

Civil Rights History Project
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Interviewee: Virginia Simms George
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Location: Northborough Free Library, Northborough, Massachusetts
Interviewer: Emilye Crosby
Videographer: John Bishop
Length: 73:12 minutes

Unidentified Announcer: From the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.

Emilye Crosby: Ready to go?

John Bishop: Yeah, we're rolling.

Emilye Crosby: I'm Emilye Crosby of the Southern Oral History Program, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and I'm conducting this oral history as part of the Civil Rights History Project, which is sponsored by the Smithsonian Institution's African American—I'm sorry, National Museum of African American History and Culture and the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress. Today is August twenty-fourth?

Virginia George: Yes.

Emilye Crosby: 2013.

Virginia George: Yeah.

Emilye Crosby: And we're in the Northborough Free Library. And I'm here with Mrs. Virginia Simms George, her husband Frederick George, and John Bishop, who is videotaping, doing the videography. Thank you for joining us.

Virginia George: Thank you.

Emilye Crosby: I was wondering if you could tell me about your family and where you're from growing up.

Virginia George: I'm actually from Virginia. And when I say that, everybody, you know, is quick to say, "Oh, you're named after the state." But my grandmother was named Virginia, and my father indicated I was named after my grandmother, who probably was named [laughs] after the state.

EC: [Laughs]

VG: But I was born in Newport News, Virginia, which is on the Tidewater, and I have one brother, who is thirteen months older than I am. And my father and mother separated when I was a very young child, and so, I was raised by my father, my brother and I, for the most part.

So, I went to school in Newport News. And I think since this is talking partly about the Civil Rights Movement, I'll just share when I was coming up, Newport News was very much segregated. And I grew up just in town. And my father remarried, and after he remarried, they bought a home, and we moved out to the suburbs.

And when we moved to the suburbs, what was happening, was all the white people were leaving that area and going further out where they would not be living with blacks. There were two people, I think, still there when we moved, and she was our next-door neighbor. And she happened to say to my father that, "Had I known, you know, that you guys were such good

people, I never would have sold my home.” But that was my first real experience with the idea that there was a difference.

And then, going up to visit my aunt, who still lived on the street where I was born and grew up, I actually took a bus, which was the first time I’d ever ridden a bus in town. And I was probably about twelve and I didn’t know really the etiquette of the bus. So, I got on, and there was a seat, you know, like this way, and then the rest of the seats go—and I sat there. And there was a white lady next to me, and I wasn’t sure—I didn’t know I shouldn’t have sat next to her. She jumped up, she moved to the other side, and she started to look at me, scowling and frowning. And I felt so bad.

And I remember going home and talking to my father. And that’s when my father talked to me a little bit about race and the experiences. And in his mind, the thing to make a difference was education. And my father would always say, you know, “You need to get your education, because if you get it up here, no one can take it from you.” That was one of the first things.

Then, my brother had lived in Germany for about five years, and he came home. And he and my father went to a hardware store, and a white clerk came up and said, “What can I do for you boys?” And I think my brother, having lived in Germany for such a long period of time, you know, realized, that really wasn’t right. And I remember him telling us that he said, you know, “This is my father. He’s no boy,” and he left. But in Virginia, where I grew, they use the words “boys” and “girls” as a means of demeaning black people.

So, I had decided that I wanted to be a lawyer and I was going to, you know, fight for the civil rights of all African American people. I graduated from high school and I—we didn’t have counselors, [0:05:00] you know, that really gave the kind of advice that our children get today. So, I ended up going to Virginia Union University. And, actually, my father had gone there for a

year. And I think the dorm that I stayed in used to be a man's dorm, and it really was—had turned into a woman's dorm. So, I went there not really—thinking I was going to be a lawyer and majoring in history, and it was straight history because the intent was to go to law school somewhere somehow. So, that's a little bit about me.

EC: Can I ask a few follow-up questions?

VG: Sure.

EC: So, what kind of work did your father do?

VG: My father was a postman.

EC: Okay. And so, you said that when he remarried and bought the house and moved out to the more suburban area—

VG: Um-hmm.

EC: So, was this in the fifties probably?

VG: Yes, yes.

EC: And this is when there's that sort of transition with whites moving out.

VG: Moving out, and blacks moving out to their area.

EC: So, the neighbor lived there long enough to get a sense of your family, but had already sold her house?

VG: Had already sold her house, and it was too late to turn around, you know. But she was saying, "If I had known, I wouldn't have," kind of thing.

EC: That's really sort of interesting, you know, that she would—not that—it would be true, but just that she would have that thought and articulate it in that era.

VG: Yeah. Never will forget that, you know, because the neighborhood that we moved in was, as I said, was transitioning. There were a couple of doctors, African American doctors,

business people, and everything like that. But, you know, to the white people, it was like, “They’re black!” You know, “We can’t mingle. We can’t live together.” And so, they sold their homes and they left.

EC: They didn’t really consider the class issues at all.

VG: Or that we were people, you know.

EC: Right.

VG: And that probably nice people, as we turned out, you know, to be. But, you know, my father was a postman. He was very active in organizations and very much encouraged us to go and get educated.

EC: So, at this point in Virginia—well, let me actually back up. So, do you remember things like the *Brown* decision or the Little Rock integration or anything?

VG: Um-hmm, yeah. Oh, yeah. Saw it all on TV, you know. And it was interesting and something that—just, you know, never thought about, you know, because—so, our schools were black. We had—our neighborhoods were black when I was a little kid. There was a store—I remember Jefferson Avenue was a busy street, and on that [street] there was a department store run by white people. And that’s where we would go and we would shop. But we had our own, you know, like restaurants or places to go. It was totally separated, so you didn’t really come in contact with white people.

But my father, being a postman, worked on a route that was white, and he enjoyed it. He’d come home Christmas with these big bags of presents, because all the people really loved and respected him, and they remembered him at Christmas. But, yeah, it was—during that time, you know, we expected to go to a black school. We had black teachers. We had no white

teachers, you know. And everybody—the principal, the counselors, the teachers—everything was black.

EC: It's interesting, too, because Virginia at that time—probably, must have been while you were in school because of the timing—you know, was closing schools. The Prince Edward County schools, I think, that were part of the *Brown* decisions, that when they were forced to integrate, you know, Virginia was one of the states leading the way in closing black schools rather than, or closing *public* schools rather than integrating.

VG: Okay.

EC: Now, that only happened in a couple communities.

VG: Right, that's what I was going to say. So, in our community, at the time, it was still—you know. So, I was born in Newport News, next to us is Hampton, and then, you had Warwick. What started to happen was that Newport News—and it probably had something to do with voting and representation and everything like that—they began to expand Newport News over toward Warwick. So, that probably was taking into consideration that a lot of white people had moved out of the town, and they were in Warwick. And so, then the boundaries were moved, so that you could keep it, but, you know, it was a way of life for us.

EC: So, in Newport News, were African Americans [0:10:00] able to register and vote at that time?

VG: Yeah, they were, we were.

EC: So, in some ways it's a—you know, I know different states have different sort of cultures in different parts of the state.

VG: So, the thing to also remember is Newport News is—had the Newport News ship building. So, they had this humongous business because they built these very—three-city-blocks-

long ships and everything. So, you had, you know, that industry there, plus you had Air Force, Army, Navy, Merchant Marines, you name it. So, the first of the month, everybody—these ships, these sailors, and everybody—would hit the town. So, needless to say, I didn't go out!

EC: [Laughs]

VG: I had to be chaperoned! And the worst chaperone of all was my brother!

EC: I bet!

VG: You know, I couldn't go out unless I went with my brother or with my neighbor and friend, because her mother would take us to places and bring us back. So, you had that happening in town at the same time.

EC: I was going to say, so, there's, in some ways, there's this federal influence, probably.

VG: Somewhat, somewhat.

EC: And there's a strong enough African American community to have a self-contained business [11:17].

VG: Right, right. And our churches, of course, were black. Everything: funeral homes, churches, drugstores. Because one of my first jobs, or not my first, but one of the jobs I had was I worked as a soda jerk, clerk, in a drugstore. And the person, one of the owners of the drugstore's son was my brother's best friend and lived in the block just ahead of us, plus another doctor, so Dr. Jones and Dr. Tucker owned the drugstore. And so, of course, all of us blacks came to the same place to get our prescriptions, to have sundaes, or buy the things that we needed that they carried.

EC: Um-hmm. So, it sounds like it must have been, in many ways, a good community to grow up in.

VG: I think so. You know, I think, and sometimes I share with Fred, I was a debutante and all like that, because we had our own society. And being a debutante meant that you didn't date, or you had not dated, and everything like that, and you were selected to be presented. And [laughs] I know that's foreign to people today, but—because I wasn't able to go, you know, out and to date. I could not date until I was sixteen. And when I was sixteen, I was presented to society where you had, you know, meetings, you had practice and everything, and there was a debutante cotillion, where you wore a white dress, gloves, pearls, pearl earrings, and you danced with your father.

EC: Did you enjoy that?

VG: Oh, loved it! Loved it! I remember, actually, my stepmother made my dress, and it was so big. My uncle—my dad wasn't driving at that time, and so, my uncle had a big old Cadillac. And I remember sitting in the backseat, and my dress took the whole seat, you know, and everything like that. So, it was fun, you know.

EC: Yeah.

VG: When I think of it, you know, I did. I really feel that I had a lot of great experiences. Had a lot of great people who influenced me and helped me. One of my very best friends, I babysat for her. Her name was Marian Bends, and her husband was the first black urologist in Virginia. And I used to babysit for her, and she was also encouraging me to go to school and helped to get my wardrobe and helped me to save, and everything like that. And the same for the next-door neighbor, so I felt that I had a lot of support.

JB: Emilye, I'm going to close—

EC: Wonderful.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're back.

EC: Okay. You mentioned that incident on the bus and deciding that you wanted to be a lawyer. Were those connected? I mean, was it—?

VG: [Sighs] You know, I don't know. I just remember that incident had a real impact on me, because, you know, I just got on the bus. I hadn't done anything to her. I didn't even know who she was, probably would never see her again. But it began to help me to understand that there was a difference in me, because I was black, and she was white.

EC: Yeah.

VG: And that's when you began to know that there are differences. And I remember my father would come home and tell me about some of his people he, you know, carried mail to, their daughters were getting married, you know, going to high school, getting married. And that was the thing [0:15:00] that they did, and he did not want me to do that. He wanted me to go to school, because he wanted me to be better, wanted me to better my life, have an opportunity, I guess, to better my life. So, I couldn't say.

I guess the other thing, there was a lawyer. Her name was Marian L. Poe, and she was the first African American female lawyer that I ever knew or saw. And I just thought she was marvelous and wonderful, and I wanted to be like Attorney Poe, P-O-E, Poe.

EC: How did you see—I mean, how did you know her?

VG: She was at church. She went to our church, and I just knew her from church. I went to school with her grandkids, probably.

EC: Did you remember whether you and, you know, other children in the community or at church, whether there were discussions of the NAACP or events like the Montgomery bus boycott or things like that?

VG: No, I can't remember.

EC: Yeah. And so, when did—what year did you start college?

VG: 1959.

EC: 1959, so you were there in Fall '59?

VG: Fall '59, it was my first semester.

EC: What was that like?

VG: [Laughs] It was a lot of fun. It was my first time away from home and living on my own. And I remember I got in a little trouble, because at Virginia Union, it was very—it was a Baptist school, and you just couldn't do things. And I remember when you wanted to go out, you were supposed to ask and I can remember—and you were supposed to go with another student and everything. And I can remember going downtown to Richmond by myself, without checking out, without asking.

And I met Marise Ellison, who was one of the people who was arrested. You may have seen her picture. Marise Ellison and Patricia Washington, well, the two of them were roommates, and they were diagonally across the hall. And we used to—they used to get in trouble. And I was maybe grounded because of them, but we hung together and we had a lot of fun, you know, doing crazy things. Like, I remember one time Marise and Pat were chasing each other around the dorm or something. And a dorm lady thought we were making too much noise and came in and grounded us, you know, because I was sitting on the bed, laughing, you know.

EC: [Laughs] [17:28] laughing aloud.

VG: Well, they were being bad, and I was part of it because I was supporting them.

EC: [Laughs] Yeah.

VG: And they were supposed to be cleaning the room, because we were going away for one of the holidays or something, and they weren't getting it done, and all like that. But I really enjoyed the first year, because the dorm had a basement, and you could go down in basement, they'd have dances. So, even though if we were grounded, we'd sneak down there anyway, you know, like take a—because it was a wash area, as well, so we'd take a blouse or something like we were going to wash clothes, and go in and dance, and then come back. [Laughs]

EC: [Laughs]

VG: Or we'd turn the clock back, [laughs] so that when we went, we were in before curfew. So, these are things Fred doesn't know about me, that we did little devilish things. And one thing I remember, and I never told my father, but I remember asking my father if I could go to the Penn Relays. And he said yes, and I didn't tell him how I was going, and he didn't ask. So, we actually went in a car. Marise, Pat, and myself went with some guy to Philadelphia to the Penn Relays. Well, Pat was from there, from outside of Philly in a place called Norristown. And so, we were all going to stay at Pat's house, and we had an opportunity to meet her parents. And it was really nice, formed a relationship. As a matter of fact, I think the next year I went to Philadelphia and I stayed with Pat and I worked during the summer before going back to school.

EC: So, when you all would sneak off to downtown Richmond without signing out, was that because you were going to do something that you couldn't sign out for, or just resisting those regulations?

VG: Well, probably a little bit of both, but one time we went down there. So, I have to tell you, Pat could pass for white.

EC: Okay.

VG: And none of us could understand. Her parents looked white, and her mother and her father, they really looked white, and Pat looked white. So, we went to Richmond, and I don't remember when this was. We went to Richmond, and she went into a barbershop, a white barbershop. We waited outside. She went in there and got her hair cut.

EC: [Laughs]

VG: And they didn't know she was black, because she looked white and all.

EC: And she's doing that just because of the segregation.

VG: Because of the segregation and things like that. We thought it was funny, you know. So, we went with her and waited. And she got her hair cut, and we came out and said, "Oh, they don't know," [0:20:00] you know. [Laughs]

EC: [Laughs] It was a sort of means of resistance.

VG: Yeah. And then, and so Marise, Pat, and I, you know, we hung together and we did things together. And consequently, when they were talking about the sit-ins, the three of us, you know, banded together, of course, and we were going. And all three of us got arrested.

EC: Do you remember how you felt when you first heard—or do you remember how you first heard about the sit-ins?

VG: Well, they were going all around. I mean, you had, I think it was in North Carolina, with the Woolworth's.

EC: Um-hmm.

VG: You had—heard about them. And then, people were actually coming to the campuses, talking about getting involved. I believe Martin Luther King had come. We had two people who were ministers, Frank Pinkston and Charles Sherrod. You probably remember Sherrod's wife. Remember her?

EC: Oh yes, um-hmm.

VG: Okay. But Charles—the two, Charles and Frank, sort of led, pulled us together. And we started to talk about it. We had meetings. We started to talk about it and strategize what we would do in Richmond.

EC: Um-hmm. Can you describe Charles Sherrod and Frank Prince—I'm blanking—Pinkston?

VG: Oh, it's been so long ago. I remember Frank, I remember wore glasses, he was a minister and was very nice. Both of them were very nice, very articulate, and great leaders.

EC: Um-hmm.

VG: Great leaders.

EC: So, they were really the kind of driving force?

VG: They were the driving force and they were the ones that helped us to understand that they probably would be taken, because it was obvious that they were our leaders, and that—one go down, the other one would stand up.

EC: Okay.

VG: So, it wasn't a matter of us falling apart, because the two of them had been arrested.

EC: So, they prepared you for what would happen if they weren't there to make decisions?

VG: They prepared us for what would happen. We had other people that were working with us, and everything, and they talked to us about the need for nonviolence, the need to be calm, the need not to let people get to us, because certainly there would be that happening to us. And it did. It did.

EC: Were you afraid?

VG: I wasn't afraid. I was so excited and I was so proud. And the interesting thing is I never talked about it. This is—I never—I mean, I don't even know when I finally told Fred. I might have told him early on in our relationship. But I remember my young nephew coming, and he was telling all his friends Aunt Jenny had been arrested and all. But I never, never, ever talked about it. It was just something that I had done because I felt it needed to be done, because I just felt that black people were treated so unfairly. So, I was excited, you know. I was excited.

When I was shocked was after I got out of jail and everything, and that's a different story, but I came home and I was looking at the nightly news and I saw myself. I saw them lead me out of the store. I remember them putting me in a paddy—in a squad car, I guess, until the paddy wagon came, and then lead me from there and put me into a paddy wagon. And I said, "Oh, my God, I better call my father. He may see the news." Okay, and that's when I realized, you know, I had—I needed to connect.

EC: Yeah, so it seemed more serious when you actually saw yourself being arrested?

VG: It seemed, when I saw that, it was real. It happened, and it was documented that it had happened, and I needed to let my dad know.

EC: Yeah.

JB: I'm going—

[Recording stops and then resumes]

EC: ..comfortable?

VG: Is it okay?

EC: Oh, it's wonderful.

JB: We're back.

EC: Can you—were you arrested on the first sit-in you participated in? Or did you participate—was there one or two before that?

VG: It was just one.

EC: Okay.

VG: There was one. We walked, we marched. And we marched downtown, and then we went back. We went to this department store called Thalhimers. Thalhimers is very much like Macy's, was our Macy's, you know. And the interesting thing about that store was we could shop there, but that was it. We could go there. We could spend our money. If we wanted something to eat, we had to go to the basement, and they had a stand. You know those Orange Julius stands where you could go? That's what we had to do, and we spent as much money as anyone else would and did spend.

But there was the Rose Room, [0:25:00] the Richmond Room—I always called it the Rose Room—where we were not allowed. Black folks couldn't go in there. And so, that was our target.

EC: And so, was that something you had experienced? You had been down there and used that store before?

VG: Oh, yeah, I'd been to the store. I'd been down to the counter, the orange juice, getting a hot dog and a soda, or something like that. And then, you know, you ask the question, well, "Our money? Isn't our money good?" You know, "Our money spends. We purchase, we support the store, and yet, we can't, you know, enjoy the Richmond Room because of our color?"

EC: Yeah.

VG: You know, and that's when we just said—you know, that's when those of us—you know, we thought about it and said, "Hey, that can't be, not today. We need to change. Times need to change."

EC: Were there students that tried to talk you out of it?

VG: No, no, not at all. The students, the faculty, nobody said anything derogatory. We just got a *lot* of support.

EC: Did you—I know this was true of students at some schools, but did you worry about being put out of school?

VG: No.

EC: No.

VG: Not at all. Had all—we had support. We had full support.

EC: Can you describe the support?

VG: Well, there was never—I never remember anyone talking to us about what we did, that it was wrong, or that we shouldn't have done it. We didn't have any sanctions. We were able to go to school, continue to go to school. We were very much sought after. We went to churches at night to see people. People greeted us with support. They had dinners, you know, programs, they introduced us. It was just like, "You guys did a *wonderful* thing, and we really value and think, you know, that you're very special."

EC: Well, that's wonderful. You got a lot of support.

VG: And we had lawyers that bailed us out of jail and would be with us in some of the meetings that we went to.

EC: Um-hmm. After that first sit-in and you were arrested, did the sit-ins continue in Richmond, or were things sort of on hold?

VG: I can't remember. I think—I can't actually remember. I know the next step was we were going to Mississippi.

EC: Okay.

VG: We were going to have some buses and going to Mississippi. I don't know how many students went. I know that's when my father put his foot down. He says, "No. You will not go. You need to stay and you need to focus on getting your education. I don't want you dead." He feared for my life. And so, of course, I listened.

EC: Um-hmm. Did you feel—did you want to go?

VG: Oh, I was ready to go! At that time, I think what had happened—if I had gone to Mississippi, I probably would have been either dead or still doing stuff and maybe, you know—I don't know. My life may have taken a different turn.

EC: Yeah.

VG: But as it was, I stayed in school. And I don't really remember, Emilye, what happened. Because at that time we were busy, those of us who got arrested, because we had to go to court, we had to meet with the lawyers, we were going throughout the city. So, I don't even remember the other stuff that was going on.

I just remember that when I got arrested, I had long fingernails and they had trouble fingerprinting me. So, I was arrested, I was taken to jail, and they were trying to fingerprint me, and they had difficulty fingerprinting me. And by the time they finished, my lawyer was there to bail me out. It was—by then—it was very tiring. I remember being very tired, you know, because it had been a long day. We had walked to the city, walked to the store. We had walked and stood in line. We had been pulled out, arrested. We were—it was—I just remember it was like dark, after six.

And I remember walking with my lawyer, whom I don't remember the name or anything now, and a white man stood in front of me, and was big and spit at me and said something, and the lawyer just, you know, like guided me out. But at that time, [laughing] I think I had lost all of my nonviolence and I was ready to do battle, you know!

EC: [Laughs]

VG: Because I guess I was—I've always been a little militant and I was ready to take him on.

EC: Yeah.

VG: But I didn't.

EC: But your lawyer moved you on.

VG: But we had to move on and we could not engage. That was the thing that was emphasized more than anything, that we had to be peaceful, we had to be respectful, and that went a long ways. [0:30:00]

EC: Did your worry that you might have trouble doing that?

VG: No, I didn't worry. Only at that one point, because I think part of it was, I was by myself at that time, because we had gotten separated. I didn't know what had happened to my friends or anyone. I was—I don't even remember anyone being with me but this lawyer whom I did know. But there were a group of people who volunteered their time and their services to help us, and so we didn't spend like nights or something like that in jail. Like I said, I never saw a cell.

EC: Did you—did you feel good when you went and sat in that place that you had been excluded from?

VG: I never went.

EC: Oh, you didn't?

VG: But I worked there.

EC: Oh, you—[laughs]

VG: [Laughs] When I graduated from college and I taught. Another friend of mine, we were teachers, you know, and we had student loans. It was Christmas holidays, and they were hiring people. So, we went down and we worked. I remember I sold books. I worked in the book department [laughs] and I don't *ever* remember going to the Richmond Room!

EC: Yeah? It was like—

VG: No, never remember that. I mean—

EC: You'd been excluded. You didn't want to—

VG: I didn't want to be a part—it never even crossed my mind, you know.

EC: Yeah.

VG: It was like the store was desegregated. That's what we wanted, you know, and that's what we had gotten.

EC: So, as long as you *had* access, you didn't really care whether you went or not?

[Laughs]

VG: Didn't really care. Didn't really care. Didn't make any difference, you know. But people who *wanted* to, which was important, who wanted to do that had the opportunity to do that, you know.

EC: Do you remember whether they integrated before the Civil Rights Act?

VG: I don't remember.

EC: Yeah.

VG: You know, there's a lot of this, after I graduated, I taught at Maggie Walker, which was right down the street from Virginia Union. I did my student teaching there in history. And then, from doing my student teaching, I actually got hired. And so, I came out of school and I taught. And I taught for, I think, three years. And I realized that I was so inexperienced from *life*, not so much—the teaching I could do, but the students were taller than I am. [Laughs] They were more worldly than I was, and everything like that.

EC: [Laughs]

VG: Then I decided I needed to have more because, remember, I couldn't go out when I was a child. So, I went to school, came home, or went to something, a function or baseball or game, with my brother. So, I didn't have the experience, knew nothing, okay? And, that's when I decided I would go—I wanted to get a master's. I wanted to become a guidance counselor to be able to help students and to be better. And that's when I went to the University of Maryland to get my master's. And while there, I got a fellowship, so I ended up staying not one but two years. And I never went back to Richmond after that.

EC: Yeah, yeah. So, when you called your father after you saw it on TV—?

VG: I don't think he had seen it yet. But my father was a gentle man, and he was—my dad was just—he was the best! And, you know, he said, I remember him, “Are you okay?” I said, “Yep, Dad, I'm okay.” He says, “Just as long as you're okay, that's fine. You need me, you call me!”

EC: That must have felt good.

VG: That felt good, you know. But that's the way he was all the time, you know.

EC: Was your brother in Germany, I mean, in the service by then?

VG: He was in the service by then, so he was not there, yeah.

EC: He wasn't there to keep you off the streets. [Laughs]

VG: No, off the streets, or even to get after me or say anything. But, yeah.

EC: You know, I know this happened at some schools, but was there any protest or discussion at Virginia Union about the restrictions on students at that time, about signing out or anything like that?

VG: No, no. We accepted it.

EC: Yeah.

VG: It was a small black Baptist school, so we had to go—Sunday night we had to go to BPU, or whatever that is, you know, some kind of church services at night. That was part of what we did, you know. And we accepted that as a part of coming to school there, because those were the restrictions. And if you didn't do it, it would affect your grades and things like that. So, to my knowledge, you know, we just never—

EC: So, you just resisted a little bit by not signing out—

VG: We did it our own way! [Laughs]

EC: But not any kind of open confrontation?

VG: [Laughing] We did it our own way. We—you know, there were ways of getting around stuff, and I think we did, you know, without protesting everything, you know.

EC: Yeah. One of the things I'm interested in, and I've been studying a little bit is, with the sit-in movement, is the participation of men and women, you know.

VG: Um-hmm.

EC: And I was wondering if you thought about that at all, or if there were any discussions about, you know, whether it was safe for women?

VG: No, I don't remember it.

EC: Or I shouldn't do this because—?

VG: No.

EC: No? You don't remember any of that at all?

VG: Don't remember any of that. It was just, you know, it was a group of students who decided that this was something they wanted to do. [0:35:00] We didn't think about gender. We didn't think about grade or age. At that time, I think I had just—I was eighteen when I went to school. I think I had just turned nineteen in December, and the sit-in was in February. So, we were—some of us were young, some of us, you know, just didn't even know the city. I don't even know if we all—we didn't know the impact that we had or that we would have! So, that came as a big surprise.

You know, to me, it was, hey, we wanted to desegregate Richmond. We wanted to stop having to sit in the back of the bus. We wanted to be able to eat, to go where we wanted to go, do what we wanted to do. And that was all that was important, you know. We wanted Pat to be able to go get her hair cut anywhere she wanted to go, you know.

EC: Right.

VG: And so, that was all we were thinking, you know. Nothing else mattered.

EC: Yeah. And did you have a pretty good idea before you were arrested that—did you know the lawyers were going to support you and be there to get you out?

VG: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

EC: So, you didn't have to worry about like staying in jail?

VG: Didn't worry about it. Didn't worry about—all we had to do—our task was to go down, was to picket and to try to desegregate that room. That was our task and that's all we focused on. And we had the support, you know, financially—everything.

EC: Yeah.

VG: Yeah.

EC: And I don't know if you would—so, this happened in, you know, February of 1960.

VG: Yeah.

EC: And I know in April is when Ms. Ella Baker called a meeting of student leaders from the sit-ins, and that was at Raleigh, [Shaw] University, and Charles Sherrod was one of the people who went to that. Were you aware of that at the time?

VG: No.

EC: Or was that sort of just a kind of separate sort of thing?

VG: That was just a separate—yeah. I would say that what happened at Virginia Union was just one incident.

EC: Yeah.

VG: Just one incident.

EC: Very focused on that.

VG: Was focused on that, as I remember, but that's like fifty years ago, okay?

EC: I know. [Laughs]

VG: So, to the best of my memory, that's all we did. We focused on—that was our task. That was what we wanted to do. Those of us who participated at that point—some people probably went on and continued to do sit-ins at other places and everything like that. But my father refocused me. [Laughs] Okay?

EC: [Laughs] So, after that first one, it was like, “Okay—”

VG: “Okay, you did—you had—you did it. You wanted to do that. You did that. Now, you get back into the swing of things and get your education.”

EC: Yeah. Did you ever consider pursuing the law degree, or did you decide you had other interests?

VG: A number of times. A number of times. I remember—I think I finally just realized that it would never be. I remember that at one point I thought about taking the LSAT. This is as an adult, because once I got my master's, I actually went to work for a private company. And it was in Washington, D.C., and it was an inner-city plant. And my role was to try to get—it was black people—trying to get them off the welfare rolls, off drugs, and out of jail. [Laughs] So, I was a counselor and I had—whatever needed to be done, that's what I did. So, for years—I worked there, I want to say probably two years, before moving to Minnesota.

EC: So, was this like the late sixties or early seventies?

VG: It was the late sixties.

EC: Yeah. And did you enjoy that work?

VG: I did.

EC: Yeah.

VG: I did, I did. I mean, I think part of—I always had—I always want to help, wanted to help people. I wanted to see people survive and to do better. You know, so it was like, you know, getting someone out of jail, getting them on a path to learning a trade, was really a positive thing for me to do. There were people who were single moms who lived in housing, and they couldn't get the landlord to fix the stove or something like that. It was called a MA4 and MA5 Contract. They were federal contracts that this company had. And the goal, as I said, was to get the people who were unemployable employed and to keep them employed. So, I worked there, with that company for over seventeen-and-a-half years, but I moved from Washington to Minnesota, then

back to Washington, and then to California, then to Minnesota, and that's where I was before I came to Massachusetts.

EC: Did you see any connections between that work and the Civil Rights Movement?

VG: When you think about it, I think [0:40:00] civil rights was about helping, you know, helping people, helping people to get their rights, to be able to vote, to be able to spend their money where they wanted to be, helping people to become good citizens, where they can become viable, take care of themselves, own homes—yeah, I did.

EC: Yeah.

VG: And that's how I've seen my life. I've been a mentor. We were talking about my husband, who is a trustee at his school. We shared a lot, but I didn't share this, that I went with him a couple of times, and I would say to the lady at the reception, "Where's the nearest store, you know, like a T.J. Maxx?" She says, "Oh," she says, "That's in Rochester or Buffalo." I said, "Okay," and Rochester is like sixty miles. [Laughs] So, I took the keys and went to Rochester, and I did it for like about three or four times.

And then, one time—Fred would have things he had to do at night. They'd be in meetings, like from eight to five. They'd come home, five-thirty, they'd need to change their clothes. A bus was going to pick us up and take us to a reception or a dinner, right? I slid in at six o'clock one night.

EC: [Laughs]

VG: [Laughs] And Fred simply said to me, "Jen, you're going to need to find something else to keep you busy." And I said, "Okay," and I got the message. So, sometimes I present training at the school. I've done resumé counseling with students and I've also been a mentor.

EC: And this is at Alfred University?

VG: This is at Alfred University. And I actually was appointed to the leadership advisory board.

EC: I was going to say you've gotten an award from them recently, right, for your work with the university?

VG: I was named an honorary alumni.

EC: Okay.

VG: That was about two years ago, I think, two or three.

EC: Yeah. And did you—was part of that work with the Women's Center or something at Alfred? Is that right?

VG: It was with the Women's Center. That's the—so, what happened was the Women's Center, Leadership Center, and then there was another part that was a leadership center. One of the sponsors of the Women's Leadership Center died in a tragic accident. And we renamed the center the Judson's Leadership Center, and they consolidated part of the women's program with the leadership program. And I still am active with that. In fact, we were talking, I have a meeting in a couple of weeks back there. And that's where I, you know, I've mentored the students, and October, I'll be doing a training there, as well.

EC: Can you tell me what you enjoy about that?

VG: [Sighs] Again, it's that helping people and sharing. I really, you know, I like being able to give back, you know, because I feel that so many people gave to me. When I was that young person in that city where the sailors and everybody, there were people who helped me to move on and to move out and supported me to go on to do what I've done so far.

EC: Um-hmm.

VG: And so, that's what I really enjoy, giving back, you know.

EC: Yeah, yeah. You said earlier when we were talking, and maybe even on tape, but that you haven't talked about being part of the sit-ins and the Civil Rights Movement.

VG: I never talked about it, never, never talked about it. The first time that it came up was two years ago, I think it was, when they had the fiftieth anniversary, and somebody started calling me, saying, "You have to come. You should come," and all about that. And I sort of said, "Yeah, okay," and all. And finally, I think Fred said, "Jen, you should go." His job was so that he could not go at that time, but he said, "You should go." And my niece lives in Richmond, and my oldest nephew, they came to see me and they were really impressed.

EC: Yeah.

VG: And when I went, I was—I didn't realize the effect that we had had. We were given *credit*, I couldn't believe it, credit for desegregating Richmond, Virginia, the city?! I didn't know that!

EC: Yeah.

VG: Did not know that! And I go to campus, and here's a plaque, and there's my name! You know, I'm saying, "Oh, my God! This is just from what we did that many years ago?" Had no idea, Emilye! No idea!

EC: So, it gave you a different idea of—?

VG: Different perspective, but I still haven't shared it with a lot of people. And I don't know why. Maybe because I don't want people to know I'm so old. [Laughs]

EC: [Laughs]

VG: [Laughs] Maybe it's the vain-ness of me, you know.

EC: Let me let you in on a secret: A lot of people can't do math. [Laughs]

VG: [Laughs] Good point, good point. [0:45:00]

EC: [Laughs] So, you can tell them!

VG: [Laughs] I can tell them, you know, because I haven't—like, at one point—

EC: They'll just think you're a child prodigy.

VG: I was a child prodigy. And at one point, I thought about inviting some people to this, and then I said, "Uh, I don't know. I'm going to try to get through it myself." And then, I started thinking one time, "Well, what do I have to really say?" You know, I mean, we did it because we wanted to—that's it!

EC: Yeah. Well, I know you said that you were interested in history, you majored in it and you—

VG: Yeah, majored in it, taught it.

EC: You taught it and continue to have an interest in it.

VG: Yeah.

EC: And, you know—and then, I don't know, here you are. You're somebody who has had a impact. I mean, everybody has some sort of impact on history, but yours is one that's a little bit more visible as part of the sit-in.

VG: Yeah. And my job doesn't know it. Nobody at my work knows this.

EC: So, do you think at all about sharing it, or that it might be important?

VG: I don't know. You know, I go back to that age thing. [46:02] "Oh, you were back then," you know? [Laughs]

EC: [Laughs] Back in the day, right?

VG: [Laughs] Back in the day! So, I don't know. And then, I don't why. It's just—it's just, you know, like washing your face, cleaning your teeth. This is something that I did. I was very young. It was something very important to me, very meaningful for me. I have no regrets in

doing it. But I'm not a person who brags or talk about any accomplishments or anything. I'd rather talk about the accomplishments of my husband, whom I think has, you know, done a great job and is a very, very brilliant man that I enjoy, and my son. Those are the things that I, you know, share and have them have the limelight, you know. I guess a little bit of South is still in me.

EC: You know, it's interesting to hear you say that, because, of course, you know, I teach.

VG: Yeah.

EC: And for my students, one of the things that seems to be most meaningful for them is to talk to people who did something when they were the same age.

VG: Yeah, probably, yeah.

EC: And they say, "Oh, wow! Then it makes me think I *can* do something, you know, and I'm not—"

VG: Yeah. probably, yeah.

EC: You know, there's all these things going on in the world, and sometimes they feel overwhelmed. And so, if you ever talk to the students at Alfred—

VG: Maybe share.

EC: I'd be interested to hear.

VG: I might. I think now—and so there are so many other things that I'm involved in that I am with students. One of the women's organizations that I participate in out of Springfield, we have young girls that we work —excuse me— that we work with to try to be, you know, someone considered she-oes to these young girls, who maybe not have others, that maybe sometimes I might share. And I might even share it with some of the members of my

organization, because what it tells us is that, you know, you can have an impact, you know, and it's important to share your skills and your knowledge and everything that you've learned and acquired and all.

EC: Um-hmm. Can you talk about that?

JB: I'm going to stop.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: [48:10] We're back.

EC: Can you tell me a little bit about that organization and the work?

VG: So, this organization is called the Links, L-I-N-K-S, Incorporated. It's a national women's organization made up predominantly of African American women. It started in Philadelphia a hundred years ago, not a hundred years ago, many years ago, because—for social and friendship. And now, we have spread all out; we're international, as well as national.

And we have six facets that we operate under. You know, there's health and wellness, the arts, national trends and services, international trends and services, I think I left one out—youth, services to youth. And so, what our programs center around those facets and this group that I'm in is out of Springfield. So, what we've done is we've assessed the community of Springfield, which has a lot of needs, and we've started to try to mentor young girls. And some of them are parents that have no parenting skills, don't know how to interface with the schools.

We've also started to support a house that—it's called the Village. It's women who have been incarcerated and on drugs. And so, what we're doing—the organization is made up of people such as myself. I'm an executive counselor, trained executive counselor, human resources, I know about job-searching and those things, that we take our skills and we present workshops, counseling [0:50:00] and tutoring and coaching these women to successfully

overcome their addictions, become better parents, get jobs, get their own homes. And so, we meet in Springfield and that surrounding area monthly, and we have projects that we work, as well.

EC: How far is Springfield from here?

VG: About fifty miles, a little less than fifty miles.

EC: And so, have they—you know, are you seeing progress?

VG: We've seen a lot of progress. We've supported some of the young girls who have—so, let me back up. A number of the people in there are lawyers. We have one lady who's a very good friend of mine who's a Superior Court judge. And we have a writer. We have different people. And we've actually stuck with some of these young ladies and seen them graduate from high school, go on to college. And we keep in touch with some of them.

We also have an English—I believe she teaches English at UMass-Amherst, linguist, linguistics, and she's actually sort of mentoring a young lady who graduated from high school and has gone on to UMass. So, she's there with her and sort of, you know, continuing to work with her. So, we've seen progress. We've done some things in the city. We haven't seen as much—it's just a lot of work that needs to be done there.

EC: That must be rewarding.

VG: It is, it is.

EC: Is it hard to keep up with that and your work?

VG: Well, you know, I actually—I'm involved in a lot of things. And I began to scale back a little bit, because—so, I live here in Northborough. And I actually was a library trustee for a couple of years. I was—I chaired the Community Affairs Committee, which did things in the community to enhance the life of the citizens and everything, like we did town cleanup, we've

done summer concerts in the park, the tree, and everything like that. So, I chaired that for like fifteen years and I chaired the Personnel Board for the town.

Well, two years ago, my husband decided that I should do something different. And I said, “Okay,” and he says, “There’s a vacancy for the Assabet Regional School. You should run.” I said, “I’m not running, Fred.” He said, “Oh, yeah, you should run. I’d be something nice to do.” I said, “I’m not running! I’ve got enough to do.”

So, he says—well, nobody signed up, the date went by, and everything like that, so he says, “Well, you should do a write-in.” Yeah, Fred. So, Fred told a few people, and I won through a write-in. So, now I’m a school committee member for a regional school, vocational technical school, and sometimes I wonder why.

EC: [Laughing] You hadn’t thought about starting a write-in campaign.

VG: I know! He does, he has a campaign. So, I have to get signatures when he’s running. So, you have to have like fifty signatures, but he likes to do more than fifty, because suppose somebody isn’t a registered voter or something like that. So, I help him to get signatures, because he runs every year.

EC: Yeah.

VG: But, so I did step down as a library trustee and I stepped down as the chair of the Community Affairs Committee. So, I still chair the Personnel Board and the Assabet Valley. And then I do my work with Alfred University. And so, I do a lot of mentoring. I do a lot of mentoring.

And I’m an HR manager, and I stay very busy with my job. I used to, in addition to being HR manager, chair the Alternative Dispute Resolution, which was a process where if a person

felt they were not being treated fairly or something like that, they could come and present their case, be evaluated and either have a reversal or it would remain the same.

EC: Was that within the company or—?

VG: It was within the company, um-hmm.

EC: Yeah. Did that work well to avoid conflict?

VG: It does. It's very similar to—so, if you're in a union, you have the five steps. But as a professional, you don't. So, this is a way of working, and it helps both the employee and the company. But then, it doesn't stop. Sometimes people continue on to do lawsuits or MCAD discrimination suits and everything like that. So, all my—you know, everything has sort of been along the same lines: mentoring, coaching, helping, you know, throughout my career.

EC: And you mentioned your husband and his elections and his work. So, could you say just a little bit about that so there's some context for other people?

VG: Oh, well, when I met my husband, he was a selectman. And a selectman [0:55:00] is in Massachusetts is like a city council. And so, he was a member of the city council. And, instead of having a mayor, you would—one of the members would chair. So, he's been a selectman. He's chaired the board of selectman. But prior to then, he was actually chair of the Personnel Board. And then, he became, like I said, a selectman.

And then, he's been a town moderator for ten years. The town moderator is—we have the old-style government where you have town meetings and anybody who is a registered voter can come, be heard, listen to the budget, you know, questions and everything like that, and his job is to facilitate that meeting, and to keep it orderly, to get the budgets passed, or whatever needs to happen, and to resolve any conflicts, and all like that. And plus, [laughs] his favorite thing, I think, is he appoints members to certain boards, and so he's my boss.

EC: [Laughs]

VG: He reminds me quite frequently he's my boss. So, as a Personnel Board member, he appoints me, but I was floored, Emily, when I learned that he called the town administrator to see how had I done my job.

EC: [Laughs]

VG: I said, "I cannot believe this!"

EC: [Laughs] So, how do you separate the work in coming home?

VG: Very well, very well. You know, we—I think we both like and enjoy community work. And like I was saying on the way coming over here, he's being very supportive in coming with me today, but the third weekend of September, he will be so busy, because he's the voice of Apple Fest. And we have an Apple Fest celebration every year about the third weekend in September. So, we'll have a parade, we'll have fireworks, we'll have concerts and everything, and he does all the announcing.

EC: Wow. [Speaking to Fred George] So, you keep busy? [Laughs]

VG: So, we both keep busy in town and we try to, you know, be supportive of each other. And I can speak for him. I don't know, I'll let him speak for me. But I think he's extremely supportive of me.

EC: Yeah.

VG: And I couldn't do it, you know, without him, because it's nice. He's also in human resources.

EC: Okay.

VG: He has his own consulting practice. And so, he works with small and medium sized companies, doing consulting, human capital consulting and things like that. And so, we have the

ability to share our work, you know, and sometimes, if I want to just bounce something off of him, then I can, because I know I'll get a fair assessment and honest assessment.

EC: Yeah. Have you thought about running to be town moderator—

VG: Heck no!

EC: So that you could be his boss? [Laughs]

VG: Heck no! [Laughs] Listen, you have to know Robert's Rules of Order, you have to be patient, and you have to speak very well. And he has a very—I mean, sometimes we go out sometimes, and somebody will say, "Oh, you should be on radio! You should be an announcer." And I just say—

EC: [Laughs]

VG: But he's done that—been there, done that, you know. And sometimes I think he thinks he should do voiceover or something. But I don't have the patience, the knowledge, or the ability. I get—I would probably—he stays—what I admire, a lot of things about him, but he doesn't show any favoritism or anything on his face. I probably would be saying, "You need to sit down and shut up!" [Laughs]

EC: [Laughs] Sort of like when the lawyer—you were walking back out after you were arrested? You know, and you were ready to fight back?

VG: Exactly, exactly! Like, "Oh, don't come after me!" Right, right.

EC: You know, that's—I mean, one of the things I'm also interested in—

JB: [59:00]

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're back.

EC: I was going to say one of the things I'm also interested in with the Civil Rights Movement is nonviolence and how it works. And I think a lot of people have an image of the Civil Rights Movement as just being completely nonviolent, and nobody ever had any urge for anything else or thought about anything else.

VG: Oh, no. No, that's not true.

EC: Yeah.

VG: That's not true. I mean, if you got spit at, spit on, it's hard not to be angry, or not to show some emotions.

EC: Did you encounter any of that when you were marching to downtown that day?

VG: Just the—people were yelling at us, calling us names and everything. And you just sort of had to keep focused on your goal and don't make eye contact. That's how we had to do it, you know. If you look at them, you actually give in to them by acknowledging them. So, you just keep where you're going, don't look, don't respond or anything.

EC: And did it help that you were doing that with your close friends? [1:00:00]

VG: Well, we got separated.

EC: Oh, did you?

VG: We were separated.

EC: Like, right away?

VG: I don't even remember. I think I got arrested before them.

EC: Yeah.

VG: Or I'm not sure.

EC: Yeah. So, when you went back to Richmond for this reunion, and Virginia Union, and found out that, you know, people were saying you had this huge impact and stuff, you know, what was it like to be back together with the students who had done that?

VG: It was wonderful. I had not seen Marise and Pat in years. So, the first thing, you know, we had an opportunity to catch up, because Marise had married a person who is in the military, and she had traveled all over, and we had lost contact with each other. And Pat still lives in Philadelphia, outside of Philadelphia. I knew her husband; had met them when they were dating. So, it was good to catch up.

Overwhelming to see what, really, people were saying. They were calling us heroes. And I said, “Oh! Okay. This thirty-four, group of thirty-four, desegregated the city of Richmond? I didn’t know we did that. Wow, that’s wonderful!”

EC: Yeah.

VG: To know. And I guess I was very proud that I had made the decision to participate, and this was the result.

EC: Yeah. Do you think about the status of civil rights today?

VG: I do. I do.

EC: Do you have any thoughts that you’d like to share on that?

VG: [Laughs] You know, I always have thoughts. The first thought that I have, and this won’t come as a surprise, too, but I believe that racism is still rampant and apparent in the United States today. I believe—well, I will say, I was so shocked when Obama was elected president. I did not think that I would live to see an African American president, never in my wildest dreams. I thought that was something my son would experience.

However, although he was elected, I think it's *racism* that has been a part of the issues that he has faced. I mean, and that people—and what just gets me so upset is that intelligent people don't see this and don't put a stop to it. You know, there are so many senators and representatives that should never go back to Congress. You know, I mean, to sit and have lunch and say, "Hey, we're not going to agree or accept anything that he does." *How could you do that?* How could you not give this brilliant man an opportunity to be successful? Racism is still well; it's still alive. And there are other things, but that's the one that just—you know. And I think sometimes, you know, what can I do? What should I do? And like I've said to Fred, sometimes I think I should just quit and go work for—you know, try to work for Obama, do something to try—because it's not over. We still have a *lot* to do.

But the good news is that our children don't see color today, you know. And I had this conversation with my sister-in-law, who lives outside of Washington in a place called Nokesville near Manassas. And where they chose to live, just as where Fred and I have chosen to live, there are very few African Americans. So, my son's friends are all white.

EC: Does that—excuse me.

VG: And his cousins are the people of color that he knows closely and cares about and relates to. But when we talked about having four and five kids at our house, they're all white.

EC: Um-hmm. Does that create different kinds of challenges?

VG: I don't think so. I think, for them, it's easier, you know. My son has never known about having to sit in the back of the bus. My son doesn't—I think, well, I think he, in my opinion, and of course my husband may have a different opinion, when he was in the seventh grade, I think it was, he came home and announced he wanted his hair braided. I said, "Okay," so we began a routine, every Sunday night, Saturday or Sunday, he'd take his hair out, and I'd braid

it. I think he was about the only African American in his class, and that was his way of showing that he was different. And he wore his hair braided until he got to high school. And now, he wears it *phoom*. [Laughs]

EC: [Laughs]

VG: [Laughs] The only time he—in the summertime, he'll cut it, because it's hot. But my man lets his hair—he used to play in a band, too—he lets his hair grow. It looks something like Richie—um, what's his—the jazz? [1:05:00]

JB: Yeah, Lionel Richie?

VG: Not Lionel Richie.

JB: Yeah, I know.

VG: But he looks like a—Marley, Bob Marley. You know how Bob had the big hair? My son has the big hair, you know, so he doesn't hide his ethnicity.

EC: Yeah.

VG: And then, when he cuts it, you can't tell—sometimes our friends—we have friends in California who say if he's coming out there, please have him shave and everything, because they may take him for part of a Muslim or some Islamic or whatever, so.

EC: Yeah. Does he see the existence of racism still?

VG: I don't think so, no. No, he never sees things in terms of color, which is good, you know. I mean, if something happens to—in our day, if something happened to you, you didn't get promoted or you didn't do something, it was because of your race. He doesn't see that. He may see partiality, but he doesn't see race.

EC: Yeah, yeah. Well, can you think of things that are important, things that you think people should, you know, think about or know about, things I haven't thought to ask you?

VG: Things you said you haven't thought to ask me? Let me see.

EC: Or any of it.

VG: [Pause] I'm thinking. I don't know. That's a big question. That's a loaded question. I'm just trying to think about it. I guess, for me, just thinking about me, I think that I've always had the civil rights fight in my blood. On my job, in my life, I will fight for what I think is right. If something is happening—a lot of times in my work, people come to me, and they ask me for help. And I will give them that help. And it's off the record kind of thing, but it's more or less like, you know, they're dealing with—and a lot of times—and I see racism. I see it, you know. And I've been trying to figure out how do you get others to see the racism that exists, because it's so subtle.

For an example, if you hire—you can hire a person of color or a female, but you may not give them the total job or the job that they can be most successful in. And/or you can finally, maybe, hire a person of color who is very, very good, and you won't let them move. They keep them right in that position because you don't want to lose them. But you lose them anyway, because they go to another company.

So, what I've been trying to—I'll just give you an example. Lately, our company seems to be changing the way they do business. They don't have the old type HR. So they have business partners, and so you end up with a whole lot of different projects, you know, salary planning, HR review, things like that, but they don't look back at the basics.

And I had—I had a couple of experiences that someone came to me that someone was complaining that someone went in the ladies' room, and a person said, "I think you have the wrong bathroom." And so, nobody thought anything of it, right? And then, I had somebody else

to say, you know, “There’s someone visiting, and we think that person is going through a change.”

So, I’m working on transgender issues at my company, and I’m this close to getting gender-neutral bathrooms, at least two gender-neutral bathrooms near the manufacturing floor, because I work for a manufacturing company that’s like over four thousand people, lots of square footage, but there’s no gender-neutral bathroom so that if I’m transitioning, I have someplace I can comfortably go, or if I’m just sick and I want to go someplace like that. So, I started that.

And then, I had a situation where someone came to me and needed help in my role—that’s my role in trying to understand and trying to help that person that I’m actually helping to rewrite or put together training to talk to management and leaders about sensitive issues like this. We’ve had it before. But, in one situation, I mean, an employee says to someone, “When did you know you were a lesbian?” Or, “When did you know you were—?” “When you were out with your back surgery, instead of, you know, out with back surgery, did you transition?” Stuff like that, inappropriate conversations and questions. [1:10:00] So, I’m working with some people to try to train people to make things better, because it’s still—we’ve got a long way to go.

EC: So, do you find resistance to that, or is it just more like just kind of lethargy, you know?

VG: I think people just don’t know. Some people just don’t know, and they just don’t understand. But then, there are some people who are going through things, and *they* don’t know how to deal, you know. The recent situation I had is where a person was born a female but feels that he is a male. But he’s taken no steps, okay? So, people don’t understand. And he, I think, hasn’t really, you know, gotten his mind wrapped around that, and so people—he feels people discriminate or harass him. But harassing—saying, “Did you have a sex change?” isn’t really

harassing. That's inappropriate. So, training people not to ask personal and inappropriate questions.

So, I mean—so, yeah. So, it goes from one thing, excuse me, to another, you know, but it's all related. It's all related, you know. And it's about understanding differences, valuing the differences, and letting people have their own ability to make their choices and to live their choices. So, I'm trying to think, now, what's my next step? You know? Am I going to teach? Am I just going to sit home and read, like one of my girlfriends? Or—

EC: I don't see that. [Laughs]

VG: Yeah, I see somebody shaking their head behind you, you know. But, you know, I'm thinking about transitioning myself to figure out, you know, maybe it's more community work. I'm not sure.

EC: Yeah. So, do you think you might want different challenges coming up?

VG: Or continue, yeah, or whatever, you know. I'm really proud of myself if I get those two bathrooms at the company. I just am waiting, you know. It's budget. I got support. It's now getting the budget to do that.

EC: So, you've been able to convince people it's a good thing?

VG: Oh, yeah.

EC: It's just a question of actually now implementing?

VG: Yes, right, right. And then, the next step is completing the training where I'll help to train managers: What do you do, how do you do, and, you know, just coach.

EC: Yeah. So, it sounds like some major accomplishments.

VG: For me.

EC: Yeah, yeah. So, can you think of any final thoughts? Or we can take a second to think about it, too.

VG: No. I think I just about shared just about everything that I can.

EC: Well, we really appreciate it.

VG: No problem.

EC: And we're very pleased to have your story as part of the Civil Rights History Project.

VG: Well, thank you. I hope it's helpful.

EC: It is.

VG: Thank you.

Unidentified Announcer: This has been a presentation of the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.

[Recording ends at 1:13:12]

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Sally C. Council