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Presentation by Vel Phillips to students in History 191 (Technology for Historians)

John P. Raynor, S.J., Library

Marquette University

Professor John Krugler (hereafter Krugler) : We're here in the Marquette University technology room at Raynor Memorial Libraries. We have a very special guest today. Vel Phillips is one who was instrumental in bringing about great change in the city of Milwaukee and in the state of Wisconsin. Her career has been long and very interesting. And she has very graciously consented to make an opening statement about her career and some of her activities. And then she will open the discussion up for questioning, so by all means have your questions ready. Mrs. Phillips, the stage is yours.

Phillips : Thank you very much. Can you hear me? Your professor, teacher, gave me these two pages of things I might touch. And if I followed this sheet we would be here at least eight hours, no less. He really laid it on [laughter]. I'll start with, let's see, the beginning. Harvey Pager was my law professor [and] was well known at the University of Wisconsin for his little jokes. He didn't like the textbook that we used, and he would always say: "It doesn't start at the beginning and go to the end. It doesn't even start at the end and go backward. It starts in the middle and spreads both ways." So that's what I'll do. I'll start in the middle.

I was a graduate of North Division High School. Now there is no more North Division High School. But actually a couple of years ago it was practically all black. At the time that I went to North Division High School, it was the opposite. It was practically all white. [There were] maybe seven, [but] less than ten, black students in the whole school. We always lived in a neighborhood where there were not many blacks.

And it was perhaps [for that] reason [of not living near or going to school with many blacks that] I wanted desperately to go to Howard University, because it was an all-black school. And I just wanted that kind of an association. I thought that at least everyone there would be on my mother and father's approved list, which I learned early on [was not true]. When my mother took me to college, on the last day of the parent's visit, she said, "Let's visit everyone in the dorm." And I said, "Fine." [The name of my dorm] was Truth Hall, and we went [to the] second floor, third floor, all the floors. And my mother didn't have paper or pencil or anything [to write or make notes with]. So when we got back to the room she said, "Now in 202. Do not associate with that person because..." And she went down the line [of every person we had visited]. And she had the funniest reasons [for not wanting me to associate with people]. Like, first of all [room] 202 had Mamie Hansberry. Mamie Hansberry was the sister of Lorraine Hansberry who was a well known play write and wrote: *Raisin in the Sun*, *To be Black, Beautiful* and something. Mamie's baby sister was Lorraine and I had a baby sister, Connie. We both had that in common. But anyway my mother had her on the list of no one to associate with. And it was because she [Mamie] was smoking a cigarette at the time [we were] in the room. Then Zoe Crompler, I shouldn't be calling these names. But anyway [despite my mother's disapproval], Mamie became my dear friend. I was her bridesmaid. She had about three husbands [bridesmaids?] but I was the main one. [I think I was drawn to her] because she was attractive, sophisticated, [and from] Chicago, just everything that I wanted to be. And then Zoe Crompler who was from Youngstown, Ohio, she became my very good friend. But she was on the list. And the reason she was on the list was because she called her mother by her first name [instead of calling her mom or mother]. We were in the room and she said like, I can't remember, "Bernice, will you hand me..." She called her mother Bernice. So Mother thought that was just [disrespectful], I had very strict parents, especially my mother. And [there were] various ones [my

mother disapproved of and didn't want me to associate with]. So she had the list, [but] all the people that she put on the list became my dear friends, of course. That was so funny.

So I had a wonderful father and mother. And I sort of always believed that later on in life that because I had a loving mother and father [I was able to do the things, and have the success I did]. Mother, who was a homemaker, never worked or anything like that, just took care of the children. I just sort of thought that we were expected to go to college. How should I put it? [I felt] that making a difference in the world, that's all I really wanted, to make a small difference. It was expected [of us]. It was easy [for us]. It's the people who lived in the projects, and who didn't have a mother and a father, that I admired tremendously for what they had done [because they didn't have the advantage that I did of the support of both parents].

But anyway my first experience with real prejudice was at North Division when I decided to enter an oratorical contest. The Forensic Contest was a big deal at North Division. There were four divisions, I'll break it down very quickly. There were four divisions: Extemporaneous, which I was not interested in, Oratorical, which I was, and Serious Declaration and Humorous Declaration. And Thelma Sievert (sp?), you know I meant to call Thelma, she would have come with me today. Because we reminiscence about [that time when we were in high school]. I said to her, they call her Tiebe, I said to Tiebe, "I think I'll enter that contest." I had been thinking about entering the Oratorical Contest which is a national contest, and I thought I could get a little practice by doing our high school thing. So I get going to Miss Moolenslater who was in charge [of the Forensic Contest]. She was very racist. [There were speeches that were already written and you were supposed to memorize them.] They had a whole slew of them. So you [were supposed to] just say, "I want the oration, any oration." [But when I asked for the orations] she said to me, "All the orations are out." [This was strange because] if you took them out you could keep them for a certain amount of days, three or four days. Then you had to bring them back so other students could have them. So I kept [going back to ask for an oration]. I must have gone two or three weeks, at least, asking her for this oratorical. And she would always say, "We don't have it." So my sister said to me, "You know, Miss Moolenslater is very prejudice and she probably doesn't want you to be in the contest." My sister did little after school chores for the English teacher, Miss Roberts. Miss Roberts was the opposite of Miss Moolenslater. So every time I would go in there, [Miss Moolenslater said the oration was out.] Finally, she said to me, "We have [a] humorous declaration. Your people are all comedians." Stepin Fetchit [aka Lincoln Perry], you wouldn't know these names, but he was a black comedian, that [performed an act where he] kind of shuffled his [feet and said] "yas sir." [This act portrayed to white audiences that] the typical black person that was not intelligent. [Stepin Fetchit would say in his act:] "Yes Mr. White Man" and all like that. [So Miss Moolenslater] she says, "Stepin Fetchit and other comedians would be just what you want." Well, that was an insult and I was sophisticated enough to realize that was an insult. [When she found out what Miss Moolenslater was doing to me] Miss Roberts told my sister, "I'd like to speak to Velvlea." She said, "Listen, are you writing a speech for the Elk-oratorical contest?" I said, "Yes." She said, "Well why don't you just march in and tell her that you don't need [any of her speeches. That] it's going to be an original oration." So I said, "I can't do that. This [was] written for," the politically correct word at that time was Negroes, so I said, "This is written for Negroes, and for the Black Elks." I'm saying to you the "Black Elks." They didn't call them the Black Elks back then, just the Negro division of Elks. [Miss Roberts] she said, "Well that doesn't make any difference, Vel., Vebvlea. You wrote it yourself, Velvlea. You wrote it yourself. Just go in and do it. If you're afraid to do it," I was very shy, she said, "I'll tell her." Because the two of them [Miss Moolenslater and Miss Roberts] were in charge of the oratorical, of the forensic contest.

Anyway, [to make] a long story short, I entered with my original oration. [The first round of the contest] it was after school, you stayed and I did my little [oration]. They break it down to whoever made the

final four in each of the divisions would be in the semifinals. Then the final two in each of the divisions [would perform again] and when you did the final two to decide who would be the first in each of the four, you gave your speech in front of the whole school. When I came [to check the results] after I gave my little thing, the next day I looked on the bulletin board and I was eliminated, I wasn't in it. My sister said to me, "Vel, something is going on at this school. Do you know what it is? I haven't found out but I keep hearing them say your name. What's going on? Have you done something?" I said, "No I haven't done anything." She said, "Well, how did the contest turn out?" I said, "Well I didn't make it, you know." She said, "I think that's what they're talking about."

Well, to make a long story short, the students thought that I gave the best speech and that I should not be eliminated. So they passed around this petition saying that Vel, not Vel Philips because I was Velvalea Rogers, was the best one and she was eliminated, and that was not right, and this and that. And to show you just how much it affected the school, Jacquelyn Peoples, who was my sister's best friend, was with my sister when she said that to me, and she said "Vel, Why are you letting that happen? You know that there aren't many of us here and there's just about five or six in the whole school and you're causing all kinds of trouble." Well I didn't know what to do, I was very shy.

When I was in the assembly I was summoned to the principal's office. Now today you get someone to the principal's office and they may go in and strike the principal. But that was just [not how it was back then]. I was frightened to death. So I go in and there sat Mr. Warner, who looked like a Nazi General. Miss Moolenslater was standing against the wall and Miss Roberts was standing against the wall. So he said, "Have a seat, Velvalea." And I said, "No, I'd like to stand up." He said, "No, I think you should sit down." So, of course, I sat down. He said, "I understand you gave a speech and that you were quite good. The students seemed to think you were quite good. [But] you were eliminated." And I said, "Well, yes." He said, "I'd like to hear that speech. Would you be willing to...?" I said, "You want to hear it?" So I stood up. "You want to hear it right now?" I'll never forget it because he said, "No, sit back down." So then I sit [laughter]. He said, "I think in that category there should be five instead of four and then I will have a chance to hear it. How do you feel about that?" I said, "I don't think I could do that because my parents wouldn't allow me to do that. If I didn't win, really. I don't want to be given anything. And if I didn't earn it, [I don't want to be given anything]." He said, "Well, I think you should discuss it with them and tell me in the morning. I would like to hear it. And I think I'd like to put five in that category." So I said, "I will tell it to them but I know what they're going to say."

So when I got home, my sister got home before I did, and they were waiting. My mother said, she was just furious, she was going to go up to the school and this and that. I was just so embarrassed [that] she [would] go running up to the school. I said, "Please don't do that!" And I was crying almost. My father always was the cool one. He said, "No, I think you should tell him you'll be number five. Let her work this out, she's got to work out her problems, and this is a good lesson. Let her just give it." So I said, "Well I don't really want to do it anyway because it talks about..." my title of the speech was *They Shall Not Pass*. [Those were the famous] words of a French General [at the Battle of Verdun in World War I]. He was talking about the war and I was talking about blacks not being able to cross the color line.

Anyway, after this, I went back and told them that I would do it. So when we had the next thing in my category, I was one of the [contestants]. I made the last two, and then [I went] all the way to the end. So when I had to give my speech in front of the whole [school].... Oh! There was a newspaper item in the *Milwaukee Journal* that Marquette was having some little difficulty. That this young lady, myself, had won [the contest]. And it was my first exposure to a newspaper item. For that reason, Marquette was not going to let teachers be the judge. They had [professors from the] Marquette Speech Department,

or something, be the judges. I had forgotten that this is Marquette, and we got these two [Marquette] people to do it.

So when we get there, Ellis Urban, he [later] became a lawyer like I was a lawyer. Later on we'd talk about it, and he had a kind of an English clip. Sort of like he had studied abroad although he said he hadn't. And he was very good, Tiebe said he was everything [at school]. He was the class president, he was this, he was that. He was just everything in the school. So when I got up to give my speech, all I said was, "They shall not pass." The students who had passed around this petition were standing on their desks. It was like I was their candidate. [They were shouting] "Go Vell!" It just knocked me dead. I couldn't think of anything to say after "They shall not pass." Mr. Warner said, "Now you students you have to quiet down otherwise we're dismissing the whole thing." So I finally got myself together and I gave my speech. And, of course, I won. Well, I shouldn't say 'of course' but I did win [laughter].

But I later on said to Ellis Urban, "You know, Ellis, I always thought that it was unfair that the students were all on my side and all of this fanfare and everything put you at a disadvantage." And he said to me, "No, Vel." He said, because he was very good, he said, "No, you were very, very good. And you had written your own speech and it was from the heart. You bested me on that day." This was only about four years ago. I think his son, who is a lawyer, said that he has passed. But he was quite good.

But that whole experience set the stage for the rest of my life really. There are two things that were very important for me. I think [they] made my life the way it was. First of all, my mother did not want me to go to Howard University because it was so far away. So she said, "We can't afford it." Everything I wanted to do she'd say, "I can't afford it. We can't afford" So then my father would always [intercede.]

We had a one family house, the bedroom were upstairs. And my sister and I would sit four steps or five steps down and then we could hear them in the breakfast nook talking. My mother would say things like, "I don't know. I worry about Velvalea. She said that she will never marry." I always said that I didn't want to marry because, as I said, my mother waited on my father hand and foot. And I wanted a career and I didn't want a husband because I didn't want to have to wait on somebody hand and foot, you know. So she said, "She just says that she never wants to marry." Anything like that. So my father said, "Well, I think, you know, she will be very disappointed. So he finally said "Just set some standards for her." I think she'll remain a sweet girl and I don't think you have to worry." And a sweet girl, I knew what that meant. Because my mother would say to us all the time, first my sister, my older [sister,] then I was the middle one, then to my baby sister. "If you're in an automobile and a young man starts driving east toward the lake." Now he could be going anywhere. She said, "Ride up in the car and put your shoulders back because he's up to no good." She'd say that. And so then my father said.... Oh, my mother said, "Well, I'll think about it."

So she said to me, "I know you want to go to Howard." Because I had met a Miss Young at the Urban League who had just graduated from Howard, and she was talking about how wonderful it was. So my mother said to me, "There's three rules. If you follow these three rules, I will let you go to Howard University." These three rules I really think shaped my life. She said, "There will be no smoking of any kind until you graduate." Now she wasn't talking about drugs, she was talking about Camels and Chesterfields and like that. Well, I hadn't smoked so that didn't seem difficult. I didn't know that I'd be tempted. And then she said, "There will be no alcohol, beer, or anything like that until..." then I could finish it because I knew "you graduate." And I said, "Fine." I didn't drink anything. [So] that didn't seem [to be a problem]. I didn't know that they would have wild parties in the dorm and there would be all kinds of alcoholic beverages and that I'd even be tempted. So I said, "Fine." Then she said, "And you

must remain a sweet girl..." And then I finished it, I said, "...until I graduate." She said, "Nope. Until you marry, you must remain a sweet girl." Now if I told this story before. Did I tell this before? I told you but I didn't tell the kids. So I had no idea. You know, I was a virgin so I said, "Fine."

So now I march off to school. And it was only after I got there that I realized it was embarrassing, when I'd say, when they had drinks in the dorm, and I'd say, "Well, no thank you." And then someone would say, "Well, Vel never drinks." Then I'd be embarrassed, you know. They'd say, "Why won't you drink?" I said, "Because I promised my parents." "She's a thousand miles away, for God's sake Vel, you know. She'll never know!" I said, "But I'll know!"

And I said to my first boyfriend who I [thought] I'd later on eventually marry. I said, "I have to remain a sweet girl until I marry." He said, "Cool." But it wasn't all that cool. Because he went to the service, he was fine until he went to the service and came back to visit me after [he was in the service]. He was working on his master's degree, his PhD in chemistry. He was at least six years older than me. He was working on his PhD. He has graduated from Howard, [and had] gotten his master's. He was older. So when he had to go to the World War II, I called my mother, and I said, "We want to get married." No, no, she wanted me not to get married and she had this and that [reason]. And so we decided then to wait.

He was very cool. But when he came back from the service and came to visit me, as soon as my mother and father went to bed.... We'd be out in the yard, he would start making demands. I said, "Well you promised me that I could remain a sweet girl until we marry." He said, "Well that was before I went to [the]service," [and he had been] living with some woman in Italy. So I bid him goodbye because he gave me an ultimatum.

So when I did meet my husband, although I did not want to marry at all, we had two dates. [Then] we ran off and got married. Two dates! We went to Dubuque, Iowa, and didn't tell my mother. I was going to be visiting with a friend, and my mother said, "I don't know." I had [already] graduated from college, [but my mother said] "I don't think I should let her go because she'll be staying with a friend." So my father said, "Unchaperoned?" My mother said, "Unchaperoned." They finally let me go because Princess Margaret over in England had been on some trip at a chateau with her intended. And my mother said, "She was unchaperoned?" And my father said, "Probably some servants were around." So in any event she let me go.

But to this day, I have never had any liquor at all, [not] any alcoholic beverages. [But] after awhile, after I was embarrassed for a couple of years, after awhile, I noticed I was sort of special [because I didn't drink]. They'd say, "Well Vel doesn't drink?" "Oh really? She doesn't drink?" And it was kind of my thing. And then I didn't smoke and that was before [it was learned it was bad for your health], no one thought smoking was hazardous. Because I had promised [my mother], I never have smoked, I never have had any alcoholic beverage. And we did not consummate our marriage because I was afraid and this and that until after we had a wedding in the church which was eleven months later. So I remained a sweet girl for eleven months after I was married. And I don't drink to this day and I don't smoke. So I think those three things really shaped my life.

Now I'm going to be very quick so I can actually answer questions. When I went to law school, there were very few women in the law school maybe five or six. Because when I went back for my fiftieth anniversary, I graduated, I hate to say when I graduated, but I graduated in 1951. And so in 2001, of course my husband was gone, and I went back [for my 50th law school reunion]. And I said, "I know there were at least six [women]." I didn't understand why I was the only woman. And they said, "Well, Vel, you're talking about in all the classes, first year, second year, third year." So in my year, I was the

only woman there. And it was kind of fun [to be the only women] because if it was raining. We had to go between buildings, and they were always fighting over who was going to carry the umbrella for me.

When I was in law school, my husband and I would be together. And they'd say to him, "Oh, aren't you lucky? You've got a built-in secretary." And I would be just fuming. Why should I be his secretary when I'm going through the same school? And so my husband would sort of kick me like, "Keep cool." Because I wanted to say, "Are you kidding? Maybe he'll be my secretary!"

But anyway, so I got past that. And then, when I got out of law school, we were the first man and wife law team. Our picture was in the *Milwaukee Green Sheet*. You people wouldn't remember the *Green Sheet*. You remember [motioning to Krugler]? He would probably remember the *Green Sheet*. And our picture was underneath, [and the caption read]" the first man and wife law team to be admitted to the Eastern District of the Federal Bar." It was in the *Green Sheet*, our two pictures. I met Doyle Getter, he was the reporter. His name was Doyle Getter. I know you don't remember Doyle Getter. He wrote a little column that was on the left hand side of the paper, on the bottom half.

But anyway, Doyle Getter was the one that I called when I joined the League of Women Voters. That's the thing that made me want to. I joined the League of Women Voters. They were working on reapportionment, and Wisconsin had not reapportioned. They're supposed to reapportion every ten years. Wisconsin had not reapportioned in thirty years, three decades. And the Secretary of State Zimmerman, a man named Zimmerman, said that he would not okay another election until they reapportioned. I was a part of the team [to explain what the issue was about and the correct way to vote for or against reapportionment]. I was assigned to "knock on the door," [and ask people if they were for or against reapportionment]. Because [the] reapportionment [issue] was [confusing]. The thing that we had to check [was if they understood how to vote on the issue]. [A] no [vote] was if you were for reapportionment, [then] you voted no. [So] if you were for reapportionment, instead of voting yes, you voted no. If you were against reapportionment, you voted yes. It was just [so] confusing, so that people would, you know, vote not to reapportion [even though they were for reapportionment]. And I would explain to people. And they would say, "Oh, honey, I haven't voted ever. I just got here from Mississippi or Arkansas or Alabama,," or somewhere like that. And they'd say, "Well you surely look nice and young and like you really working at it, but honey, I just don't think I can. Maybe I'll vote tomorrow."

So anyway, I became interested in it. And I got my husband to agree that if they really did reapportion, if reapportionment passed, then I said, "This area where we live on Walnut Street over a drug store. Maybe it would create a district." They had kept saying that Milwaukee was the most densely populated area in the state. Well, I figured out on my own that if Milwaukee was the most densely populated area. We're in the hood, that had to be [the most densely populated area in Milwaukee], because there were houses in back of houses. I was so concerned with the housing conditions. There would be a space heater in one room where we were. When I was knocking on doors, they'd say, "Come in honey." It would be hot but then you'd go into another room and it would be just like below zero. And I didn't have any concept of real poverty until [then], because we came from [a wealthier area]. You know, my father and mother were in business. My mother never worked. My father was in business. My mother just was a homemaker. And we weren't rich or anything but we were sort of [better off], you know. She never worked or anything. We owned our home, it was a big eight room house, and so I just didn't know what it was like to live like that.

So that was the spark that got me going. And my first year, as I said before, on the council was [Mayor Frank] Zeidler's last. My first term was his last term. He was very interested in public housing, and we

would have long talks and all that. And I was just interested in fair housing. So I waited four years before I introduced [fair housing]. From '56 to '60, I had two children. It was very difficult [to be on the council and raise children]. John, you tell me when you have to quit.

Professor : I think it's probably a good time to take a short break.

Phillips : Okay.

Professor : Because we don't want to get you too tired.

Phillips : No, I'm not tired.

Professor : Well, would you like to get on to the questions about Father Groppi?

Phillips : Oh yes.

Professor : I think that's what you said you had wanted to talk about.

Phillips : Okay. Well, I didn't know anything about [running for public office]. I went to the Milwaukee Public Library and got a book: *How to Run for Public Office*. That's a truth! What to do, you know. And I remember that Ike Coggs who had been elected to the [State Assembly]. He was first in the state assembly then he later became a County Board super[visor]. He was the first black on the County Board. Anyway, he said, "Well, Vel, what are you doing? Have you had a fundraiser, a big fundraiser? And a mass meeting?" I said, "No, because the book said that for a local district office that you might have three hundred people there or even two hundred but maybe only fifty can vote for you. So be very careful." So he said, "Oh, really?" Then he'd tell me something [else] and I said, "Well, the book said..." He said, "How much money have you raised?" I said, "Well, the book said, even though it's good to raise money but you shouldn't do it unless you have some money of your own to gamble, put into it." Then he said, "Well have you done thus and so?" I said, "Well the book..." He said, "What book did you read? Listen, I'm the authority! I've won this and I've done this, and so on and so forth, you know." He just was down with the book. But I followed everything the book said.

Because my husband who had promised to run [if reapportionment created a new ward then didn't run, when] they created a whole new ward, there was nobody [to run]. It was just, the Second Ward, the old Second Ward. And this was after the reapportionment passed. And so I just sort of felt that that was my ward. Because I'd come home, and my husband would rub my feet and everything after knocking on doors and everything. He said, "Well, honey, how'd it go?" I said, "Listen, if they have reapportionment, I want you to run because that will be a good way for you to get known and everything." So he promised he would.

So when they had the reapportionment and it passed and everything. He didn't want to run. He just said that it wasn't his pot of tea. "I'll do anything", I said, "I don't know what I should really do." So I called Doyle Getter at the *Journal* who had written the story when we had been admitted to the bar. I said, "Would you tell me how many women have been on the council? Can you check your records?" He said "Oh sure." So he called me back and he said, "No woman has ever served. No woman has ever even survived the primary. Why do you ask?" I said, "Dale is reneging now and he's trying to get me to run in order to for me to stop nagging him to run." So he said, "You wouldn't want to do it, Vel. You're so feminine and so little and petite, and there's all that smoke and just a lot of men sitting around."

But the more he downed it, the more he played it down, the more interested I got. So I said to my husband ["I'm going to run"]. And he said, "Have you thought about it?" And I said, "Well, the only

thing that I don't have is we don't have any money." Because we were just starting the law practice. And he had said to me...

My father wasn't able to give me a graduation gift because he said [when I graduated] it was a little bit slim. So in between, as soon as I got married, he said that he would get me [a fur coat because] I wanted a fur coat [to keep warm]. And [so] he [said he] would get me a fur coat. So I said to my husband [when] I came home [and at that time] we lived in a trailer... And you don't know what it's like to live in a trailer. It was veterans' housing, and you had to put on all your clothes, walk to the middle of the place where the johns and everything [were], take off all your clothes, take your shower, then put on all your clothes again, snow boots and all, and march back, because there were no indoor facilities. And so I said to my husband, [as] I was prancing around the trailer.... I went home that weekend, and my father said, "Well honey, I'm ready." We were going to go down to Leon's Pfister's and pick you out a fur coat. So I picked out this little fur coat. It was a Brazilian otter. I never heard of that but it was on sale and we could afford it. So anyway, [I went home to the trailer and] I'm prancing around the trailer [saying], "Look at my fur coat." My husband said, "Where did you get that fur coat?" And I said, "It's my graduation gift." [As] I was singing a little song. He said, "I'm supposed to buy your clothes! I'm the man!" He was just furious and upset about it. So I was upset and I called my mother. I was practically in tears. She said, "Didn't I tell you? Now stop!" My husband didn't want me to pay any bills, [not even] our rent [which] was \$25 a month at the trailer. [So] he got his GI bill, he quit his job, [I mean] he quit law school. He was a first year [law student], and that first year he quit law school, or that first semester, and saved his money, worked Oscar Mayer so that I could graduate/enroll in law school.

So, we always had arguments about money. Because he thought he was [the provider]. My mother said, ... "What's wrong with you? If you're husband is saying that all the money you make is all yours and all the money he makes is kind of like ours, you should be happy?" The women's movement was just coming in to the floor. So I said, "Mom, it's about power, it's not about that. I know he loves me but he wants to pay all the bills so he can tell me what to do."

Which is exactly [what] he did when I wanted the fair housing thing, [he tried to tell me what to do]. For five years between 1962 when I introduced the bill and 1967. 1962, did I say '52? No, I graduated from law school in '51, and I was elected to the Council in '56. So from '56 to ... I didn't do anything from '56 to '60. I had two children, and I just learned [how the Common Council operated]. I was very quiet, [just] learning the ways of the Council. I was on the Finance Committee, just being a good alderman, and seeing what was what. And I had only won by less than a hundred votes, so I wasn't sure I'd be reelected. So I was very quiet, but very studious, learning everything about City Hall and what to do.

In '60 when I met John F. Kennedy, who was running for president.... When I won in '60 then I knew as soon as I [won that] I wanted to introduce [a fair housing bill]. Now we had a big to-do. I'm writing a book. I thought I introduced that first fair housing bill in '60 or '61. But the record says that the first one was introduced in '62, so I have to go on what the record says.

But Groppi didn't join [the fair housing fight] until '67. And he called and asked if he could, and this you've heard, if he could join my cause in '67. Now he had a little rag tag group. There were about five or six of them going around to different alderman's houses. Doing things like [protesting] the Eagle's Club. They [, the Eagles Club,] were not letting blacks in, so that was one of his little projects. And Lloyd Barbee was just furious with Groppi. I happened to like Groppi a lot. He was a really a fascinating kind of guy, very intense sometimes and then very laid back at other times. Lloyd would call me and say, "Why are you letting Groppi get all the credit?" The newspapers would follow him around and say, "When is the next housing bill going to be introduced?" and all like that. And I was so naïve and so into

really being just a good public servant that I didn't care. I'd say, "Lloyd, I don't care who gets the credit. I just want a housing ordinance."

But after Groppi got in it, it got more attention than when I was doing it all by myself. I have to give him his dues. Here was a white priest and these little, black kids who were sort of ghetto kids, and it was just too movie-like for them [the media] not to be attracted. And Groppi, even though I'm sure he enjoyed the attention, never ever tried to pretend like he was the main show. When they'd come up to him, he'd said, "Hey, we're cool. We're just here to support Vel. You have to ask her, I wouldn't know when the next housing ordinance [will come up for a vote]." To that degree, when Lloyd would call me and say that to me, and not only Lloyd, [but others]. What's that minister's name that was very active during that time?

Clayborn Benson (Director of Wisconsin Black Historical Society): From St. Matthew's?

Phillips : Yeah, I think he was from St. Matthew's. You've got some pictures of him. I can't think of his name.

Benson : He is ...?

Others: Greg

Benson : He is ...?

Others: Greg

Benson: Greg

Phillips : No, no, not Greg. He was very cooperative.

Benson: [undecipherable]

Phillips: No, it was a guy that was just connected with the marches.

Benson : Oh yes, Rev. Kirkendow.

Phillips : Kirkendow! Right. But a different one. Is he dead?

Benson : He is, he just died.

Phillips : Kirkendow would say, you know, he was very active. And there were others very active. And I was the head of, in Lloyd's group, I was the head of the get the food when the kids would for school, the lunches and everything. So Lloyd and I kind of worked together. Lloyd was into desegregation and I was into housing. So we were very close. And when Lloyd, or Kirkendow, or anybody would say, "Groppi's getting all the credit." I just wasn't concerned with credit. But I did, to be honest with you, when we did the fortieth anniversary, and it was appearing like it was all Groppi. I was a little bit annoyed. I thought "Let's get history straight." Because blacks never get their due in history, it's always somebody else, you know. But Groppi never tried to steal the show. He just enjoyed doing. And he would say, "My boys this and my boys that." Lloyd found criticism about that. And I'd say to him, "But you know what, Grop." I called him Grop. "You know what? They ARE really boys." They REALLY were boys. And you know, they would put me on their [shoulders]. They would lift me up, and put me on their shoulders and treated me like I was just a queen. So I absolutely adored them.

But I do think they broke into my house. Because at one time, when my house was burglarized, the only thing that was taken... There were two things taken: a gun. I wasn't even sorry that was gone because I was afraid of it. I said to my husband that I don't believe in any kind of weapon like that. Because I think that if you have a gun, you might use it. And so I wasn't worried about the gun. But the gun was stolen. Well, maybe three things. The liquor cabinet was gone into and the refrigerator was absolutely raided. They made sandwiches and ate and all like that. But nothing else was gone. All the money was laying around and stuff. No money was touched. Nothing! The gun was gone [and] the beer and liquor was invaded, and the food was really invaded. So it just didn't seem to me that those were the regular kind of burglars, you know. It just didn't add up. So my husband and I decided that it was some of the Commandos that had been there.

I said to them, "You know, my husband has gotten a gun," because I was always threatened. As a matter of fact, they came and shot through my porch window and the bullet lodged in the oven door. We had a built in oven, [because] Henry Maier, it was his house, and he had a beautiful built in oven door that was different from the stove. At that time it was quite rare to have an oven that was in the wall, and I had a little tray under it.

But anyway, I think it was them that went in there. Because they didn't do anything but drink some beers and liquor, and eat food, and take the gun.

So, I loved them. However, we did not have any...how shall I say it? Soon as I come home from City Hall, oh, the first day, they called me and said, "Would you like to march?" As soon as he asked me if he could join my cause, and I said, "Yes." Then he called, Jimmy Pierce, called and said, "We're getting ready to go. Would you like to go?" I had taken off my clothes, my city hall clothes, and was already in my lounge stuff, and I said, "Yes, but I'm all undone." So he said, "Well we'll wait for you." So I was downstairs and my husband [was there and] my two boys were playing chess. My husband heard me, so I said, "Listen, I won't be long. We were marching across the bridge." So I ran upstairs and got dressed real quick. When I came down, my husband was not there. So I said to the boys [where's your father?] I had never left them alone, they were like maybe ten or twelve, they were big enough [to be left alone, I think]. I'd have to figure it out exactly, because Michael was born in '58 and Dale was born in '56.

[The fact that I was a mother, who needed to care for her children] that was kind of a rub with the council. They accept a woman and then a woman and a half came on the council, [since I was] pregnant. I was about five months pregnant [when I was elected to the Common Council]. I only found out I was pregnant after I was pregnant for about four months. [I didn't know because] I was all involved in the campaign. [Then] I just started feeling kind of woozy. I was, "Oh God! You've probably got cancer down there." You know, down there. So I went to the doctor and he told me to come back on March something or other. I said, "That will be right after the primary, and if I lose, I'll be blue, and if I win, I'll be busy." So he gave me another date, and sure enough, I forgot it. And the nurse called me, Eleanor called me, and said, "You had an appointment that you missed, Mrs. Phillips." So I said, "Oh God, yeah." So then I went in and I knew that it was cancer. My mother said the big C [when she talked about cancer]. So the doctor said to me, "Do you know how to knit?" And I said, "Well, I could knit a little. Why?" He said, "Because you're pregnant." And I was almost five months pregnant. So then, I thought everybody would know that I was pregnant. So I was very conscious, but no one knew. I only gained about I think I gained seven pounds or something.

But anyway when I went to march, when I came downstairs, Dale was not there. So Michael finally said or one of them, "I think he may have gone to filling station down at the corner, Mom, to get some

cigarettes.” So I waited and I waited and I waited. And then finally I called my mother to ask if she would come over so I could go march for the first time. And so she said, “Oh, Dale didn’t tell you?” She loved my husband so much, at first she was not too fond [of him,] she thought he was kind of street-wise. But then later on she learned to love him a lot. So she said, “He’s on his way over here,” that’s when she said, “because he doesn’t think you should march with Groppi” And I said “Mom!” and she said “and I agreed with him. I think it’s very unladylike running up and down the street shouting and screaming.” I said, “Mom, I won’t be doing that, I’ll be marching for my housing bill.” So I missed that first night as I explained to you last week, and thereafter I never missed one night. It was the most beautiful, beautiful thing. I’ll say this [indecipherable].

I have served on the legislative branch when I was on the Council, in the judicial branch when I was a judge, and in the executive branch when I was the Secretary of State. So I served in [all three branches of government]. The thing I enjoyed the most, without a doubt, was the City Council because I felt close to the people, and that kind of thing, although it was very interesting to be on the bench. I remember this one little guy. He was about eight years old. Oh, recently it was in the paper, where the seven-year-old took the car and drove and ruined his grandmother’s car. Did you see it in the paper?

Audience : No.

Phillips : Oh, yes, it was on television, and his grandmother said, “I’m gonna whip his behind if I can find him.” Did you read? Right on television, “I’m gonna whip his behind. That’s what I’d like to do is whip his behind.”

Because one of the cases I remember was this little boy, he was a genius. He would go to the salvage places, and he and his friend put together an old car. He was about seven maybe eight. Put together this old car and drove it off of the [yard], after it was there, and drove it away. His feet could not reach the pedals so while he was driving, the friend worked the pedals. So then they’d drive in[to] the [filling] station and said, “Fill her up!” And the man knew there was something wrong, here’s a seven-year-old driving into the filling station. So he called the police, which of course what he should have done, and he came to me in the courtroom. His father sat in the back, angry because he a) missed work. He said, “I’m missing my job.” And b) he said, “He won’t go to school. He’s so dumb, he won’t go to school.” And I said, “Listen, your son is a genius and you’re calling him dumb,” things like that.

Then I had a ten-year-old recovering alcoholic. So there were a lot of interesting cases that I had to deal with. And the man who is over the corrections, he had the nerve to say that “Since Vel Phillips has been on the bench I have had to let some of my maintenance people [go] at Oregon and different schools. We don’t have as many people coming into the jail,” like it was my duty to see to it that he had people in the jail. And people were actually saying to me, “Is it true that now that the prison population in the juvenile facilities is down, that they’ve had to lay off people?” And I just wanted to say, “Who cares? That’s not my job!” But I wouldn’t. But I lost that election because they were just not accustomed to having a woman [judge]. I was the first woman on the bench in the county, there wer only two other women had ever been a judge. I was the first black judge in the state. But I left there to become Secretary of the State, and black people didn’t understand that. They thought I was [Governor Lee] Dreyfus’ secretary, you know, took notes.

So I’ve had some weird experiences.

[End of first tape]

Phillips : ...asked me for two different stories. One was when Groppi was very ill. I would go [to the hospital]. I think it was cancer [that he had]. He really had.... My mother was always talking about the Big C. Another story I have to remember to tell you is when I did my first television. That was interesting. Our first [indecipherable] Groppi, you remind me the third one [indecipherable].

I would go to visit him in the hospital, and I would go at feeding time. Because he had to have a nurse feed him, he couldn't feed himself. So I found that out, so I would go in time to feed him. I was glad to do it because I just loved him. But I would always come back feeling so badly, because he couldn't say thank you. He couldn't talk at all. But he would look at me and his eyes, as I live and breathe, his eyes said "I love you." His eyes said "thank you so much for coming, thank you so much for feeding me, thank you so much for just being you." His eyes said it all, and I'll never forget it.

So I did the same thing for John Reynolds. The judge, John Reynolds' first wife, [Patti Reynolds was sick]. It touched me so much how Groppi was ill. That Patti Reynolds, John Reynolds and his wife now are dead, when she was in the hospital I would do the same with her. It's the most rewarding thing to see especially if they can't talk. He reminded me of a little paper boy. He now does a lot of, you know the guy that... Clayborn?

Benson : Mr. Reynolds is a federal judge she is talking about.

Phillips : Right, but you know the black fellow that has one name and does interpretations?

Benson : Kaju.

Phillips : Yeah, he was my paper boy.

Sound Technician : I'm going to interrupt you for a moment.

Phillips : I had a paper boy that would do the same thing. He didn't know how to say thank you this paper boy. And when I gave him a tip he didn't [say thank you]. No one had taught him how to say thank you. But he would look at me in a way that said thank you a million times. That's one story I wanted to tell. And what was your [question]?

Interviewer : Your relationship with Henry Maier and how your work on the Council and working with the mayor?

Phillips : Henry Maier was...You should say only good things about the dead, but Henry Maier was so mean always to me. He would sort of order me into his chambers [and] he'd say, "Damn it Vel!" He'd start cursing right away. He cursed like a sailor. "Damn it, Vel! Why are you continuing to introduce that housing bill? It's embarrassing to my south side residents, and I have to be elected."

He always had this excuse like that if the county, if other areas in Milwaukee, beside Milwaukee county, in the state would pass fair housing than we would pass fair housing. Otherwise [he thought] there'd be people leaving the city and moving elsewhere in the county. And it had to be a county thing. And I said, "Well, let the city to their part. I have nothing to do with the county. I am a member of the city council and I can only work in this. That's my limitation. So we'll just have to be the leader. We'll pass it then the county will pass it." [Then he'd say,] "No, it can't be that way. You need a good whipping. Dale ought to give you a good whipping," he'd say that to me. And I'd say, "If my husband dared to put his hand on me, I'll have him arrested immediately, and if you don't stop talking to me this way, I'll have you arrested." I would just talk right back to him.

And anyway, I would say things like, “Don’t try to summon me anymore. I’m not going to be summoned because you got your area, [and] I got my area. You worry about your electorate. What I’m doing for fair housing is going [to] benefit the whole city.”

But the other thing is the other that was so funny when I think about it now, [is] my first time [on television]. The council members had a show that came on once a week, and different aldermen would talk about the affair[s] of the city, what was going on. So the first time I was on television...

Professor : Vel, I’m going to interrupt once more. I’m going to move this microphone.

[rustling.]

Phillips : And so I was on with Alderman Schreiber, Marty Schreiber’s father who was President of the Common Council [now], and Alderman Mortier, who was on the first ward. And of course I was the only woman and the first woman. I’ll never forget because I was very excited to be on television. It was the first time I’d been on television. So I said to my mother, she kept my baby. My husband was at the office, our law office, and I wasn’t going to see him ‘til later. So when I came to pick up Dale, I said to my mom, “Did you have a chance to...” “Oh yes.” “How was it?” “Oh, you were beautiful. You were so beautiful. Your hair was just right,” and she was going on and on. So I said, “Well Mom, I’m not so concerned with what I looked liked. How did I sound?” [indecipherable] “Oh you were the smartest one. You knew all the answers. You were just [so], I was so proud. I am so sorry that your father couldn’t have heard so and so part because he was working or something.” So I was feeling pretty good.

Now fast-forward when my husband came home. I said, “Did you chance to watch the show, me on television?” And he said, “Oh yes, I saw it,” because he had television in the office. So I said, “Well how was it?” And he said, “Get your pencil and paper.” I said, “Why?” He said, “Just get your notebook.” I didn’t have a good feeling, as soon as he said that. So he said, “It was terrible.” I said, “Why?” “You talked more than anybody. You talked much more than you should have. You interrupted Alderman Schreiber three times. You interrupted Alderman Mortier two times.” I just sunk down. “Oh honey was it that bad?” “It was. It was worse,” he said. Now this is the thing that really got me, he said, “because what you did really that was not good was you took advantage in a way of being a female.” I said, “How?” He said, “Well because you were the first woman and the only woman, the first black and the only black. They didn’t know how to handle you without appearing to be picking on women.” Like Hillary [Clinton] said she had [been picked on]. “And then of course it was an all white council, they didn’t want to appear to be racist. And so they didn’t quite know how to handle you and you took advantage of it. It was not the Vel Phillips show!”

And even though it hurt at the time, it taught me. I never [forgot] from there on in, I waited my turn. I didn’t interrupt anyone. It was a good learning [experience]. It’s good to have someone in your corner who will tell you the truth. My mother [just said] “You were the smartest, the prettiest, the loveliest.” She would tell us that when we were growing up. “Yvonne you have the best smile. Vel you have the prettiest eyes,” [and] this and that. My mother was wonderful.

Benson: Vel, Can I ask you a question? Your first open housing bill in ‘62, was it different than the bill that actually passed in ‘68?

Phillips : No.

Benson : It was the same bill?

Phillips : Mmhmm.

Benson : Who helped you craft that?

Phillips : Bill Curly, his name is Bill Curly. He was a *Milwaukee Sentinel* writer. He worked for the *Sentinel*, and he quit the *Sentinel* and was our clerk. And that was his job was to help craft an ordinance. And the two of us worked on it together.

Benson : Did you take pieces from other counties or other states? Where'd you get your research?

Phillips : I had done a lot of research on it myself because I'd had four years to think about it. I didn't want to do it in the first four years because I had won by such a little lot. I was afraid that if I did it the first time that I may not be reelected. But Bill Curly he was so fervent about that. When they turned me down time after time after time, he quit the council. He absolutely, and to support my position, made a statement. It was in the paper that he would no longer be with the Council.

Benson : He was working for the city?

Phillips : He was working for the city. And I remember, I called about five years ago I had to call the City Council, and a woman by the name of Judy. I remember when she came to work. The Aldermen should really thank me and [I] told Avante this recently. When they wanted something that was hard to get and they were afraid, they would come to me and say, "Would you back it?" Like cars, they wanted cars and they were too chicken to get it. And so they came to me. My people they were like, "If you can get a car, you can get an airplane. Go for it." So I didn't worry about taxpayers, maybe it was a racial thing, but they were so proud. People were so proud of me being in the Council. People would come up to me and say, "Mrs. Phillips would you do thus and so." It would be something that was really legal that I should get paid for. And they'd say, "I voted for you." And I'd say, "Well, where do you live?" And they live on Capitol Drive, and I [knew my district] never went as far north or any farther north than North Avenue. So I knew [they didn't vote for me]. Sometimes they really didn't even know that they didn't vote for me. They were so much in my corner, they were so proud, they were for me and they thought that they voted for me.

But anyway I was going to tell you one other thing that was very interesting. You asked about Bill Curly.

Benson : I wonder about the other Aldermen who opposed you?

Phillips : Oh, I know what I was going to say.

Benson : The other Aldermen who opposed your open housing legislation?

Phillips : Budzien was one, he was sort of a gentleman. He had more money and a lot more finesse and brains than most of the [aldermen]. I shouldn't say this, this is being recorded, but he was really a gentleman. And I remember the last time before it [the fair housing bill] passed when it was turned down, he passed my desk. My desk was always in the rear, I loved my location.

My mother was always embarrassed by anything that I did, like using the bathroom. It was the aldermen's bathroom. And one time when I came on a Sunday, she wasn't dressed for church. I said, "You're not going to church." She was always fanning [paper rustling] [herself]. She said, "I'm too embarrassed." And I said, "What did I do?" "Why would you use the men's room?" I said, "Mom, it's for the aldermen. I am an alderman." "Well, you could go anywhere but you use that bathroom." So she was very upset with that, because I was always into something.

And did I tell you about my husband and the Aldermen's Wives Club? Did I tell you about that? The Aldermen's wives met and they felt that because I was woman, [even though] I was an Alderman, I was the only [woman alderman]. [The felt] I should join the Aldermen's wives club. So I went about three times maybe. But it was horrible, I just couldn't take it. They talked about little silly things, you know, baby formula and stuff. That was not...you buy the baby formula..., way before I found out there may be something in plastic, I wanted bottles, I didn't trust plastic.

Benson : Vel, those who opposed your bill. What reasons did they give you?

Phillips : Oh, their constituents were against it. It was very [a] easy [excuse]. The big reason was, the big thing is, they sent it to the city attorney's office and the city attorney would give them a reason saying you shouldn't do it. It should be a county-wide thing or this or that.

But let me finish telling you quickly though about the Aldermen's wives. I decided I wasn't [going to join or go anymore]. I said to my husband, "I'm not going anymore to the Aldermen's Wives [Club], it's just too hard." And so my husband said, "Well you know honey, I've been thinking about that. I'm really the alderman's wife." He said, "I'm the spouse here, I should be going to that and not you, with all the spouses. Think about it, I'm the spouse." And so I said, "Well, what would you do?" He said, "I would love it." I shouldn't put this in, I really shouldn't but I'm going to say [it]. He said, "One black man and seventeen white women. I'd go around and I'd hit one of them on the fanny. Boom! 'How you doing, girl?'" [laughter] I knew he was joking but it just frightened me. I said, "Oh God! You wouldn't do that would you?" "I'd hit another one right on the back and I'd say, 'Hey baby!'" And then he would roll in laughter. He was always laughing at his own jokes, and his laughter was kind of funny. Then people would laugh at his laughter. I said, "Well if you do that, we're done." But anyway...

Professor : That's a great story, and we have now exceeded the agreed upon time. It's past four o'clock. Would you be willing to let each one of the groups, three questions from the students?

Phillips : What do you mean groups?

Professor : Well they work on final projects.

Phillips : Okay. How many?

Professor : If one spokesperson from each group. That'd be three questions.

Phillips : That's fine, I'm willing to stay as long as they want to stay.

Professor : Well, I know you have some other things that you need to do.

Phillips : Yeah, well that's okay.

Professor : Do you have some questions you'd like to ask her?

Phillips : I'd like to know everyone's name real quick.

Interviewers : I'm Bridgette. I'm Barb.

Phillips : Barbara? Oh, you're the one that was in the car with me.

Interviewers : Susan. Kyelien. Lauren. Mike.

Benson : I'm Clayborn Benson.

Phillips : Oh shut up. [laughter]

Benson : I have a question.

Professor : Well, why don't we let the students ask a question? We'll let you have the last one. How's that? Bridgette, you want to ask one of those questions about the aftermath or follow-up or would you rather defer to someone else?

Interviewer : We interviewed some of the Commandos and the other people involved in the Open Housing marches. They were part of the NAACP Youth Council.

Phillips : Yes?

Interviewer : And a lot of them said that they felt that the turning point with all the marches was the Sixteenth Street viaduct march? Would you agree with that? What was the big turning point for you?

Phillips : Well, the Sixteenth Street. They didn't just do Sixteenth Street one day that went on and on. I thought that going across Sixteenth Street bridge was always so [bad]. I mean, they threw rotten eggs, they threw urine, [and] feces. You just come home, [and] you had to take off your clothes and wash everything. And I got a lot of hate mail. And I got to know quite a few of the policemen that were assigned to march with us. Actually, the marches cost a lot of money, because they had to have assigned policemen and stuff. But I was always threatened. My children, I never talked about them. I tried to keep my children [safe]. I remember going back to City Hall once or twice for whatever. I remember now this story, and Cindy Kuecker or someone else who was another woman on the Council would have her children running around. I never had my children running around, because I had to be very aware of being a woman [because I was the first and only alderwoman for a time]. I remember when I had to....

My first run for office for City Council, I went door to door. I did everything. The only thing I had not done was I had not [taken a person to the polls]. They used to put on the post, telephone posts, all the people who had voted at four o'clock and all the people who hadn't voted. And the people on my campaign team would say, "Oh, I took that person on the pole. I took that person." So I said to my husband after the primary. I said, "The one thing I'd like to do is to knock on a door and take someone to the polls." Because I wanted to be able to say that I had personally done everything that I had asked a worker to do.

So this time, I knocked on a door and the woman came to the door, and I said, "We're here to take you to the polls, we noticed that you haven't voted." So she said, "Well you know, I never vote without my husband." And I understood that because I always voted with my husband. Matter of fact, he was like a closet Republican, and he would say, "I don't know why we're going because we're going to cancel each other out. So maybe you should stay home." So I'd say, "You stay home!" But anyway, I understood that, but we had instructed our people, "Don't take no for an answer. Find some way to get them to go vote."

So I was trying to figure out what to say to her when her husband walks in the door. I said, "Oh, fine, let's all go." So they said yes. So the little boy with his little cap over his ears was in the middle, and the wife was on one side and the husband was on the other. I can't quite remember which side. But anyway my husband was driving and I was in the passenger side. So we had instructed our workers to

say this and that, and Frank Ziedler, it was his last turn and he was a wonderful person. [So we instructed our workers this way] first of all, the doors are locked, [so] they're locked in. Now wait until you're close to the polls, and then you say, "Now for alderman..."

Now I had seen a little three by five card—like that. [A] three by five index card, that was my literature, and it was red, white, and blue, but the woman had folded it so it was only about that [big]. So I wasn't really sure [it was my campaign literature]. I just thought I saw red, white, and blue. So now we're close to the polls, [and] my husband said, "Now for alderman..." The woman popped up right away and said, "You don't have [to tell] us about the alderman, we know who to vote for, for alderman and we'd rather not discuss that." So my husband sort of stopped short, and then the man said, "Yes, we're voting for Vel Phillips." And I turned around to say thank you very much. I think he sat in back of me because he let in his wife in first. Before I could say it, the man said, "We think he is a very good candidate. He's a lawyer, he belongs to this." I was just struck. But my husband never skipped a beat, "Oh great, we think he is too."

And so the next day when I won, that was the woman who called me to say, "Didn't you take us to the polls?" And I said, "Yes." "Well why didn't you tell us you were Vel Phillips?" I said, "Because you thought I was a man and I certainly wasn't going to disturb that."

The other thing I was going to tell you was about five years ago, or maybe more, I called City Hall for something. And this Judy answered the phone, and she was there. She came on [to the payroll] as [an] eighteen years old, right out of high school, when I was there. She was blonde and very pretty and very nice. I said "hi" and [that] I was looking for whoever I was looking for. She said, "Is this Alderman Phillips?" She was calling me Alderman Phillips. I said, "Yes." And she said, you will enjoy this, Clayborn, I said, "Are you still there Judy? My God, you've been working [how many years]." She said, "This is my last week. Mrs. Phillips it is so good to talk to you. You know, I was so afraid of you and I never said anything." I said, "Afraid of me? How could you be afraid of me? I only weighed less than a hundred and I'm only 5'2". How could you be afraid of me?"

And she said, "Well when I first came, you were dictating something to me and in the window there was a sign that said," this is really significant, "We are an equal opportunity employer! Talking about the city" I said, "Oh?" Because I hadn't remembered nothing. She said, "You stopped mid[-sentence]. You saw that sign and you said, 'Judith, see that sign in the window, will you hand that to me please?'" She said, "You were very gracious, I handed it to you and said 'You want me to take it away?'" It was a little larger than this. So she handed me the sign and she said, "You threw it in the wastebasket." I said, "I did?" She said, "Yes, and you said, 'The city is not an equal opportunity employer until they hire all these clerks ones, twos, and threes dumb white women. Until they get some dumb black women then they're not equal.'" She said, "That just frightened me." Because I had said that we had a lot of dumb white ones running around with only a high school [education]. Because I met a black girl there and she had graduated from college and she didn't last, and I said that we got all these little, white girls running around, dumb ones. Until they do a dumb black one, they're not equal. And she said, "From there on in, I just was afraid of you." Can you believe that, little old me? But I tell you, it's been a good ride. Do you have another question?

Professor : Somebody else from your group? Do you have a question Susan?

Interviewer : I think we have lots of question.

Professor : Well, nobody else is asking so go ahead.

Phillips : It means I talk a lot.

Interviewer : We did some research about the school desegregation and Lloyd Barbee. And I was just wondering what was your level of involvement?

Phillips : Oh, I did all the food. He had a school right there at St. Matthew's and I did all the lunches. I would call different restaurants and stuff and ask if they would [give food]. You know, people that could afford it, [if they would donate some food]. And I'd tell them how many students approximately, and I'd get the food. I was in charge of that for MUSIC, and it was wonderful. He was very cooperative with me and I was very cooperative with him, and he was very bright. We're hoping to get the Milwaukee Schools, the old West Division, which is now the Milwaukee School of the Arts, we're trying to get that named after Lloyd Barbee. It'd still be the School of the Arts, but instead of Milwaukee School of the Arts, it would be the Lloyd Augustus Barbee School of the Arts. And that's what we're working on now, [just] brainstorming. Did you have a question Barbara?

Interviewer : Yes, I was wondering about your involvement with the Youth Council? There's lots of pictures in the display and elsewhere with the Youth Council members usually with Groppi but I was wondering what your level of involvement was?

Phillips : I would come home from City Hall, and it was just like going to a job. My husband would be helping with the getting of the meal. I would always have it all planned, and I did have a housekeeper, and I'd have things all laid out. And then we'd have dinner, and then I'd head right for the church. I remember once this white fellow said to me, we were getting ready to go on the march, he said, "You know this marching is just tearing this city apart. What is it that you people want? What is it?" He had no idea that 'you people' is a phrase that black people do not like. It's a segregating kind of thing, and the average black would right off be ready to shoot fire with this 'you people' business. So he said, "What is it that you people want?" But I could tell that he had no idea that this was an insulting thing to us. I said, "My dear, nothing but our share of the pie. Same things that you want, good schools, an opportunity to get a job and to keep it and to move forward, a quiet neighborhood, place for our children to play in. Just everything! Just the American Dream! The things that you take for granted and that we don't have." And he said, "Is that it? That's all?" He was just kind of stunned. I could have gotten very upset but I could tell that he was sincere in his questioning and didn't have any idea that things were not equal. And I think about that.

Did any of you hear the Reverend [Jeremiah] Wright last night? Yeah, that's very interesting. Because my first thought was 'Why doesn't he just go away?' Because I'm an [Barack] Obama Mama, and I just very kind of upset. But he, first of all, is extremely intelligent, you can tell. [He is] very well read. [He] served in the Marines. You know, [George W.] Bush got out of the service, all of these people don't serve and he was a Marine. Spent six years as a part... And I think he helped operate on Lyndon Johnson, his team. So he is not what Hillary [Clinton], and I've always been a Hillary [Clinton] fan. A friend of mine said, "Vel, you're not for Hillary [Clinton], you always were?" And I said, "That was BBO." So she said, "What does that mean?" "Before Barack Obama." So I really think that it's just kind of interesting. I've always liked her because she's a woman and I'm a woman, and I know how it feels. Because it was much harder, as I said last week, it was much harder getting over the woman thing than getting over the race thing.

Now Budzien, on the last day, I was gonna tell you that then I'll answer another question. The last day he passed my desk and then he came back and he said, "You know Mrs. Phillips," he said, "I just want you to know I will be voting against this fair housing ordinance again. It's my constituents that would be

against me, and I just want you to know that I wouldn't mind having you as a neighbor at all. That would be fine with me." And I just couldn't take it anymore. So I said, "Well, what makes you think that I would want you as a neighbor?" I said, "I wouldn't want you to be my neighbor." Did I tell you guys this? I said, "Because neighbors are someone that you can depend on to help you in a crisis. And I wouldn't want to be in a foxhole with you or anywhere near you. I wouldn't feel that if I ran out of sugar, [I wouldn't want]to come over. So you wouldn't be my neighbor, and I wouldn't want you to be my neighbor."

Interviewer : May I ask you a question that kind of follows up on that. 1967 were the confrontations. Milwaukee was really torn apart, and the next year, you got the fair housing bill passed. Was there any relationship between the fact that the Council finally moved on it and what had happened the previous year?

Phillips : Yes there was. Let me just finish telling you [what happened with Budzien]. After Budzien made that statement, he sat down at his desk. And then after about five minutes he got up and came back over. He said, "You know, I'd like to apologize." Because he realized, he had enough brains [that what he said was insulting and wrong], some of the Aldermen just didn't have it, but he realized that that was very condescending, and he said that he wanted to apologize. And I said, "Apology accepted."

In answer to your question, I don't think they would have passed it in '68 had it not been for the Federal Law. The Federal Law passed it just before we did. Then they knew, Milwaukee was a part of the United States of America so they might as well go along. That's a good point.

Interviewer : I know we all need to get going. But can you just sort of conclude by giving your perspective on how Milwaukee has changed since 1967? We're 41 years down the road. Are we a more humane area? Are we a better off for all of this having happened?

Phillips : Well, people ask me that a lot especially during Martin Luther King's [Day?]. I happened to know Martin Luther King. You knew he was very special. But you didn't really know [him]. I think his being assassinated really put him in a particular category, a stamp, a holiday, all those wonderful things that have happened to [honor] him. But he was, in many ways, just as, shall I say, strong as this Reverend [Jeremiah] Wright. He didn't use the same language. He didn't say "God damn [America]" or anything. But he was very [strong]. People forget how really strong he was. But he was a peace person so that softened everything. I don't believe in any violence [either].

But I would leave him hanging on the phone. He'd call me and say, "Well, we're gonna be here. Can you come? Can you tell Groppi to come?" And sometimes I'd say, "Well, where are you, [I'll call you back]?" And he'd say, "Vel, you're not gonna call me back. And I'll stay on the phone," and stuff like that. And I'd just leave him hanging while I did whatever maybe the children were acting up or something. I think about it now, the people I kept hanging, [like] John F. Kennedy. Once he called me, I was trying to clean the refrigerator and it was all open. And Michael was trying to get into that open [space], that space just seemed to drive him nuts. So he couldn't get in, he went and got his little stool, and then got in sort of butt first. Then when he started trying to close the door, I said to JFK, I called him JFK, I said, "Michael's been trying to get into the refrigerator and now that he's in, he's trying to close the door." He said, "Vel, stop right now and go and get him, because you can't close the door while you're in the refrigerator. "

But I've had the good luck of having to meet a lot of wonderful people. [Like] LBJ [President Lyndon B. Johnson], I knew well. JFK I knew even better. [I knew] Martin Luther King [and] Eleanor Roosevelt. I had to introduce her at a meeting, I'll never forget her. Also, Fannie Lou Hamer was a worker in the

South for Civil Rights and she worked in cotton fields. I'll never forget looking at both of them. Eleanor Roosevelt had the most beautiful fingers. You could tell they had never touched any dishwater at all, and she had gorgeous rings and stuff. And Fannie Lou Hamer, her little hands were like, she couldn't close them all the way from picking cotton. Really, just looking at their hands gave you some idea as to kind of lifestyle they had lived. Their lifestyle[s were very different].

But the federal bill was the thing.

Professor : Okay. We've taken advantage of your time.

Phillips : No you haven't. We've got five more minutes.

Professor : Anybody want to ask any more questions?

Interviewer : Well, just do you think Milwaukee is better today than it was?

Phillips : Well, yes I think it is better today. But it has its [problems]. The fat lady, they say it ain't over until the fat lady sings, she's standing up but she hasn't opened her mouth yet. I will say this, I have noticed, there are one, two, three, four, five women. So there are only two males in the class. Do you think, is that the way [it is] proportioned in the school, more females than male?

Interviewer : It's slightly more.

Phillips : Why is that?

Professor : Well, I think that is a difficult question to ask, and you're starting to interview us now. The situation is in a lot of ways [difficult to explain]. I think females are far more interested in their education and they see the advantages to it, and sometimes maybe the males don't. Do you have any ideas? It's way out of my baliwick.

Interviewer : There's more of them.

Phillips : That is true, there's more girls born than boys. The other thing I was going to say, though, what is your major? You're majoring in what? You're taking this course but what is your major?

Interviewer : I'm a history.

Phillips : That's very fascinating.

Interviewer : Social welfare.

Phillips : Oh, social welfare.

Interviewer : And history minor.

Interviewer : I'm getting my masters in history.

Interviewer : I'm also getting my masters in history.

Interviewer : I'm an English and history major.

Phillips : Well, I've learned lately that English is a really good background for anything and especially for law school, because you learn how to do briefs and all. History was one of my favorite subjects. I absolutely enjoyed history.

Professor : Well, you've added to the historical record today, that's really great. On behalf of the people, left thank you.

[Applause]