

*Civil Rights History Project
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Interviewee: Kay Tillow
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Interviewer: David Cline
Videographer: John Bishop
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David Cline: So, what I'm going to do first is just do a little introduction for the tape, and then we'll start, we'll just start talking.

Kay Tillow: Okay.

David Cline: And we'll take it from there. And anytime you want to stop, we can stop for as long as you like.

Kay Tillow: Okay.

David Cline: Okay. So, today is August the fourteenth, 2013. Speaking is David Cline from the History Department at the University, at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, also working for the Southern Oral History Program at UNC-Chapel Hill. Today I have the honor of interviewing Kay Tillow here in Louisville, Kentucky. Behind the camera is John Bishop of Media Generation and UCLA. And I think that's everything. Is that everything? Yeah.

John Bishop: And reading the paper on the couch [00:44]. [Laughs]

David Cline: Oh, and [laughs] we're back here in the lovely home of Kay *and* Walter Tillow, so hello to Walter, as well, and thank you for having us back here. So, if we could just start, if you could just introduce yourself, your age, where you were born, and—that would be great. And then, we'll have a conversation.

Kay Tillow: Okay. [Laughs]

DC: Yeah.

KT: My name is Kay Tillow, and I was born in Paducah, Kentucky, in 1942. And my parents lived in Metropolis, Illinois, which was across the river from Paducah. Paducah was the closest hospital. And I grew up in Metropolis, Illinois.

DC: And if you could tell us a little bit about your upbringing and if you see anything sort of in the way that you were raised, the family that you are from, that may have caused you to become involved in the Movement in later years.

KT: Well, my parents were of modest means. Both of them were from farm families, of families that had come over from Germany and were eager to get land [laughs] here. And every German family had a plot of eighty acres. I'm not quite sure [laughing] how that happened, but that's where—my grandparents each lived on a farm, and both of my parents grew up on the farm. And my mom was able to go to Southern Illinois Teachers College and became a teacher. And my father had a—he farmed and he also had a furniture store.

So, we lived in the—the town was very small, six thousand people, and it's still six thousand people. So, Metropolis is just, you know, a farm town of—and very, very far away from, you know, urban centers. It's like halfway between St. Louis and Memphis. So, the big city is Paducah, which is like thirty-six thousand. So, I went to grade school and high school there. And my parents were involved and active in the church.

So, I think perhaps one of the things that influenced me most was that we had a Presbyterian minister named Maynard Elftman, who at some point when I was in high school gave me a copy of the book, *The Wall Between* by Anne Braden. And it was an amazing revelation to me, [laughs] from those narrow confines. My family was not at all political in any way, so I didn't—I had no—you know, my family didn't talk about politics. They talked about morals and education, and those were the things, and the church, that guided them. But this book was *eye-opening* in terms of what was happening to people.

DC: And what kinds of things did Mrs. Braden talk about in that, and how did that affect you?

KT: Well, she told the story of inequality in Louisville, Kentucky, and how they had purchased a home for an African American family because the sellers would not sell it to them. So, they purchased the home. And that brought this terrible [laughs] backlash and—well, everyone knows the story, that the house was bombed, Carl and Anne were arrested, Carl went to prison charged with sedition, trying to overthrow the state of Kentucky.

But Anne wrote very well, so she always—she approached it from, kind of, for someone who didn't understand any these things at all, I could understand—and very moving [0:05:00] about inequality and, you know, the need to stand up against what was wrong. So, that had a big influence on me. And that was before I graduated. I graduated from high school in 1960.

DC: And what was the world—so, what was your immediate world around you there in Metropolis, as far as the demographics, as far as equality? What did you see around you, and how did that compare to what you were reading?

KT: Well, I remember when—the grade schools were integrated there when I was in grade school, and I remember, you know, people being very, very upset about that happening,

but—for a while, and then it seemed that that was over. But, of course, the African American teachers lost their jobs, and I don't know when they were later hired, you know. I'm sure that at some point that was changed, too.

The high school was integrated. And so, you know, it was not—I don't think it was like the Deep South, but there was certainly prejudice there. I can remember nominating a young African American to be the head of the—the what-was-it?—the High Tri [she may have meant Tri-Hi-Y Club, a national service club], some girls club in high school, and the teacher telling me, “No, we weren't ready for that.” [Laughs] So, that was in—before '60.

DC: Very interesting. Yeah. And was that before you would have read the book, or after?

KT: I don't know. I don't know that.

DC: Yeah.

KT: I can't remember how that fits together.

DC: Do you remember your first—this is probably a difficult question, but do you remember your first sort of overt act?

KT: Well, I'm not sure exactly which one was first. I went to the University of Illinois then. And by that time, you know, I joined the NAACP away from Metropolis [laughs], which was easier to do, you know, and participated. I remember participating—my first picket line was at the University of Illinois against some store that wouldn't hire African Americans. And I remember being very frightened, but believing it was right, and I was going to do it. And I remember what my sign said. Somebody—I didn't write it, but someone had given me this sign. It said, “In the Land of Lincoln, Discrimination is Stinkin'.” [Laughs] And not too much happened. I mean, we were kind of berated on the picket line.

But we, you know—things by that time were beginning to happen in the country, and I just went to the meetings and learned. And we would have reports from, you know, people coming from the South, you know, who would speak at the meetings and tell some of the stories. And, you know, the Movement was beginning to have impact all across the country, and in Champaign, Illinois, as well. [Laughs]

DC: Right, right. And so, you talk about students visiting. Were there other ways that you were getting your news about what was happening?

KT: Hmm, well, depending on what year. In '62, in the summer of '62, I was back in Metropolis and preparing to go to Ghana on a junior year abroad.

DC: Right.

KT: Which I went in '62. But during that summer before then, I went with the local NAACP because there were SNCC demonstrations in Cairo, which was about forty miles away. And we traveled to go, you know, we went to the court hearings. It was a segregated courtroom.

And I remember being just amazed at the courage of these people. Mary McCollum was one of the people who was there, and she had a big—she had been cut on her thigh, a huge gash, during one of the demonstrations. And just—you know, people were facing such brutality and were so strong. You know, that was it about the Civil Rights Movement, is that you gained inspiration by these other people who you admired so and who were really, you know, risking everything to stand up for what they believed in. So, that had a great impact on me [0:10:00] during that summer.

Then, you know, I went to Ghana. [Laughs] And that was different! [Laughs]

DC: Right.

KT: W. E. B. Du Bois was at the time the—he got an emeritus honorary degree there. He had gone there to work on his Pan-African encyclopedia, I think it was. And, of course, I didn't know who he was. And all of the students said, [laughing] “You don't know?! He's American! You don't know?” You know, I became aware of some of the ignorance [laughs]—and the holes in our education system, that here was someone so highly regarded around the world, and I had never heard—so, I went to the ceremony where he was given that honorary degree. And he was there with his wife, Shirley Graham Du Bois.

And I learned a lot, you know, in Africa, from—I mean, Conor Cruise O'Brien was the chancellor of the university, and he had written *To Katanga and Back*, you know, and all of that story. So, I was just becoming aware of like the U.S. role in the world.

And by the time I came back, which was in '63, two things happened on my way back. One was that Du Bois died in August of '63, and the March on Washington. So, I came back and, you know, the Civil Rights Movement was in full [laughs] blossoming.

DC: You arrived back after the march?

KT: Right, at the end of August, right afterwards, yes. And so, I went back to the University of Illinois. But somewhere along the way, I met John Lewis, who came to the University of Illinois. I'm not sure which year that was, whether that was '63 or whether that was earlier, before '62. But I was very impressed. Again, the people who were active in that Movement were so inspiring and compelling [laughs] about what it meant, and the value of this cause and this humanity. And I was very moved by him. He had a lot of hair then, too. [Laughs]

DC: [Laughs] Now, were the students in Accra following what was going on in the U.S.?

KT: Yes. They were. Of course, that was also the time of the missile crisis, which they were, [laughs] they were all asking me, “Why?” [Laughs] “Why? Why? Why, you know, all this

danger of nuclear war? Why is this happening?" But I can't remember a lot of discussions about the Civil Rights Movement. [Laughing] But they wanted to know why I had never heard of W.

E. B. Du Bois.

DC: Right, right.

KT: And, uh—

DC: Okay, so you get back to campus, and it's in '63.

KT: Right. And then, my NAACP chapter decided to send a delegation to Atlanta during the semester break. And the way I remember it is that we were going to go picket [Loeb's]. [Laughs] I'm not even sure what [Loeb's] was. I think it was a chain of restaurants or something, in Atlanta. And we were going to go down there and see and report back, et cetera. And I went down with some others from there.

And as a result of that visit—where I remember a discussion with Prathia Hall, who was from Philly. She spoke, and Jim Foreman, and, you know, lots of other people. And I made the decision that that's what I wanted to do. I couldn't stay in school. I had to go. [Laughs] I had to go and help, not that I knew what to do, but that's how compelling the Movement was.

I remember we went to Hattiesburg, and at the time, there were demonstrations over voting there. And Hattiesburg was a very oppressive, violent place. When we were there, Bob Moses had been in jail. And there was a white man also in jail, too, from the Movement. I can't remember his name, but he had been very badly beaten, because they had put him in [0:15:00] with the white—it was a segregated jail, and they put him in with the white prisoners. And, of course, they told them he was involved with the civil rights. So, he was really badly beaten; he could hardly be recognized as a human being.

And we stayed with a family there in Hattiesburg. And the police—we picketed at the courthouse where they were trying to register. And the police marched in military [sighs] ranks, you know, down the street, like they were meeting the enemy. And I remember a gigantic mass meeting there in Hattiesburg with hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of people.

So, there was this stark, you know, comparison between this militarized opposition and the violence in the jail, and these people who were not afraid. Kind of a—that was very inspiring, that they gave each other courage and they were not afraid. They had us in their homes. They were under threats of violence. Of course, that was the area where Schwerner, Goodman, and Chaney were killed not long after that. But there were hundreds of people, and you could *feel* [laughs] that, you know, something was moving and shaking and turning and was not to be put back, in spite of the violent opposition that it faced.

DC: Now, in terms—did you identify as a Southerner?

KT: Ah—

DC: Or how did you see yourself, and especially as you got into the more, the deeper South from where you were from?

KT: Well, I guess I did. I mean, I, I don't know. [Laughs] I was sort of a—betwixt and between. But having been born in Kentucky, I claimed Kentucky as where I was born.

DC: But then, as you got into a place like Hattiesburg, how did that compare to how you had—what you had seen growing up?

KT: Well, that was much—but, of course, there was no Movement in Metropolis. [Laughs] I mean, I would say Cairo probably could have vied with Hattiesburg for the brutality of the response to the Movement, and that was southern Illinois. So, you know, I didn't see Metropolis with the Movement there, really. [Laughs]

DC: Right.

KT: So I'm not sure. And I didn't know any white people in Hattiesburg, other than the people that were in the Movement.

DC: So, you went there just over a school break, but decided that this is where you needed to be.

KT: I decided I would go back, yeah. And that's what I did. And I kind of went— [laughs] people kind of went with the flow at the time, you know. We were young, and I certainly didn't have any particular skills to contribute, just myself, [laughs] just going down and trying to be there and learn from other people and try to help in whatever way that I could.

DC: So, what was your first step? How did you find an assignment, or what you were going to do?

KT: Well, I was with a group that went kind of to these different places. I remember we went to Chapel Hill and we went to Tuskegee, where they were preparing—Staunton Lynd was there, and they were preparing the Freedom Schools that were going to happen that coming summer. Freedom Summer was in '64. So, you know, we kind of went to this place and that place. Chapel Hill, I think there was a student conference. And I was at Highlander several times, which is where I met Walter.

DC: Oh, that's where you met?

KT: Yeah. [Laughs]

DC: Was it at a workshop? Or do you remember what the circumstances were?

KT: Yeah, I guess it was a workshop. It was—by that time, I was working with a group called the Appalachian Committee for Full Employment, which was working with miners in eastern Kentucky. And the people from SNCC came, and we all—you know, people came

together and discussed the situation. I remember Jim Dombrowski being there. He was one of the old SCEF people.

And I met Carl and Anne. [0:20:00] And, you know, they kind of weaved throughout all of it. They were really mentors to all of the young people that were coming through the South. And they shared [laughs] *The Southern Patriot*, which was their newspaper, and their skills and their encouragement to everybody that came through. They were really a tremendous force, I believe, in the rebuilding of the Civil Rights Movement from the earlier thirties, where the Southern Conference for Human Welfare, and I think there was another, a youth group, and kind of—they bridged the gap and kind of reconnected it in that period of time.

DC: So, yeah, how did you, as young people, look at this sort of earlier generation of activists?

KT: Well, we had to learn about it, because those of us who didn't come from, you know—Walter came from a left background. I came from the farm. [Laughs] I didn't know about anything, so we had to learn. And, of course, Carl and Anne had us reading, you know, reading and trying to understand.

DC: What did you read?

KT: Well, let's see. What did I read? Eleanor Flexner's *A Century of Struggle* on women. We read a lot of stuff about the HUAC, you know. Carl was very strong about, you know, the terrible impact of anti-Communism and its ability to flatten the progress in the country. And, of course, with what he had been through and that whole story about, you know, his life and the sedition charge, et cetera. So, Carl was very strong. I would say they were the big influence on SNCC, that they—that the organization would not—refuse to be anti-Communist, you know, refuse to adopt that kind of, that liberal anti-Communism of Hubert Humphrey. [Laughs]

DC: So, the organization that you said that you were working with, the Appalachian Committee, what were they primarily working on at that time?

KT: Well, at the time, I guess the reason I was attracted to it was there was an increasing discussion about economic—the economic situation and how important that was, in terms of equality, that, you know, public accommodations was not—winning equality in public accommodations would not end the inequality, because there was an economic base to it. And, of course, I had to learn that, too. [laughs]

But I was persuaded by that, and there was a group that was organizing to—there was a group of coal miners in eastern Kentucky who had tried to revive the miners union after it had been broken. And they had been arrested and jailed on a charge of conspiracy, so there was a legal case. And there was kind of a movement around it, and I went there to help. I put out a newspaper called—I don't know. I think it was called *Kentucky Jobs with Justice*, and we worked on organizing there.

I remember I was there. We marched on Frankfort with the people who organized from Louisville for—there was a jobs—march on Frankfort for jobs and freedom. And that was March fifth of 1964. And we brought the contingent from the coal fields of Appalachia and joined up with the other people.

DC: This is one of the pieces that I think subtly gets left out often in this story of the Civil Rights Movement, especially about, you know, the March on Washington was the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. The fact that the economic piece, from the very beginning, was thought of as a part of this civil rights goal. It sounds like you learned that early on in the work that you were doing.

KT: Yeah. I remember there was a workshop we had at Highlander. Of course, Highlander, of course, had been—had participated in the earlier days in the education of those who were—the CIO, trying to organize workers in the South and trying to organize those agricultural movements of black and white together, and all. But, so we had a conference during this SNCC era on unions. I remember we had someone from the United Electrical Workers who came down [0:25:00] and talked with us. And we had a discussion about, you know, what role should unions play, you know, in terms of trying to propel justice and equality in the country.

DC: So, early on, you became interested in working with workers?

KT: Yeah, I did. Yeah.

DC: Yeah.

KT: Yeah.

DC: What year did you and Walter meet?

KT: '64.

DC: Okay.

KT: Somewhere in there.

DC: Yeah. I'm sort of—I know this gets personal, but I'm interested in how it works as a couple in the Movement, especially when you're being—you know, there's so much work to be done, and you might be pulled to work in different places at different times. And how did that work for you?

KT: [Laughs] Well, I don't know. We managed to find a way to put it together. You know, by '65 and '66, you know, a lot of people were leaving SNCC. So, you know, Walter worked on that Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party in '64. And in '66, I believe it was '66, I think, we went to work for the Electrical Workers Union.

DC: Okay.

KT: Both of us. Of course, they sent me one place and him another. [Laughs] They sent him to Detroit and me to Pittsburgh, but [laughs] it still wasn't together. But after that period of time, you know, I think people didn't know exactly what to do in the South. There were different things happening, from up to '64.

DC: So, in terms of, as SNCC started to change a bit. But it sounds like you were already focused on other things.

KT: Yeah, I was working in East Kentucky, you know, for all of '64, basically.

DC: And you'd catch up and see each other every so often? [Laughs]

KT: Yeah. I wasn't so far away. [Laughs]

DC: Right, right. And so, then, actually in—working in a union?

KT: Uh-huh.

DC: And how was that experience?

KT: Well, that was an experience. [Laughs] That was another thing to learn. I worked in northern Pennsylvania on a union drive there. And then, eventually we left the UE, and I went to work in '69 for 1199, which was a civil rights-related union, the hospital workers. And the interesting thing about the union—the union basically was a progressive union and was built among African American workers in the hospital, service workers, in New York: dietary, housekeeping, nursing assistants, et cetera.

And we worked on establishing the union in Pennsylvania, where it was not majority black situation. And amazingly enough, we found that we were able to build the union even in vast majority white hospitals, not in Pittsburgh, but the first one that we won was in Lewistown, which was almost all white. And that was against a, you know, a campaign by the employer

for—that this was a black union and, you know, all of that was happening. But that was an interesting experience. We were able to build the union in rural areas in Pennsylvania.

DC: How are rural areas of Pennsylvania, in terms of their race relations?

KT: Well, I don't know. [Laughs] I don't know. I worked in Wilkes-Barre, where we organized the registered nurses in all of the whole hospital. That was one of the early ones. And, you know, that was Mercy Hospital in Wilkes-Barre. I remember they campaigned against the union by saying that the nurses are professionals, and “We've worked hard to come away from being called ‘coal crackers.’” And, of course, that made the nurses livid, because their fathers had sent them to nursing school on coal miner salaries. [0:30:00] So, we won there.

We won there and in Butler—ah, I can't think of the other towns. Spangler, Huntington, Washington—Washington, Pennsylvania—and Canonsburg were hospitals where, in the not-big cities, but more rural areas where we were a part of the union. The rest of the union was African American. In Baltimore, you know, Baltimore was one of the first—I think one of the first outside of New York City. I remember Coretta King went there and helped the campaign, and Johns Hopkins was organized into 1199. That was probably '69 or '70.

And then, there was an 1199 campaign in Charleston, South Carolina, around the same time or a little earlier than that, I think, and they were not able to win union recognition.

[Laughs] But it was a huge, you know, a huge battle, but they didn't break it down. There was some kind of a settlement that they would allow the union to collect dues or something. It didn't build the basis for establishing the union in the South, and it's still unorganized. And, of course, Kentucky, the hospital workers are almost all unorganized. I mean, it's very, very hard [laughs] to do that in the southern states.

JB: David, let's pause for a minute. I want to change this and [31:53].

DC: Okay.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay, David. It's recording.

DC: And this is just an aside, but I've done a bunch of work in Southwest Georgia, with the SNCC folks down there and Charles Sherrod.

KT: Oh, yeah!

DC: And one of the reasons—he admitted to me that one of the reasons he went, you know, went north to seminary was to recruit people to come down, and part of what he needed was vehicles. [Laughs]

KT: [Laughs]

DC: But you were starting to say—[speaking to JB] are we back?

JB: We're going.

DC: Oh, great. I was asking about—or we were mentioning, off-camera, just for a second there, we were talking about the importance of Highlander, and I was talking about it being in a rather remote place. And you were starting to talk about how people got around in those days.

KT: Oh, well, Highlander at that—during that period, it was in Knoxville, you know. I—

DC: Okay. So before—

KT: It was a—earlier, you know, where it was burned down, I think that was in Monteagle, Tennessee.

DC: Yeah. Yeah, near Sewanee, right.

KT: But it was in a big house in Knoxville at the time when we were going. And it's somewhere else now. I haven't been there. [Laughs]

DC: Yeah, yeah.

KT: But I think New Market or somewhere.

DC: Not far from there.

KT: Although I have been back. I went back because my friend who I work with on single-payer is from Tennessee, and he invited us back. We went to a play about Myles Horton and Don West [laughs] that was somewhere near that area. And we went to the grave of Myles Horton and saw where the school had originally been. I have a picture of Walter and me with the marker, you know, the historical marker there.

DC: Yeah, in Monteagle.

KT: It's in Monteagle, yeah.

DC: Yeah, yeah. Interesting. Yeah, which leads me to ask the question, too, I mean, the work that you were doing with the nurses' union, which you clearly saw as civil rights activity, did the nurses see it that way, and then, what other—or the hospital workers? And who were your allies in working on these campaigns? Did some of the other civil rights organizations support you, or not?

KT: Yeah, yeah. I remember—well, in Pittsburgh, when we first started in, you know, '69, the other unions were not sympathetic, because here was a union—it was a New York-based union. And, you know, we had organized a petition from some hospital workers to ask them to come and help us, and they were all excited about, you know, coming, so they came and put me onto the staff. But the other unions in the city were not sympathetic because they saw it as their territory. [Laughs]

But the allies were—the UE was very sympathetic. And David Montgomery at the time was a professor at the [0:35:00] University of Pittsburgh, and he—he and the guy from, Tom Quinn, from the United Electrical Workers, headed up the support committee for us, because at

the time, in 1969 and '70, there were—the National Labor Relations Law did not cover hospital workers. And therefore, you know, to get recognition, you had to really build, you know, a movement that had some strategy of forcing the hospital on moral grounds to recognize the union, which is what they had done in New York, you know. They had more power there, and they got Rockefeller to back it, and [laughs], you know, they were able to do it.

We were not able to win in '70. There was a strike at Presbyterian Hospital, and we were not able to, you know, gain collective bargaining. But as a result of the strike, the governor of Pennsylvania at that time, his name was Shapp, and they were contemplating collective bargaining for state employees at the time and, as a result of that strike, they added hospital workers. So, Pennsylvania became a state that included, under *state* law, the right for hospital workers to organize.

And it was not until 1975—I think it was '75, I think that's right [sound of sirens begin in background]—that the NLRB was—amended its coverage and made it possible to organize in hospitals across the country. But—so our movement was a part of, you know, opening that door and making that happen.

DC: What were the racial demographics among hospital workers? I mean, were there a majority of African Americans in the field?

KT: Well, in—

DC: Or did it depend where you were?

KT: It varied.

DC: Yeah.

KT: In Pittsburgh, probably thirty percent or forty percent were African American, among the service workers. I mean, we weren't organizing among the nurses in Pittsburgh. I

mean, we couldn't reach them. But it wasn't majority. It wasn't like you could just unite African American workers and then you had majority, which I think is how it was in New York. So, it was a new, [laughs]—

DC: Interesting. Okay.

KT: A new challenge. But, you know, I think that's something we were proud of, was that we did build the union, that other hospital workers called on us. People from Uniontown called. We started a movement there, and people were all related to coal miners and had a union tradition in their families and didn't care! [Laughs] They wanted a union, you know. There was a strike in Uniontown, as well, also which was not won, but was a valiant effort. It was amazing that, in Uniontown, as a part of that effort, we had to—you had to strike for recognition, because before the law, you couldn't [laughs]—

DC: Right.

KT: You couldn't get an election. You had no way to gain—no established way to gain collective bargaining rights. So, I remember that, as a part of the effort to get the hospital to settle, we would go out to the various enterprises of the people who were on the board of the hospital. And somebody from the coal mine was there, you know, so we could close down the coal mine, close down the clothing factory, we could close down anything [laughs] in the city!

DC: Right.

KT: [Laughing] Except the hospital was still functioning because it wasn't a solid, you know, a solid strike. And that was what happened in Pittsburgh, as well. It wasn't a solid majority that went out. But we did win—we won—the first union that was established was at the Jewish Home and Hospital for the Aged in Pittsburgh. And, oh, it was a lovely campaign! That *was* a majority African American workers. And that campaign was led by Henry Nicholas, who's

now the head of the Hospital Workers Union in Philadelphia. [Laughs] But before the Philadelphia union was established, you know, Nicholas came to help us in the Pittsburgh area. And this was an area where clearly the Civil Rights Movement was a part of people's thinking and very responsive [0:40:00] to that.

And since we couldn't get a vote, but we had a clear majority, we had a sit-in. It was on Christmas Eve in 1969. And [laughs] we—it was solid. It was amazingly a strong movement. And we were sitting there and told management, you know, if there were any emergencies, we would send someone to help, but other than that, you know. And the woman from the laundry kept coming through and said the laundry had to be done. [Laughing] And we said that wasn't an emergency. They could go without.

And by the end of the day, we had an agreement with the management that they would conduct an election. We found a rabbi from Rodef Shalom, who was going to hold this election, and we had a date set for some time in January or February that we would have a secret ballot election and an agreement that, if a majority voted for it, they would recognize the union and bargain. Yeah, that was our big—that's really why we could establish the union there, 'cause we finally won something. [Laughs]

DC: And that opened the door.

KT: And that meant that we had a—you know, we had several hundred, I can't remember how many it was, a couple of hundred members there at that nursing home. And that was the beginning of the union in Pennsylvania. But it was shortly after that that they passed the law, in '70 or '71, and then we began winning under the law, under the state law, in Lewistown and Wilkes-Barre, and in '73 in Washington and, you know, a number of other hospitals, and built the union. And many of those bargaining units were majority white, which—something we're

proud of!—that, you know, gave you hope that you could unite people on economic issues, with some understanding of civil rights issues, and make a common fight for justice within the country.

DC: Now, as you brought people together to form the unions and brought the communities together, did that ever lead communities—create unity within those communities that led them on to other issues, to fight other kinds of battles, that you know of?

KT: [Pause] I don't know. [Laughs]

DC: Okay. Alright.

KT: I'm sorry. I—

DC: Yeah.

KT: [Pause] I don't know.

DC: Okay.

KT: I mean, I think that, in general, we built solidarity for other workers, you know, so that we would demonstrate with other unions or other people trying to get the union or, you know, bring people together around those issues.

DC: Well, great. No, I was just—

JB: [43:12]

DC: I was just curious about how empowering it is to take on other issues.

JB: [43:16]

DC: Okay. So, how did—you know, we started by talking about your family. How did your family back home respond to the work that you had decided to devote yourself to?

KT: Um, well, they were not happy about it, [laughs] my mother mainly because I had left school before I graduated, and I didn't finally graduate from college until '67. So, I had left

before my last semester, [laughs] and my mother was very upset about that. It was that, and also concern about—it was dangerous, you know. And they were not happy about it at all. [Laughs] So, it was difficult, because it was not the norm [laughs] that had been planned. Well, even Walter's parents, who had much more understanding about the Movement, were frightened about the situation and worried about that.

And then, you know, there were other problems about Movement people. I remember, you know, we were also involved in the Antiwar Movement. And in the days of the Antiwar Movement, I mean, it was terrible what would happen. The FBI went to see my parents about this. [0:45:00] So, *that* doesn't help [laughs] the situation, where they were questioned and, you know, they didn't have, you know, [laughs] any way, any context in which to place that. So, you know, it created a great deal of difficulty. They were questioned about, you know, the picket lines against the Vietnam War.

DC: And then, do you remember them getting in touch with you and telling you what had happened?

KT: *Yes!* I remember, you know, my mother crying on the phone, and I'm trying to explain. And the FBI has just left their house and been questioning them. And, you know, they think that I'm, you know, in some kind of terrible trouble and that the FBI—you know, they never had run-ins with the law! [Laughs] You know, they—that was completely different to them. And, of course, that was what it was about: they were trying to repress, you know, make it difficult for people to participate in such a movement.

DC: Now, did you see the various things that you were involved in—like the Antiwar Movement, but also the labor organizing and civil rights—did you see this as all of a piece, or as separate things?

KT: Yeah, I saw it as all connected. For me, it was. The same folks that, you know— [laughs] they were the same people that were concerned about the same issues. I think that the Civil Rights Movement was the foundation of the ability of people to do the other organizing. I think that that was the catalyst and the strength and the momentum. That was the powerful movement that really changed the country, made it totally different, and made it possible for people to do these other kinds of things. It was, you know, what was out there in front with the moral compulsion and made it possible for the Civil Rights Movement, the Antiwar Movement, all of the other kinds of things that followed, were grounded in and took their strength from— you know, they were connected to what the Civil Rights Movement had done.

The power of common people moving together is very compelling and gives you all kinds of ideas about what you might change. [Laughs] You know, seeing a Fannie Lou Hamer— I saw her many times—and knowing her story of what she had been through. Where does a person gain that strength? You know? Where does that come from, that someone of such humble origins could give such leadership that really shook the nation and *changed* it? I mean, she changed that, you know, that convention, you know, when she said, “We didn’t come all this way for two seats.” You know, that a woman from that background could say that? You say, “My goodness! It doesn’t take, you know—you don’t have to be Einstein! You can—[laughs] you know, that we have within the nation many people, many people, all kinds of people, who could become movers to make things happen differently in the country.”

DC: And capable of creating extraordinary change.

KT: Pardon?

DC: Capable of creating extraordinary change.

KT: Yes! And that really—the whole Civil Rights Movement was that way, you know. It really was about [laughs] people who had fewer resources on which, you know, to rely, but so much strength in that Movement! I mean, you think about the Freedom Riders. I'll never forget the Diane Nash story, you know, when she's called by the Justice Department, and they say, you know, "You can't do this. You can't pick up this ride. You could be killed!" And she says, "We know that. We are aware. We have all made out our wills." [Pause] It's just powerful. [0:50:00]

And that was there on a massive basis, not just one or two or three leaders, but many, many, many, many people. So, that changed the country. And, I think, propelled the other movements that have been asking or asserting their rights within the country, as well.

DC: Did you ever personally interact with the Women's Movement?

KT: I was involved in the Pay Equity, yeah, and Coalition of Labor Union Women. I was the president in Pittsburgh of the Coalition of Labor Union Women, and we carried on quite a bit.

DC: What kinds of things did you work on?

KT: Well, it was a time when labor union women didn't have any role at all in the officialdom, you know. [Laughing] So, I remember so many times I would get up to speak at the Alleghenies Central Labor Council and couldn't get recognition, you know, or they would say it wasn't the right time on the agenda to raise that issue. I mean, it was difficult. So, the Coalition of Labor Union Women, which was founded in '74, kind of [phone rings]—

JB: Let's pause.

DC: Just take a—okay.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

DC: Okay.

JB: We're back.

DC: So, you said the Coalition of Labor Union Women was formed in—

KT: The Coalition of Labor Union Women was founded in 1974. I went to the founding. I think we were in Detroit. I'm not sure where we were. [Laughs] Those hotels all look the same. But it gave us a way for union women to form an organization and to speak on behalf of, you know, women's issues or whatever. So, that's kind of what we did. A number of chapters in CLUW [pronounced "clue"] became kind of the focal point of women who were concerned about civil rights and antiwar, as well as union issues. And we had a dynamic chapter in Pittsburgh, and they were always telling us we were [laughs] we were getting out of line. But it was a good thing.

DC: I mean, you're laughing about not being recognized, but I imagine that that must have been terribly frustrating at times, given what you were working on.

KT: Well, it's just funny memories of, you know, the way things were, you know. I mean, I love the Labor Movement, but, you know, when you know it, you know all of its problems, as well. So, it's—that was one of its difficulties. Some progress has been made on that but, you know, there are big problems within the Labor Movement. We have so much to do, so many workers unorganized, and so little to—we're losing ground, in terms of, you know, wages compared to where all the money is going to the top.

DC: And you're still working in the Movement?

KT: Yeah, I worked on the trying to build the union—the Nurses Union here in Louisville. But right now I'm working on the Single Payer Movement, you know, the effort to *finally win in our nation* universal health care, to make health care a right for every person, and to win a system where we would publicly fund it, so that we would remove the economic barriers

to getting care and make certain that everyone could get care, regardless of ability to pay. And that's the effort now that I'm working on.

There's a bill in Congress called H.R. 676, sponsored by the wonderful [laughs] Congressman John Conyers, who also introduced the Martin Luther King Holiday bill and has led many—he introduced the shorter work week, which we worked with him back in—a while back, [laughs] decades ago. But he has introduced this bill, which would remove the private, for-profit insurance industry from our health care system and remove the for-profit hospitals, so that you couldn't profiteer in health care. [Laughs] You could earn a living if you worked, but you couldn't make profit from denying care. And, of course, that's the system that we have now.

And I'm hopeful that the issue of health care unites people, because it touches all of us, and that it may be a place [0:55:00] where we can break through and once again learn how to make—do *big important* things, instead of just talking as though it's only possible to get tiny, tiny, tiny incremental change, because nothing else is politically feasible. And, of course, from my background, I know that with masses of people in motion, you can change it, [laughs] you know. So, we're working to build that movement that makes it possible to pass that bill.

JB: It seems that there are a few things that shouldn't be run as businesses: health care, education, and the military, even, should not be run as businesses. Could you speak to that issue? Or do you think that we have to go smaller steps before we get to—?

KT: I'm not thinking about small. I think we should step as big as we can. And I agree with that. I mean, I think—you know, I'm tremendously concerned about the direction of education, because I think public schools are being undermined by these charter, for-profits, you know, privatization of our education. And I was really cheering for those wonderful Chicago teachers who took that on, and who built the bonds between the community and the parents and

the needs of the children and the teachers, as all on the same side, and wanting to have, you know, a way to teach and also a way that people could earn a living by teaching, without being, you know, so kicked around. And I agree that, on the military, the subcontracting in the military is terrible, and the wars are terrible, too.

But health care, I don't know, it's one—because I'd worked, you know, with all these health care workers, [laughs] and I became aware, you know, working with nurses here in Louisville, of—the profit motive was understaffing these nursing units! So that, you know, we always said that even the most excellent nurse can be overworked to the point of incompetence. [Laughs] And it's certainly true! And, of course, if you're—you know, these hospitals at the time were owned by Humana, which is a profit-making company. And so, of course, they staffed as slim as they could, and that meant that there wasn't enough of the nurse to give to all of the patients, and patient care suffers. Of course, since then, we've—you know, nurses knew it all along, but since then, they've done some studies that show, you know, deaths and infections and all of those things rise when the nurse staffing goes down in relationship to the numbers of patients.

So, anyway, it should not be a for-profit business, and it needs to be run in the interest of patient care and of wellness and prevention. And John Conyers—I am proud [laughs]—he's introduced this bill. It was first introduced in 2003, and we've been working to build the movement around it.

I picked up on the issue around—to build union support, because I think that that's a key. We need the union support to make it happen. So, we started building the All Unions Committee for Single Payer Healthcare, H.R. 676, and the first group I got to endorse it was my CLUW chapter, and the Chicago CLUW chapter, and then we got the national CLUW to endorse it, the

Coalition of Labor Union Women. And we got friends who were in the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists, and they took it to their convention. So, with those two union groups, we began to try to get other unions. And at this point, we have gotten—these are endorsements of H.R. 676, the Conyers bill—we have 605 unions that have endorsed that bill, 43 state AFL-CIO federations, and 146 Central Labor Councils, and I think 22 of the international unions. And we're still working on it, because we're still not there. [Laughs]

The bill that was passed doesn't solve the problem of bringing care to everyone, nor of cutting the costs, and so many people can't get care because they can't pay. [1:00:00] Even many who have insurance can't pay the co-pays and deductibles, or there're barriers to the ability to get care. You know, the country has adopted this insurance company thinking that, "Our problem, why it's so costly, is because people are *using* the system." [Laughs] And it isn't the reason at all! The fact is that, you know, people in countries that pay half as much per capita as we do for healthcare, their people have more days in the hospital, more doctor's office visits, et cetera. So, the problem isn't that people are utilizing the healthcare. That's an insurance company way of thinking: If anyone uses it, they're losing money, so the job is to put barriers up so they won't go.

So, I think we're winning on that, too. I mean, we're a ways away, and there are lots of people who say, "Kay, that just isn't politically feasible. You have to set your sights on something lower." [Laughs] And I say, "But something lower won't solve the problem. And the job is to bring universal healthcare to our people." And, of course, that would do so much, in terms of the disparity between African Americans and whites in this country. If we could at least get that right!

And, you know, the fight for healthcare has the amazing ability to do that! I just became aware recently that in '65, when Medicare was passed, and all of a sudden, all these seniors had money [laughs] to pay for hospitalizations, they wrote into the law that the hospital couldn't get money if they were a segregated hospital. So, *all of a sudden*, the hospitals of the South, they're integrated because they couldn't get the money, and here was federal money that was available to them. So, I mean, we can change all kinds of things with *healthcare* if we can make certain that everybody has a right to get that.

And I'm aware of the studies. They're just awful. I looked at a study by David Satcher—you know, he was surgeon general—and someone who was here in Louisville, Adewale Troutman. And I don't know what year this study is, but the study said, I think, it was that there were 83,000 excess deaths in the African American community, deaths that would not have occurred had there been equality. And, of course, that's related to the healthcare system—other things, too, but a large part to the lack of access to healthcare. And it's just a crime.

And I'm hopeful that we'll find a way to build the movement that can change that. And that may be in the doing. [Laughs] We might stimulate, open some other doors, to end the wars and to win justice and to win back the voting rights that are now threatened. And, you know, it seems to me you have to go forward or you'll go backward, and I think we face that now, certainly within the labor union movement. And the voting rights decision is just heartbreaking, and we have to get ourselves together and refight that battle.

DC: How *do* you carry on? I mean, you personally, in terms—what are your sources of strength to keep fighting?

KT: Well, I have a husband. [Laughs] That helps a lot. You know, he's kind of amazing at *his* ability to keep going, and even stronger than I am, I think, in many ways. And I've learned

a lot from him, you know. He came from a different perspective on all of this. People laugh, you know. He hasn't lost his New York accent, [laughs] so he still sounds like he just walked out of the Bronx. And I don't know, maybe I sound like I just walked out of Paducah, so [laughs]—and we never picked up each other's. Sometimes we don't even know, you know, what word you're saying, "Could you repeat that?" [Laughs] [1:05:00] Try to get it together.

But I think lots of couples met in the South, I think, you know, during that period of time when we all kind of got mixed up and lifted up in a major way, lifted by a Movement, you know, that was happening around us—through which we *learned*. I mean, you know, I would say I gained more from the Movement than I gave, because when I walked into it, I didn't know what to give or how to give. I was just there. [Laughs] But we all learned and became better people and more knowledgeable about what others had done before us and what could be done and what needed to be done within our country. So, we've been working on it. [Laughs]

DC: One thing that I think is interesting is that, obviously, the Movement didn't have a pension plan. So, now you've got, you know, people who have devoted their lives to the Movement are at a place in their lives where, for some people that we've talked to, they're really struggling at this point.

KT: Yeah, I'm sure. Well, see, from the point at which I went to work for the Union Movement, I was—had a fairly regular [laughs] income.

DC: Pension, yeah.

KT: And pension. But I know many people are in that kind of a situation. Well, we need to expand Social Security, because, quite frankly, many people who had good pension plans, in the auto industry or the steel industry or everywhere else, it's all under threat now. I mean, those pension plans are going under. People are getting a small percentage, and Social Security isn't

adequate to do it, so—which is why we've been working on a resolution to the AFL-CIO for the upcoming convention that says, "Protect Social Security and Medicare." And the way in which you do that is that, Social Security, we need to expand the tax so that it doesn't cut off at \$100,000 or whatever that figure is, so that all wages are taxed, so it's not a regressive tax, and that capital gains and interest is taxed, as well. And that will save, certainly save Social Security and allow us to enhance the benefits; and that Medicare will be saved if we put everyone into Medicare, and that's the expanded and improved Medicare for all, which is the Single Payer Plan, H.R. 676, introduced by Congressman Conyers; that both of those can be saved and that it calls on the AFL-CIO to call for a march on Washington to promote these causes.

DC: Do you think that will happen?

KT: Well, [laughing] we got eight Central Labor Councils to send in that resolution. And I think people agree with that. I don't think we have things in motion to where people are thinking bigger, but they're going to have to start doing that, because we can't just hang on. We can't even hang on to what we have unless we start moving people to try to improve what we have.

I think there's a tremendous effort to use immigrants now, in much the way they used to use African Americans, to try to divide people, and there's an ugly anti-immigrant movement. But I think we can win people there, too, to be pro—that's part of what's in the Conyers bill is that, you know, it doesn't exclude anybody. You know, the Affordable Care Act says if you're not—if you don't have a legal document, you can't even buy insurance. So anyway, basically, we take the money that immigrant workers who are undocumented pay into Medicare and Social Security, and they never get it back because they don't—they're not able to collect on those benefits.

JB: [1:09:34]

DC: Okay.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay, we're back.

DC: I actually think we might—

JB: Can I ask one more question?

DC: Yeah, sure, sure.

JB: One of things that's most troubling is the number of African American males in prison. Do you have any perspective on that?

KT: Well, I would agree that it's very troubling. I'm not particularly knowledgeable. I know that the numbers [1:10:00] have increased tremendously, and I was happy to see that the judge in—I guess she's in New York, she's in that district—threw out the stop-and-frisk and that there is—people are raising this issue. It's very troubling that there are so many African Americans in prison, and we need to do something to change that situation. Clearly, many of them are innocent or sentenced far beyond what is deserved for whatever they committed.

And it's terrible. It's the way the nation has decided to deal with the problems of joblessness and, you know, disruption of families and lives in communities where, you know, we have huge unemployment levels, which has a terrible impact. We don't have equality in education so that we're opening the doors for a healthier life. And it's a terrible problem. I wish I knew exactly what we could do. [Laughs] I'm ready to work on it, because I think it really is a huge problem.

DC: Well, this has been a remarkable interview, I think, especially underlining the centrality of economic justice to the Movement. I want to ask you if there's something I didn't

ask or I should have asked, or anything that you'd like to add at this point. Any questions you were expecting that I didn't ask?

KT: No, I appreciate the opportunity to talk about this. I mean, I haven't thought about many of these things for a very long time. But I'm glad you're doing this, and I'm sure you have other people too—who played much more prominent roles, you know. I'm just a little piece of it.

DC: But that, I mean, I think that was—that *is* something that's really come out in the project strongly, is what a movement is made of, right, are all the little—the people doing their pieces and how it's all—they all connect. Great. Thank you.

JB: Yes, thank you. That was very good.

DC: Thanks so much.

KT: Well, thank you.

DC: Perfect.

JB: I hope we weren't too threatening. [Laughter]

KT: [Laughs] Well, no, I had fun! I don't know whether, you know, I probably should have thought more about—

[Recording ends at 1:12:48]

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Sally C. Council