing that their white neighbors were going to move, would put their homes on the market, selling them at a loss, and then the realtors would sell them at an inflated price.

It was a quick way to make a buck for them, preying on people's fear and prejudice, and it worked! When we first bought our house in 1975, the City of Decatur forbade for sale signs in the front yard based on that trend that people would see a for sale sign and panic and move. What that meant was that people did not want to be the “last” white person in the neighborhood. They

did not want to see their property values go down because, if all the houses were for sale, then the prices would be lower.

It was complicated because it was not only an economic situation but it was a human reaction of fear, economically. [The white families] thought these neighbors were different than them, would not like them or would not be nice to them. It was also the loss of their own neighbors, [people] that they had known for years. What they didn't understand is, if everyone had stay put, none of this could have happened. Alternatively, if you welcome the people who do want to move into your neighborhood, regardless of color, nothing happens, property values are stable.

Neighbors began not to trust another. [They would say] "No, I promise I won't put my house on the market" yet they secretly went behind and made a deal with the realtor. "They made me an offer that I couldn't refuse," that kind of thing. What Agnes did to stem that tide of just declining property values, and houses standing empty which invited urban decay, was they bought a lot of the house on S. Candler Street up to around Kirk Road or Midway around in there, and then rented them out to faculty members.

That actually helped stabilize the neighborhood. [Agnes Scott] didn't have any kind of agenda about who they rented to. If they were an African-American family renting the house, faculty member, fine. They did not redline it by race. They weren't trying to stabilize the neighborhood by racially but rather economically.

Oakhurst was another victim of white flight. Oakhurst, 5th avenue, that whole area that has now been "gentrified." People are moving back in, and the people who moved in the 60's and 70's are now being displaced... Decatur has some of the highest taxes in state largely because of the school system. We've got a terrific school system, people started moving back into the community because of the schools. It's really been a strange thing to watch.

[Interruption]

**PART 1 ENDS**

**PART 2 BEGINS**

**SM:** You mentioned remembering the images of Little and Selma, what do you remember about that?

**CS:** Just that it was painful to watch, and I thought *that doesn't happen here*. I didn't understand what people were so upset about.

One of the greatest things I remember in my lifetime is seeing George Wallace's 180-degree turnaround from his attitude in the 50's. He firmly planted himself in front of the University [of Alabama in 1963] and said, "This is not going to happen on my watch." Basically, segregation forever and all that.

He was a changed man before the end of his life. He publically made a point of saying “I was wrong, I regret this.” That was just a very moving thing as a southerner, as a white southerner, to hear and to see. A lot of people remember him as a segregationist but don’t remember his change of heart.

**SM:** Yes, I’ve never heard about that.

**CS:** Oh, Google it! It’s powerful stuff.

I am so glad that he came to that realization before he died because I know people who did not. It was their loss; you cut yourself off from so many people, from the rest of the world when you encapsulate yourself in this little echo chamber. It’s a tragedy, I think.

**SM:** I’m going to go turn the AC off —

**CS:** Sure —

**SM:** Just so I can make sure that we can hear everything [clicking in background].

**CS:** Okay.

Oh, there was one thing, a scandal. This is before the Internet, before Facebook, and trolling, you know all that stuff, and someone planted the idea — on the Selma to Montgomery marches [in 1965] people spent the night in tents on the way in-between. I heard my mother telling somebody that she had heard — I was probably in 8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> grade maybe — my mother telling someone that she had heard that black people and white people were having sex in those tents to prove that they were so accepting of each other. She found that horrendous. I was sort of shocked and horrified that people were doing that anyway because the idea of sex was still pretty icky to me.

When I was at the Medical Arts building at a doctor’s appointment — this is on Peachtree Road, the building is still there, it had a caduceus on the front, it’s in Midtown near the Shakespeare Tavern —

[A visitor exits the archives]

**CS:** Bye, thank you!

My mother was getting her prescription filled, and there was a little newsstand and there was a magazine rack. There was this sort of rag, for want of a better word, this tabloid-thing, that talked about that it was Tent 9 or something, this infamous [whispers] sex tent on the Selma Montgomery March. You go have sex with a person of color or a person of color could go have sex with a white person. I thought, *Oh, it must be real. Oh my goodness.*

I just did not know what to make of that. It was in print and now, looking back, I think, *who did this?* Somebody was either making stuff or digging stuff up to sensationalize and cast aspersions on a non-violent march. When you hear firsthand accounts – I just transcribed John Lewis’s [oral history] account –just the brutality visited on people. He had a concussion from one of the state



troopers who beat him in the head and he still has a scar from it. Well, an injury, who knows which injury it was because he has been beaten up several times.

Even if that story was being true, it was sensationalized to the point that I couldn't believe it – that was an indication that someone was trying to undermine the bigger picture and trying to shock people into believing that this was not a worthy cause. It sickens me to think that they would go about in such a way. I just remember being shocked and horrified, and my mother was too. I think, *how many people heard that story?* It's really just hideous.

Of course, on TV, they were showing images of people being beaten and mowed down by firehoses, being mauled by German Shepard's, families marching into that. I cannot imagine.

Of course, Viola Liuzzo, a white woman from the North who came down to participate [in the Selma-Montgomery march], was murdered. During the march, she was shot when she was crossing the bridge. **[Editor's note:** Stucke misremembers Liuzzo's cause of death. Liuzzo was shot after the march when she was helping shuttle activists to the Montgomery airport and was murdered by the Ku Klux Klan.] She wasn't a person of color, and I wondered if she was singled out because she was white by another white supremacist who thought I'll show you. It's hard to know. I am putting my own spin on it, and I don't think that's fair.

It seems so bizarre now like that couldn't have happened in this country, but it did. I saw it happen.

**SM:** It's interesting because I was just looking up Selma, and there was a congressman who said [about the marchers] "Free love among this group is not condoned, it is encouraged. Only by the ultimate sex act with one of another color can they demonstrate that they have no prejudice." One of the marchers also said, "These white folks must think we are superman to march all day, make whoopee all night, and march again all day..."

**SM:** Apparently, it was –

**CS:** It was a real rumor that was flying around –

**SM:** That's crazy.

**CS:** ...It sickens me to think that somebody would use that to turn people against the Civil Rights Movement as if that was what it stood for.

**SM:** When I first started talking to you, you gave the water fountain story. You said that it was only much later that you realized there were actual laws. Around what age did you start to have that awareness?

**CS:** I don't know.

I was aware that there was separation, I was aware I didn't ask questions. I don't know that I understood the legislation aspect of things up until – certainly not in elementary school. *Brown*

*vs Board of Education* was in '54, right before I was in first grade. It was probably late elementary or early high school before I got a sense of all that.

As far as the white and black water fountains were concerned, I knew it wasn't done but I didn't know why. I don't think that I was thinking in terms of the law, [it was more like] this is a rule like don't cross a street on a red light, kind of thing.

**SM:** Like a social construct?

**CS:** Yes, because, at the time, I didn't separate social constructs from legislative ones because I really didn't understand the process.

**SM:** Did you ever talk to your mom, when you were growing up, about these kinds of issues?

**CS:** Yes.

I remember my mother and one of our relatives – the relative came to the house one time and was chatting my mom over coffee and said she read in the paper that a white woman was going out with a black man.

Mother was like, “Really?” and she looked surprised.

Again, I was young, I was probably about five and I said, “What's wrong with that?”

They looked at me very surprised and then said, “Would you want your mother to do that?”

Well, I didn't want my mother to go out with anybody except daddy, so of course, I said, “Well, no.”

They said, “Well there.”

It wasn't about the skin color; it was I don't want my mother going out with anyone besides my dad. Of course not. My mother doesn't date. I remember that conversation, but not – social constructs more than anything else I guess.

**SM:** Did you ever talk to her when you were older or when you were doing voter registration?

**CS:** Yes. When I did voter registration, I did not talk to her during that time. I watched the change in her though. My dad died when I was eight years old of a sudden heart attack. He was a lot older than my mother, a full generation older than she was. He was born in 1891 – my mother remarried when I was in about 9<sup>th</sup> grade...

She married a man who was very conservative. He ran a gas station downtown, and he even mentioned, one time, before mother knew him, he had separate restrooms and maintained it. The NAACP came to see him and asked him not to do that. By the time we knew him, he only had men and women, he didn't have separate [racial bathrooms.] We don't know what the impetus was for him to change that. The one thing that was less expensive to maintain two restrooms so it was probably economic decisions on his part, but I don't know...

He died just a few years later -- this is about the time that my mother moved to Jonesboro to be near to my sister – and I noticed a definite change in my mother’s attitude. She had been an abused child and she was very submissive, so she just – a lot of codependent behavior – she just wanted to keep everybody happy.

Without his domineering presence, I watched a shift in her. She was a lot more open to the idea of working with African-American people, and knowing individuals as people and not seeing labels and not seeing colors. We were able to talk about it then.

I asked her one time, I did ask her something really – when I was a child, I asked her about the Klan because I heard stories about it. I didn’t understand what it was but it sounded awful. I asked her if she knew anything about it – [My mom] grew up in a very poor family, there were nine children. They were all very badly neglected and abused. They were beaten with a buggy whip by my grandfather. My mom lived on this little farm, very isolated.

Anyway, I asked her if she knew about the [Ku Klux] Klan and she said “Yeah. If a man was mistreating his wife or not providing for his family, you know, his neighbors would all get on their horses and go over to the house, in their front yard with their torches. They would stand there and tell him to come out, tell him he better straighten out or they would beat him up.”

I said, “Really?”

She said, “Yeah.”

I said, “There were Klan people in your community?” and she said, “Well honey, we didn’t have police.”

I mean, to me, you call the police if you have a problem. They truly did not have police, and they didn’t even have telephones. Word went around that if there was a problem among them.

I said, “Well what about Black people?” and she said, “we didn’t have any colored people.”

I thought, *Oh yeah, I wonder why not.* The only thing that she knew about the Klan is that they were sort of vigilantes among white people. She didn’t have the information or understanding about their treatment of African-Americans. I mean, she heard about it, but she said she didn’t have any firsthand knowledge of it. It seemed to be the kind of thing that people accepted because, under those white sheets, they all knew each other. They were neighbors and a lot of them were members of the local Masonic Lodge.

Jimmy Venable was a Mason across the in the Masonic Lodge. His law office was upstairs. He was an Imperial Wizard of the Klan. His family used to own Stone Mountain, and it was because of him, that, every Labor Day, they used to burn a cross upon Stone Mountain, up until the 70’s.

**SM:** Wow.

**CS:** Yes, hard to believe, but yeah. They had a rally every Labor Day.

**SM:** Growing up in Decatur, did you know that it had a strong Klan presence?

**CS:** No, I didn't. The only time that I have ever been near Klan activity was in 1971, in Asheville, North Carolina of all places. It's like a hotbed of creativity and liberalism now.

Carl [her husband] and I were on vacation in the Smoky Mountains, and we got into Asheville and we were in this huge traffic jam. We couldn't figure out what was going on and we noticed that all the cars were full of men. The car in front of us had three men sitting in the back seat so close together that they were touching. The car was absolutely crammed full. I looked, and on the trunk [of the car], someone had, in masking tape, taped out the letters of KKK. We were in the middle of a Klan parade and didn't even know it.

**SM:** Oh my god —

**CS:** I said, "Do you see that? He says, "I'm pulling over right now." He [Carl] pulled into the gas station just to get out of it. We pulled into a street. It was just about a block long line of cars and we were in the middle of it and we just did not know. "How did this happen?" I said, "What are they doing here? Is this where they live?" I didn't know, I had never even seen a Klansmen before to know it.

**SM:** It's interesting because I am researching Saturday School, and Ramspeck, was one of the main people who got the Klan restarted in Georgia, and he lived here in Decatur —

**CS:** Jimmy [James] Venable too.

He lived in Stone Mountain, but his law office was across the street. There is a transcript --

**SM:** I don't so because was looking for —

**CS:** Jimmy Venable? Yeah.

**SM:** Oh, there is?

**CS:** Yes. It is under James Venable...

**SM:** You mentioned that you weren't talking to your mother when you did voting rights registration —

**CS:** No, I didn't talk to her about that...

**SM:** What made you get started with voter registration?

**CS:** I was working on the Montgomery campaign, and there was an opportunity to do that. We were just trying to register people to vote. I had never had that opportunity before, and it's one of things that I thought, If I could have done in the 60's, I would have. There was no way to do it without my parents finding out. Also, I wasn't able to drive until I was — I didn't get my license until I was about eighteen. They [her parents] wouldn't pay for my insurance, and I didn't have any way of making money.

SM: When did you start working on voter registration?

CS: 1972. My husband came with me and we did that together.

SM: There's one more question I wanted to ask, but I can't recall it —

CS: That's all right, when it occurs to you, just call me up.

SM: While you are here, I would love to get what you said about Mrs. Gray [international conwoman active at the Decatur Clinic in the 1950's] on the record.

CS: Janet Gray, as we knew her. Dr Cunningham was our family doctor; he was just an amazing person. He made house calls when I had measles when I was in first grade. My sister, who was twelve years older than I, had never had measles, and she got them from me. She was very sick. We shared a bedroom, she was nineteen, and she had the measles. It made her very, very sick.

He came out a made a house call. I know my mom was very worried because she had the pastor out, and he rushed over and everything. I was there feeling very guilty because it was my fault that she was sick but she ended up being fine.

We used to go see Dr. Cunningham, and when Mrs. Gray was hired as the office manager, suddenly the wait times at the office became ridiculous. I remember sitting out in the waiting room, my younger brother who was seven years younger than me, was running a fever. Sitting there for two hours and waiting to see the doctor and not being able to do it, that was just the final straw for [my mother]. She said "Forget it, we are going to find another doctor," and we did find one closer. I never liked him as much as Dr. Cunningham.

I did see Mrs. Gray in the office [at the Decatur Clinic], and she looked down at us one time while we were waiting, and I smiled at her. She stuck her nose in the air and I thought *well, she's not very nice*. That's really I knew.

My mother talked about it later after she was arrested, and I remember one of the ladies in the office talking about how she — this is right before we left because the wait times did not improve after she left. We were gone maybe within a year of her arrest because things were still pretty disorganized unfortunately in the office. I guess they were trying to make up for lost time or they had a certain structure in place that they hadn't changed yet —

I remember one of the nurses in the office saying to the other, "I think she had it planned it along," or something like that. I am sure they were talking about Mrs. Gray or Mrs. Burton as we now know. After I got married, I saw Dr. Cunningham again. Actually, before I got married, I saw Dr. Cunningham again. I was on my own in terms of my medical insurance and that kind of thing—

I was working but I stayed at home so I could save money and go to school at night. Also, it was pretty clear that my parents really disapproved of me moving out on my own because "nice girls don't do that." You stayed home with your parents until you get married... All my friends were

in college, and I couldn't afford an apartment on my own. I didn't have a roommate so it that was just a practical matter, but I really, really wanted to move out —

Anyway, I went to see Dr. Cunningham and he also told me that I should probably move out, but he said “Not by yourself.” He was old-fashioned enough to think that girls needed safety, that wasn't a safe thing to do. It was very sweet.

He lived across the street from Agnes Scott on S. Candler.

**SM:** Can you talk about the double-billing briefly?

**CS:** I don't know much about the double billing; I just know that whatever is in the [DeKalb History Center] transcript is all the information I have about that. I didn't really know anything about her system of accounting. Obviously, she was lining her own pockets, but I do not know what her mechanism was for that...

**SM:** Last question: Reflecting back, what do you think the loss was in terms of not integrating earlier? How do you think that would have changed things?

**CS:** Oh my gosh. I don't know how receptive DeKalb county would have been to integrating sooner. I know that Carl Renfroe [the Superintendent of the Decatur City Schools from 1959 – 1975] suggested that he would have liked to see it done gradually done, starting in kindergarten and then adding a year every year [after]. I think that would have been good. Certainly, by the time that I would have been in high school, it would have already been implemented all the way through instead of waiting the eleven years to implement all at once. I think that would have been better.

Gosh, what did we lose? We lost [long pause] — by not integrating at all, we lost being able to just be together. [Long pause] It's so hard to know because parent's attitudes reflect so strongly in this. They were afraid and they were resistant. You can't help seeing that in the children as well. When the children are together — I mean I knew that if I made friends with African-American kids, I couldn't bring them home with me for dinner or to do homework together. I might have not been welcome in their house. I don't know, I never had the opportunity to find out.

We lost ground in terms of just people being to be together, to get along together, to make a better world together. When you look at the speeches of Dr. King and John Lewis and people like that, the nonviolent approach, they weren't asking for the moon, they were just asking for basic rights. The fiery demands of people — of the George Wallace's, Bull Connor's, the Marvin Griffin's, the Governor of Georgia – the hateful speech. When you contrast those two things, I can't help wondering: *Why was that such a hard thing to hear? Why was it so hard thing to understand the difference in the rhetoric?*

Dr. King's message was about peace and getting along and he was a pastor. He was coming at it from the point of view that it was a Christian thing to do. For all these good Christians — of

course, there is scripture in Klan meetings. They are very eager to point that out as well. It's cherry-picked —

Gosh, what did we lose?

It's hard to say and it's just impossible to know. I can't imagine what the world would have been like. There still would have been some upheaval, I have no doubt because there still would have been so many people who were resistant to the so-called idea of 'race mixing.' The other thing was that our lives were so similar. My mother's life was similar as a poor white kid to say a poor black kid. She picked cotton —

My husband's first job out of grad school was at a predominantly Black Junior College. Andrew Young's [Mayor of Atlanta, Civil Rights activist, and UN Ambassador] wife was one of his co-workers. Gwendolyn Crim, wife of Alonzo Crim [First black superintendent in the South] was also one of his coworkers. I'd see these people at a get-together, and I would look at Andy Young and think, *how do you even get past all the things that happened to you?*

You've seen him in the newsreels get beaten in the head, get beaten, get hosed, get bitten by dogs, and here he is, very comfortable and forgiving. And John Lewis, talking about forgiving. It amazes me the depth, the capacity these people have for forgiveness and love. This is what their message was. Why did people just not see the difference in those messages? Theirs was the relevant, the more lasting, and the greater impact and for good.

It was the idea of losing power. I think the demagogues, the populists saw that they needed to divide and conquer the lower classes and they did. The only thing that poor white people had going for them was the color of their skin. Otherwise, there was no difference between them and poor black people. They could not bear that.

I was going to say, Joseph Lowery [Civil Rights leader and Minister] spoke at one of the commencements when my husband was teaching at what was then Atlanta Junior College, and he was laughing at how white people don't know anything about chitins. I wanted to raise my hand and say, "Excuse me, my parents used to make them."

It was in November, it was the first frost, and they had just slaughtered the pigs. They had to raise all the windows because the smell was so bad. I remember chitins.

I would have taken him aside afterwards and said, "You know my mom had a chitins recipe which I would be glad to share with you if you want." We all lose sight of the fact that we are more alike than different. Maybe middle-class white people don't know about chitins, but those of us who know what it is to live without electricity or plumbing certainly know. [Laughs] I don't even think that is necessary. This was part of the culture, of southern agrarian living. It was much more alike than different.

I've already forgotten what your question was, and I don't think I answered it but anyway.

Harper Lee brings out that very clearly in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. She is talking about Tom [Editor's note: Bob] Ewell. She said, "The only difference between him and the man [Tom Robinson] who sat accused was, that if you scraped the dirt off of Ewell's face, you would find white skin." That's it – that all they had going.

The populists – the Huey Long's and the Gene Talmadge's and the Marvin Griffin's - knew don't let these people get together with each other because they will outnumber the elite, the people who are in charge and making the rules. That may sound conspiracy theorist, but I believe it with all my heart and I see it happening now.

If we do have the beloved community that John Lewis wanted, that we all want I think, I would love to live in that community. I would love a multi-racial democracy. I think we have one, but there are always going to be those people like our current chief executive [Donald Trump, the 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States] who want to drive wedges because if you dismantle that, there is no threat to power or less of a threat. That's why we have to keep resisting.

**SM:** From the time when you grew up to now, do you see similarities or are they dissimilar? How do you talk about that?

**CS:** I see similarities because there are still people trying to keep people apart, trying to demonize each other. It makes very sad, it makes me angry, and it scares me. All those negative emotions. I have to fight that with doing something positive. I think education is a huge thing, I think travel is a huge thing, trying to open your mind. Get to know people you might not have otherwise, and get to know them as human beings.

You don't see them as the other. That's the danger of the them and us mentality. Even if you disagree with somebody, it doesn't mean that you dismiss them as a human being or as a group of people. One of the things that I saw in the Gay Rights Movement was, and I still see it, the shock and the change in their paradigm shift that people had when they discovered this person they really liked and admired was gay. They had to come to terms with the fact that maybe that person was not evil incarnate...

It's harder I think with race and nationality because there is that visible barrier first that you have to get past. I think that is one of the reasons that racism is more resistant than say homophobia because there is no immediate visual cue. With racism, there is an immediately visual cue.

I don't know, I didn't consciously think about raising colorblind children. We didn't refer to people by their race when we were talking about our friends – but when my daughter Clare was in kindergarten, she came home — this my older daughter — she came home, it was February, Black History Month. She said, her eyes were this big – this is a true story, it's so funny – she said, "Mommy, have you ever seen a black person?"

**SM:** [Laughs]

**CS:** She had African-American classmates over to the house all the time so imagine my surprise.



I said, “Sure.”

She said, “What do they look like?”

**SM:** [Laughs]

**CS:** I said, “They look like Michele and Ayesha and Shandra and so many of these friends who were at your party.”

She goes, “No, no, no, Shandra’s brown. Ayesha’s tan.” She went through all these colors.

I said, “Oh, okay, gotcha, gotcha, gotcha. Black is not a skin color exactly; it just means that person has ancestors from Africa.”

She goes, “That’s stupid.”

I said, “Okay, yes,” and she said, “Wait, if they are black, what, does that make me, white?”

I said, “Uh yeah,” and she said, “No way. I’m beige.” She was so upset because she was so literal. She was just devastated. She was like, “I don’t understand this, what are you talking about?” We were just talking about that earlier, we are sort of racially ambiguous anyway, but there are so many gradations of color that it’s not like you can just say black and white. There are all these other – beige, sepia

**SM:** Taupe —

**CS:** Taupe — I just thought that was so sweet and just so innocent. I also thought, *Have I done her a disservice by not making that distinction or not talking about race?*

It just didn’t seem to be a natural part of the conversation. Like, why even bring it up? That sort of a question that I have: how do you – I wanted her to know what I knew, but not learn it in the same way like so many other things...

**SM:** So, I swear to God, last question: As an educator, do you feel like you approached talking about [race] differently than you raised your daughters? Are there similarities –

**CS:** It was different with my classroom because the white students were definitely in a minority among the students I taught. It was easy to talk about race because they were so open about it, and we had very — I did tell them the water fountain story and it was absolutely silent which was very unusual for my classrooms which were often like a basketful of puppies. Everybody had this adolescent energy.

It was a very sobering moment. I said, “I just want to know how much I appreciate where I am now and how grateful I am for it because I didn’t have this opportunity when I was your age to be around anyone who didn’t look just like me. That is so limiting.”

That’s my selfish point of view. Yes, it benefits me because it makes me a wiser person and I hope that it makes me a better person. My responsibility is to be the best person that I can be towards other people. I had Beverly Tatum’s book in my classroom, I don’t even think that they

noticed it on the shelf. It was *Why are all the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* which is a great title. It's more about coalescence than it is about polarization, so somebody noticed that spine, and just noticed it from the back of the room because their eyes are so much better than mine.

Everybody cracked up at the title, and said, "Yeah, that is true, how come?"

I said, "Why is that true?"

They basically, without even having read the book, came to the same conclusion.

I said, "It's a good thing to get outside your comfort zone and experience what other people are like. People who don't look just like you."

Even within the kids of African descent, some of them were from maybe half a dozen African countries. This is in addition to the kids who were here, you know, whose relatives came during the diaspora. That was interesting too. I had first generation African kids in my class as well. That was great because I got to hear — talk about broadening experiences. I've never been to Africa, but just by hearing — not all of the stories were great, most of them were horrific. This is another reason why I am sort of a bleeding heart when it comes to immigrants. Some of the stories they told me about seeing things they saw as kids, no human being should see, let alone a child.

I guess my first clue about the colorblindness business, I mean I got a lump in my throat. When I picked up Clare from ballet one day, she went to the Decatur School of Ballet. It was definitely a group of diverse kids there. When I went to pick her up, she was sitting with a group of her friends on the sofa.

She said, "Wait a minute, I've got to tell my friend goodbye."

I said, "Which one is your friend?"

She said, "The one in the blue sweater."

Well, there were three kids on the sofa. Two little girls were white and one little girl was black, and that was the kid in the blue sweater. I thought: *Oh my god, if I would have been her, I would have said the black kid.* I totally got a lump in my throat because I thought, *this is what we hope for, that children see each other through their eyes* — there is an innocence there that people of my generation were robbed of in their early childhood.

**SM:** I think that ties into your water fountain story —

**CS:** Yes —

**SM:** There was such an innocence there —

**CS:** I saw a little kid my age, my size.

Yes, looking back on it, I remember that she had a lot of pigtails. She was of African descent, but that's not what I saw. I just saw someone my size, oh goodie! Here we are, and we were both girls.

[Outside interruption, audio hard to hear]

**END OF PART 2**

**END OF INTERVIEW**