ROBERT KORSTAD: I guess I'd like to start with you talking a little bit about your family, where they're from, and something about your roots and what you know about that. Maybe we talk a little bit about what influence all of those have on you.

SOPHIA BRACY HARRIS: I grew up in Wetomico, which is about sixteen miles north of Montgomery in a rural community called Redland. Actually they call it Redland right now, but we grew up calling it Red Land. My mother's family are there in that community. My father really came from Loundes County. He had come over as a youngster, I think about the age of twelve. I'm from a family of ten kids. My mom was the youngest of sixteen kids. My dad was also from a large family. So we had lots of roots in and around, lots of cousins, lots of aunts, and especially between Elmore County and Loundes County.

RK: Did you know you grandparents at all?

SH: No. My grandmother died when I was nine months. Not on my mother's side. I knew my father's mother and I knew his father, but they both lived away. She was living with a daughter in New York, and my grandfather had gone to the mines in Kentucky. So he lived in Cumberland. But both of them are deceased now. So there was not that close grandmother, grandfather. Although I had an aunt, because my mother being the youngest, her own sisters and brothers had children her age. So there was an aunt that really played the role of a grandmother for me, Aunt Lacey. She was real special in my life.
RK: What did your family do for a living?

SH: My father was a farmer, and we lived on land that belonged to my mother's sister that I'm named for. There was about a forty year difference there in our ages. She's eighty something now. But we grew up on that land. My mother had dropped out of school in the eleventh grade. She had my eldest brother, and had to continue to take care of her mother. My dad had gone to third grade and didn't have very much schooling at all, but he worked the lands there, raising cotton, corn, and vegetables. So we spent a good bit of the time during the summer months--because he peddled vegetables in Montgomery during the summer to sustain us. And then, of course, the winter months, you had the proceeds from the cotton to carry us through the winter.

RK: He did a little bit of everything?

SH: He had a lot of different things. As a matter of fact, if my father had been educated, I really think he would have been a great scientist because he knew a great deal about farming and the lands and the timing. It's amazing that he was such an earth person, and such an excellent farmer, and was so precise in what he did, and had so much pride in the quality of his vegetables. In fact, he certainly had a lot of pressure placed upon us to tend things with a great deal of care and be extra careful in terms of our harvesting and so forth.

RK: Pulling weeds?

SH: Absolutely. Yes, yes, yes.
RK: Was this a fairly rural, did you have neighbors near by or where you kind of out?

SH: We were pretty much out in the--I think the closest neighbor we had, I would say, probably lived about a mile from us. So there was no one close by. We could walk to their homes, but we were fairly isolated in our growing up. We didn't know that, because running down to my aunt's house, which was about two miles, was really something we did. I'm reminded of the Sounder picture because the kids ran everywhere, and that's the way it was with our growing up. It was just something you did. You ran over to get this, or you ran down to get this. You ran down to the spring to bring water. You ran over to the goat hill to call dad, and that was a couple of miles away. So we were really quite in the rural.

RK: What were some of your fonder memories of that rural childhood that perhaps had an influence or that you still remember?

SH: As I think about it now, I think about the struggle that went into it. At the time, I didn't necessarily see that as something that was beneficial or something that was a positive. But as I remember now, I remember my father being one that put a lot of himself into raising the crops and having food for the family. My mother was much more into making sure that we went to church and that we participated in community activities, trying to provide for us with clothes and shoes. But I finally remember them being there for us, my mother's affection with her kids. We were always, you know, everybody got to be her baby and had that
time in her lap, no matter how large we got. Daddy was most happy when he thought things were going well with the crops, that the rain was going to come, that we were going to be able to harvest things. Then he was really pleased. The only time that we found him really playful with us was when he felt some relief, and we looked for those times. Those are special for us, particularly when Dad would allow each one of us to have our own garden. And he would take time with us to help us raise our own things, because you could not go in his watermelon patch. We tried several tricks from time to time to do that, and we always got caught. But as a solution, he told us we could have our own small garden. That was always something that I enjoyed doing because I knew that that was what Daddy got a great deal of joy out of.

RK: You talked about the struggle. What were some of the things that you might say were hardships as you look back on them, that were the difficulties of that kind of rural life? Again, we're looking for things that had some various influences on you in later life.

SH: It was just difficult most of the time to make ends meet. I have several images in my mind of my mother leaving home early in the morning, walking. We had no transportation beyond the wagon up until I think, well, clearly, I was in junior high school. My mother would always have to, for the simplest things, going to buy groceries or getting one of us to the doctor, or just taking care of getting the light bill paid, she would have to walk to catch a ride. Often, we would pass her on the school
bus. I think about, you know, wishing that she could ride with us. Those are the pictures that I have in my mind that are a part of the hard times. Although she was constantly saying, "This doesn't bother me. Whatever I'm living, I'm doing this, whatever I'm living, so that I can make a better life for my children." And she would talk about her dreams, and we could see the dreams through her eyes. She would visualize to us what she saw as being and doing, and how she saw us as adults. And say, "Don't worry about me because I am wanting you to get an education and have a better life." For my father, the difficult times, I think, were around the time when the crop didn't really bring in enough to pay for the rent of the place at the end of the year. And to see his sadness. I think often times in the early part of my childhood, my dad would drink as a way... At that time I didn't realize it, my mom would be so upset when he would. But later I remembered he was sad a lot of the times around that. Fortunately, daddy became -- not fortunately, he became ill -- but he became very ill in the late '50s, and, of course, could no longer drink or smoke or do any of those things, so I got to spend the later part of my childhood without that. But it was a lot of struggle with the family trying to get the basics for us to live on.

RK: I know that you've written that one of things that happened to you was that you were the second oldest and started taking care of your siblings. How did that come about?

SH: Right. Well, I was kind of what you'd call a sickly child when I was growing up. I had scarlet fever and I had
pneumonia a couple of times. Well, finally, I think around about age ten I was discovered to have rheumatic fever, and that meant weekly trips to the doctor, which was very painful. Because again, that was having to catch rides always, or having to catch the bus and stay out at the doctor's office all day to catch the bus back home in the afternoons. But because I couldn't do field work anymore, I became the caretaker for my younger sisters and brothers. That became something that I really developed quite a fondness for. I was told always that I was bossy [laughter], but, of course, in my culture with my family the oldest child, you had to really mind the oldest child. My sister, who was a year older than I was, she was really carefree and really enjoyed life to the fullest. I was more serious minded. But I had the caretaking of particularly my three younger siblings. Really it was four, but the younger three were at some level like my children. I got into reading. I loved to make stories up. I would make my stories and tell them stories. We would have study time, teaching time. So that became something that I matured a lot around. It was a great deal of satisfaction that my younger sisters and brothers trusted me as their caretaker. And I felt great to be able to have a kind of role or responsibility because I realized that I was making a very valuable contribution to my family, because it allowed my mom and my dad to work. And not only was I caretaking at age eleven and twelve, but I was also doing the canning and the cooking and the housekeeping. So really it was much beyond just caring for the kids, yeah.

RK: What was the schooling like? You said you rode a bus.
So the bus would pick you up and take you.

SH: Yeah, we had, generally, about a two and a half hour ride to the school when it finished picking up. If the bus didn't break down, it was longer than that. We walked, I suppose, three-fourths of a mile to catch the bus. The schooling was, of course, you had wonderful teachers. You had people who were extensions of what you had known all your life. My mother's sisters, two of her sisters, were teachers, and my very first, first grade teacher was my aunt, who was mean, I tell you the truth. [Laughter] I think she wanted everybody to know that there was no exception with her, in terms of the punishment that she would give. And quite frankly, I think I got caught up in the group a lot of time, because she just wanted to me sure that nobody thought that she was giving any favorite treatment. But the people at my school were people who were like my mother. And the folk at my church were people who were constantly pushing you. Telling you that you had to learn, you had to know more than, you had to be able to be a credit to your race. I mean, you were taught that very early on, and there was an expectation at some level on our part, simply because my mother was so involved in our church, and my aunt was involved in our church and our community. So even though we didn't have financially, there was this expectation in terms of our behavior. If there was anybody who was going to do anything, have any part of the play, have any speaking role, we were expected to do that. So the early experiences with my school were ones that really, aside from the fact, the part that was most embarrassing, I guess, had
to do with the fact that we couldn't start school when other kids started. We would start when the crops were harvested. My mother and father were always in a struggle about that. She was a believer that we needed to get in school as soon as possible, and that was no later than two weeks after school started. Dad's piece was we get in school when the cotton got harvested, when the potatoes got dug, when the corn was pulled, and sometimes that was two months after school started. Because for him, his race was with an early winter. You didn't know when winter was going to start. In his mind, if you were a good worker, if you worked hard, and if could assure that you were going to be able to make it without having to depend on somebody else, then you were a good person and you were a good citizen. And my mother's struggle was you had to learn, you had to know, you had to be able to be--for her, being a credit to your race and a credit to your community, was to be educated enough to not just survive but to give something in a positive way. So there was always that struggle and there was always that embarrassment that we got to school late. And I guess it highlighted the fact that you didn't have--kids came back with new clothes in the beginning of the school term. And we never came with that. Those were some of the parts that were harder about school. But as far as being there, and the demands and the expectations, they were really strong from my mother's.

RK: Sounds like both your mother, particularly your mother and her family and this group of school teachers and probably church leaders, community leaders, too, there is a real sense of
hope for your generation in a way. We're struck in all the people that we've been interviewing how true that is. I mean, it is the post-war period and there is, I guess, kind of rising expectations, but there is this sense that you are going, you have to, you going to achieve.

SH: The expectation I understand came from my maternal grandmother. Her name was Middy, and she was well known in the community. She was a poor woman, although her family had land. They were land poor, but she was considered a person who would stand up to any one in the community about the hope for her race.

She was one who pushed for the building of, I would call institutions, schools for kids. It seems to me that she was rather visionary. I understand the church that we went to was named for two women who decided they didn't want to walk the five or six miles to the other church each Sunday. So this church was started about, I guess, about three miles from our place, where we lived. But was the kind of person who, it appeared, had the courage to stand up. And her daughters--she had one son to live out of the sixteen children--the daughters were considered to be very outspoken and could almost be called by some as dominating, in the sense that they really asserted themselves in the community, basically around what they thought children needed to be getting, what they thought the community needed to be doing to uplift, uplift was a word I heard all the time, to uplift our children and to prepare them for the future. So I really think, I certainly wouldn't say she was the only person who had that kind of thinking, but she was considered a strong influence in
our community.

RK: What was her family name?

SH: Her name was George, Middy George was her maiden name. She married a Fleming. My mother's father was Porter Fleming and was considered, very much like my father, a quiet person, but pretty determined, but a quiet spoken person.

RK: That's interesting this kind of creative tension in a way, but also very realistic, between your father's need to, we've got to worry and the here and now, day-to-day responsibilities, and your mother's, and your mother's family's kind of vision and hope.

SH: Right, exactly. It is an interesting.

RK: You picked both on those up.

SH: Well, it's exactly the truth, because lately as I have been reflecting upon my own life, and how I became who I am, I recognize in many ways I carry both of those messages. My father was a strong work, work, work, and I have to be careful as I have recognized my kind of addiction, in a sense, to working to the point that it's not good for my health. And recognize that at some level that's what my father did. It always amazed people at the kind of acreage of cotton that he had, that basically was just he and his children. And then he would let us, and I would often say, lend us out to other neighbors because there was exchanges made. They had fertilizer, and he had kids [laughter].

I recognize that a lot of it had to do with the fact that he was an extremely hard worker, and really in a sense, did the work of three people in a way. While my mother worked hard with him,
often side by side, her sense was that this is not our goal. This is what we have to sustain ourselves to help us move to a different level.

RK: That's interesting. You spoke a minute ago about when you went back to school that some of the other kids had new clothes and things. Did you have a sense of economic difference. I'm assuming that these are still in the segregated schools, so that this is just within the black community?

SH: Right. We're dealing with the black community. Yes, there was an economic difference, particularly with the rural kids. I would think that we saw ourselves as being poor. When I say poor, I mean, it was very clear that we didn't have some of the things other kids had, even some of the rural kids. But it was interesting. We were not poor in the way we carried ourselves. My mother's pushing, our expectations, our being pushed forth in whatever community activities, clearly we were not perceiving ourselves as individuals who were hopeless or who didn't have goals and aspirations and didn't have pride in themselves. So while there was this distinction there, we saw that. It was not something that laid heavily on you. You were not necessarily ashamed. I mean, there were a couple of instances where, you know, you open up your brown paper sack and your biscuits, where somebody else had their white bread. Kids were into laughing at you if you brought biscuits. But that passed. That was not an overall place that we found ourselves in. It would be a momentarily embarrassment, but not over all.
RK: What contact do you have with whites? How integrated or segregated was the community and the world that you were growing up in?

SH: My early remembrances around whites had more to do with the stories that were told at night, particularly when other neighbors came to the house or you would have gatherings. There would be these discussions about white people who had had conflicts with blacks. My mother had an uncle who had been murdered because his wife was the favorite of a white farmer, the owner of the land. They were tenants on the land. You heard these discussions, and so, while you didn't have encounters that were negative, you basically had this fear that you could really be harmed by whites. So there was this kind of unspoken message that we received out of that, that said, "Black folk really had to be very careful and really behave themselves. You could really get killed or hurt by having a certain kind of attitude."

RK: Your parents, I assume, particularly your mother, their behaviors, there was a whole way of kind of acting and behaving that was meant to protect you from that?

SH: Absolutely. The words that were communicated, and I remember from my mother, is that you are as good as anybody. God created us all equal. Don't let anybody tell you that you are not somebody, and you're not worthy and valuable. Those were the words. In my memory, there was no addressing of how we should be around whites, but very clearly, from the conversations that we heard, we were able to, ourselves, figure that there was a way that you were supposed to be. But I had never had any really
negative experiences. I did have some contact because, very near our house, and they became our closest neighbors, some whites who brought this place and turned it into a camp. It was a Christian camp. What we discovered, mom would clean for one of the couples that was living there, and that was kind of our first experience with whites. It was a fairly good relationship. I think it was very typical. She would do cleaning. They would give her things to bring home. The guy would come around, and he and Dad would have lots of conversations. I remember something happened. We thought he was, well, here's a kind of atypical relationship here. We didn't have anything to judge by. There was this centennial celebration, and I suppose it must have been the centennial which would have been the '60s, going into the '60s, I guess. Anyway, all of the whites were growing beards.

RK: Oh yeah.

SH: And somehow, there was something about that that was scary. We never knew exactly what it meant, but we felt, wow, well, he's one of them. So I remember the relationship kind of remained, but from that time on there was that feeling that there was something that you still couldn't totally trust about this person, because he was one of them. And one of them was the unknown white that could hurt you.

RK: Were you at all aware, when you were growing up, kind of in your younger years, only a few miles really from you, the civil rights movement, in this town, Montgomery, was getting started? How aware, did you know about the bus boycott?

SH: The pastor of our church was a person who was the
moderator of the district and the owner of the black funeral home in the city, and he was pretty much in the know of things. He would talk about there were things changing in our society. And I know that he was attending some of the meetings. But we didn't really, I don't think that registered in ways in our mind very much. We knew there were things going on, but we didn't have anything, we didn't have T.V. at the time. There was not enough of an understanding of what to compare it to, to really know what kind of significance it had for us. I remember the first thing that I became aware of in a kind of conscious way, that you could really call civil rights, was the death of Medgar Evers. I remember hearing that on the radio, and thinking, what could this man have done to be killed. That he really had to do something bad. And I couldn't figure out what he did bad. I wondered. I remember thinking, what did he do bad, that made these folk kill him? And that was my first consciousness. Then that was followed by the bombing of the church with the girls. By now, clearly, I was into listening into or being aware. And then the death of John F. Kennedy then became the kind of significant piece that said at some level, there's a thing called civil rights, and that blacks were trying to change things that had been, and to make something better. And that people could get killed for that, not only black people, but white people, you know, could get killed.

It's real interesting that shortly following that, not many years afterwards, came the freedom of choice option for us, to choose to go to whatever school we wanted to. And I'm quite
aware that at that time when that happened, we didn't have enough understanding of, really, what that kind of act meant. To know what it would bring. We loved our school, but we constantly heard our teachers say, "We don't have what you need. We don't have the equipment we need for biology." I mean, they would share with us, "You're going to have struggle, because we don't have it here. We can give you the best we know to give you, but you're going to still have to compete in a world out here, and it's going to be up to you to work harder." The piece that came that hit home most was my oldest brother, who was living with my aunt, the teacher who had gone to Tuskegee Institute, and who had been there for a couple of years, majoring in carpentry, but really had some difficulty. You know, it was a real struggle for him to stay, and finally he had to transfer to Alabama A&M. And of course, Tuskegee Institute was held in such high regard in the black community, and we wanted to go to Tuskegee Institute. We had had a couple of people who were really tops in our class who didn't make it at Tuskegee. It was kind of embarrassing for the valedictorian to not make it. At that time, I was in the Student Council. I was president of the Student Council. I didn't consider myself an extraordinarily smart student. I did well, did okay with my grades, and felt that I really wanted to have a good foundation for Tuskegee Institute. My sister and I, that was our motivation for wanting to complete the freedom of choice forms and go to the white school.

RK: So was this in Wetumpka?

SH: That was Wetumpka, and that was the fall of '65. We
did, and there were about seven other students who were in junior high and high school, and the rest were in elementary school, that did complete the forms. I remember when we asked our parents, asked my mother about it. And she said, "Do you really want to do this?" We said, "Yeah, yeah." She said, "You know that you're probably going to have some people who don't like you, or don't want you there, and will be mean to you." Well, mean, we didn't have a definition. Said, "Well, you know, but we want to." She talked to us, and I don't think she even knew. But she finally said, "Well, if this is what you want, I'll support you in it." Then she went and talked to Daddy, and at that point his thing was, "I don't want them to. I don't think they should be. I think they should just leave those white folks alone." But the one thing he didn't do, which he could have done, was he didn't stop us. Because in the relationship that they had, if Daddy came down strong about something, my mother was not going--she may argue the point with him. But ultimately she was not going to just go against, with something that involved us. He didn't refuse to let us go.

RK: Interesting that you and your sister, were there other kids in your school who were thinking the same thing? You kind of thought this? We want to go to Tuskegee. We're going to do this.

SH: Yeah. I don't really know. There was a girlfriend of ours, who was our nearest neighbor. My sister was in a grade higher, and they were classmates. She wanted to go, and I didn't ever know what she wanted from that, other than we were just
happy that somebody else had agreed to go with us. And didn't have any idea what we were getting into, not at all. And that experience, of course, certainly changed my life.

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RK: If you could just kind of explain what the experience was like, some stories about it, and what impact it had on you. You said it changed you life.

SH: Well, there are a couple of things that I guess I will try to share around this whole event of going to Wetumpka High School. The first was the total shock on the first day. The closer, by the way, that it got to our going, we realized that this was a big thing. This was bigger than we thought. We just thought that we were going to be going to school at the beginning of the school term. We began to feel a sense of scared because it seemed that everybody was buzzing about this. There was discussion. Well, on the day that we arrived that morning, we were still not prepared for what we walked into. When we arrived at the school, I remember, because we had a truck but we didn't have a car. So Miss Ethel, who was the mother of the friend, she was driving her car, and mom and she and the three of us arrived at the school that morning. Well, when I saw this crowd, remember now, I had not been around a lot of white folk. We had been pretty much sheltered. When I saw this crowd of white people, first of all, there was something about it, you know. We pulled up and saw that, not even having gotten close enough yet to feel their anger. You know, [laughter] it was scary. That was the first thing. And I think the hairs began to kind of raise on it.

Then there was this sea of white faces. I guess, I remember the men more than anything else because they were bigger, and
they were angry. And we had to walk, you know, between them into the school house. And they were on either side of us, and there were so many. And they were saying angry stuff, and it was kind of like—I was kind of numb. By now, I didn't quite even remember what they were saying. We go inside and there's this principal who, I remember thinking when I saw him, I could tell he was the principal. He was a tall man, but he wasn't looking angry, but he was looking scared. So he told us to go into the office. Then we had to go from the office to the study hall. All of the black kids went to the study hall, and they were telling us where we were supposed to go. My mom and Miss Ethel were still with us, and then they told them that they needed to leave. And my thought was, "I know they're not going to leave."

[Laughter] "They're not going to leave me here." I could tell they were scared, but they left. I thought about that many, many, many, many days, and really admire the courage that it took for those two women to leave their children in that place. I really have all kinds of respect for that. Because I know now, being a parent, how difficult that was, and I'm not even sure I could have done that. I'm not sure I could have done that. I'm sure that's what other parents did. They decided they weren't going to put their children in that kind of unsafe kind of situation. But they did.

And that day went on, and then we rode the school bus home, the white school bus, by the way. We did see the white school buses pass when we were riding and going to the all-black school. We were put at the front of the bus [laughter] for safety
reasons. Well, others saw that for a whole different reason. We were perfect targets for every spitball, for every rubber band, for everything. And the other thing was this bus driver, again, I remember him. He was so scared. He was so absolutely scared.

Things began to accelerate two weeks later when my sister, the abuse just got worse. It continued to get worse. And, I guess, being of the personality that she is, one day she just went off, and of course, turned around and said—and I happened to be about three students behind the person who had hit her—and she turned around. And what happens is, when you were hit by a student and you turn around, everybody is looking elsewhere, you know. So you turn around and there are all these faces and there's no one. So what are you going do? Just start hitting people. So she turned around and she said, "Who hit me?" And this guy had one of this bands with a rock, you know, one of these slingshot kind of deals. And I said, "He did." You know, and I pointed to the guy, and, of course, she just kind of went into him. Well, nothing much happened. He went on to his class, and she went on to hers. When I got on the bus that evening, she was not there, and there was the principal standing out on the grounds, and all the buses lined up. You know how you have teacher duty and that kind of stuff. Well, as I saw the bus getting ready to pull off, I said to the bus driver, "My sister is not on this bus." He pulls up to the principal and says, "This girl says that her sister is not on the bus." And the principal says, "Well, what's her sister's name?" I said, "Debra Bracy." He said, "The nigger is in jail where she needs to be
"for," what did he say, "hitting a white boy," or something like that. Well, the whole bus stood up in a course of applause. And by now, there was a fear that gripped my gut that was paralyzing, because I could imagine that they had taken my sister off somewhere, and that was going to be the last time. And I kept thinking to myself, "I did it," because I should not have said to her who hit her. So I'm just frantic now, and I don't know what to do because here it's three, and it's going to take at least until 5:30 before this bus gets us out to my house. Then Mom and Dad don't have transportation, and they've got to go try to find somebody. And I remembered that this was an act that this bus driver did, there were several that I still hold dear in my heart. I said to him as we were nearing to go across through the town, "Please, let me off here," because I was thinking about the minister of our church who had the funeral home there in town. I was going to stop and have him call my uncle who had a phone and who was president of the NAACP. I knew there was a rule that you couldn't let people off the bus, even from the black school. But he did.

He let me off the bus, and, of course, they were able to get out there. But they didn't get my sister out. The sheriff would not let her out that night. They wouldn't let my parents see her. They were just, you know, going to keep her there. As a matter of fact, they told them. It was not money they wanted. They were wanting this, whatever they called her, to stay in jail, to know what's it like for hitting a white boy. They got her out the next day, because we had a former extension agent,
who was now working in Washington in the Agricultural Department there, a black guy, happened to be in town that day. My uncle had contacted him, and he was able to come over, and there was this fear that was growing among whites, you know, that you didn't want Washington down there in your business. So when he came in and questioned them about why she was there, why they wouldn't let her out, wouldn't give her bond, he was able to get her out of jail. And then her being out of jail and told that she could go back to school in a week if she were to plead guilty. And this was one of the most painful things that happened to her, and, I think, caused a great deal of scarring on her life. She said, "I won't." What had been written up and what had been on the newscast, and whatever, the news reports, was that she had stabbed him. He required sixteen stitches. He had to be hospitalized. The guy never left the school, I mean, you know, the whole works. So they were saying they wanting her to plead guilty to those, and she would say, "No, I didn't do that, and I'm not going to plead guilty."

Well, the legal defense attorneys, I suppose, but anyway, the attorneys for the NAACP and others really impressed upon mom and dad to encourage her to go ahead and plead guilty to assault and battery charges so she could get back in school, because that was more important than whatever. And she did, against all of her wishes, and it ultimately ended up with her being out of school for a semester, because she could not get back in school.

Mom tried to get her in school in other places. And she was out of school for a semester. And when finally the American Friends
Service Committee who were in town around this whole incident, well, around my cousin who was killed in Vietnam, and they were refusing to bury him in the cemetery there in the town. They were there around that, and then learned about Debra's situation, and got the Justice Department involved. It was the Justice Department's involvement in this that got her back in school, but our house was bombed the night before she was to return. Well, actually, the weekend leading up to that Monday that she was to return to school, the Saturday night, our house was bombed. That again, just set off another chain of events. But the piece of this that I think I remember, I remember on several occasions the school bus driver going back to school, because he was scared to death that he was about to have a lynching on the bus. I remember the day after my sister was arrested and was in jail, the next morning, his turning around and saying to me, "Don't let them see you cry. Don't let them see you cry."

RK: Was this an older man?

SH: Well, I guess he was in his, he was a middle-aged guy, late '40s. And then the day after Martin Luther King was killed, his again saying something to the effect of don't let them take away from you something. And they were doing all the things around, "Oh God, oh, I'm so disappointed. Oh, the coon was killed before I could kill him. Oh, we need to go give him an award. Why do we have to be going to school? We should be going to give him a medal." Oh, it was such a festival on the bus that morning. I remember the teachers from the W.B. Dobie, the black school, every Thursday, doing tutoring lessons with us to make
sure that we made it. I remember the neighbors rebuilding our house. It took us a year. We lived in a shack. I mean, you could look up, you could see the sun. You could look down, you could see the ground. You poured a bucket of water to wash the floor, because all it did was run through the holes in the floor.

You went outside to take a bath for privacy. Just a two room shack that we lived in. But there were many things that that experience taught me. The primary one that I came away with was that for certain things that you believe in, you really have to stand up for it, and at times, put your life in danger for it. I didn't know that when I went into that school situation. After a couple of weeks, the fear of death becomes insignificant because you decide at some level, the fear is worst than death. So you decide that I'm going to stay here. I'm going to stay here for what I believe in. It doesn't ease the pain.

The most hurtful part that I still am--I don't necessarily say resolving, but I know is there--was what I felt was the betrayal of the adults in that situation, the white teachers, who allowed the students to abuse us, who I remember saying--we were trying to take an exam. I was being hit from the back. I was in biology, and I said to this teacher, "Please, somebody is hitting me." And he said, "I don't have time to baby-sit you. I don't have time to baby-sit you. I don't know who hit you, and I don't have time to watch. So you're going to have to deal with that on your own." Those situations were very painful, being ridiculed in the classroom by teachers, being passed over, being not given assistance when we were taking exams and so forth. I was still,
I think, very innocent in my belief, you know, in the goodness of people. But at the same time, there was also the field director from American Friends Service Committee, who was risking her life to come out. The Family Aid Fund that helped sustain my family when dad had no place to farm and we had no place to live. Those are the things that I became resolved around. That it's not right that we have a society that when people basically want a better education that all of these things would happen to them. That it was just not right. And clearly there were some people in the society that were misled, because not all white people are bad. There were enough people who were either misled or who were not well that somehow we needed to, there had to be work to change that. Because for people who simply wanted to go to a college, they shouldn't have had that happen to them. That was the firm kind of belief. It took on a passionate belief, later, in college. But that experience was the making of the determination that, no, I was not going to be a social worker, in a sense, or a nurse, or whatever I had as an image for me. But whatever it is that I did for as long as I lived, was going to be around changing the society.

RK: How did your relationship with the other people in the community, particularly the adults, how did that change or what was that like?

SH: I was still basically invisible in the black community as one of the individuals who was at Wetumpka High. My sister was the hero. She was the heroine. The person who had stood up. The person who had been persecuted. People basically felt that
Debra, on that day, just stood up for the race. Of course, Debra didn't take in any of that because she basically felt that she had stood up for herself and had been abandoned. So she had a good bit of anger and bitterness. I was building a kind of quiet kind of resolve. Of course, becoming more and more withdrawn, in a sense. Before going to Wetomca High, I was just budding out into this person who was generally, I think, shy by nature, but had started to speak and take on more leadership roles. I found myself being very unsure of myself. Again, as I said, there were some members of the black community who felt that we had kind of made some trouble. We really should have stayed from over there.

We should not have done that. I know there were many leaders who were fearful at some level that this was going to bring in a lot of the outsiders.

RK: Outsiders from where?

SH: The Martin Luther Kings and the protesters. So while there were many black folk in the town in support of us, they were not so sure that it was a good thing for the community to have all this ruckus going on that was happening in some other areas. So in a way, I think, there were leaders that kind of kept the lid on things, including, I feel, my uncle and my pastor. And there were other leaders who, at that time, basically feared that we certainly step out and take a stand, but we didn't want to do it in ways that brought in others and kind of lost control of the situation, and ultimately left black folk in worse off situations with relationships between whites there.

So in some ways, I think, my home community didn't progress in
ways that it could have had people had the courage to really lift up and look at some of the underbelly of racism in our town.

RK: Did you stay on at that school?

SH: We did. We were there on Monday, the first day after the bombing. We were there. We were right there. As a matter of fact, three days later Debra had beaten the fire out of another white boy, and this time it was a real battle. They were going to make us get off the bus last, even though we were in the front seat. You know, make the niggers get off the bus last. And they would start standing up earlier and earlier, and we would stand up early one day, and they would stand up. So finally the bus driver said, "You can't stand up on the bus. Everybody is going to have to stay seated until we get to the school." When we got to the school that day, they had packed the line getting off the bus so tightly. Well, one girl got her purse hooked in the back of the seat, so Debra stepped out in the place. There was this football player who turned around and just went up on the side her head, and something to the effect, "Nigger, why you getting off the bus this close behind me or something?" Well, by this time this girl has been out of school for a whole semester, and had nothing but rage built up inside of her. She just kind of went mad and knocked him off the bus. By the time I could get off the bus, all I saw was blood. She's wearing this white leather jacket. Well, it was his nose that was bleeding, really. God, and I'm going, "Oh Jesus." So she finally got off of him and headed to the principal's office. She's got all this blood on this jacket. The principal said, "Oh
God, you again," whatever. So he had both of them to come to the office. Then he called the superintendent, and it just so happened that the Justice Department attorneys were doing their exit interview, getting ready to go back to Washington, and they got this call. The superintendent said, "Listen, there's been a problem developed, and I've got to go over to the school." They said, "Well, by any chance does it involve Debra Bracy?"

[Laughter] "Yes." So they said, "Well, we'll go with you." So, of course, it was quite a relief to see the superintendent show up with these two officials who we were seeing as a God-send in our lives. What resulted from that was they both were suspended for three days, as opposed to going through this whole ritual again. Went on, and stayed in school, graduated. Didn't go to Wetomca High. Got a NAACP Legal Defense Fund scholarship to go to a predominantly white school. Went to a white college, which was a junior college, that ended up being--didn't know this for years--the camp. The college of the camp that had been next door to us, you know, where we lived [laughter]. It was just a slight difference, I think, from the school because they hadn't long been desegregated either, although there were clearly individuals there at the campus, who were professors and teachers, who really were fair. Equally, you had those who were not and tried to promote the inferiority of blacks by scripture from the Bible.

RK: Was this in Alabama? So you stayed in the South.

SH: Yeah. Stayed there, and went on to Auburn University, and that's where I received my Bachelors Degree. As a matter of fact, I majored in Family and Child Development, I switched over
to that my junior year, and it was because of that major that the American Friends Service Committee said, "Hey, Sophia, there's this meeting going on, and there's some developments going on in Alabama that we think may have some relevance to what you're studying, your course of study. If you can, come to this meeting that's going to be held in Selma." And I did come, and I was there in part because I had a semester exam coming up the next day, and I was, of course, studying for my exam, but listening as well as to what was being shared. Well, that meeting ended up being the organizational meeting for the federation, FOCAL. By now, in the major that I am in, having recognized how much a child learns in the first six years of their life, and realizing what experiences that I had just encountered, and I was, geez, certainly ninth grade, having competed ninth grade before I went to Wetumpka High. The two began to come together in my mind. That it's going to be extremely important that children are cared for individuals who value them. So that's again, I attribute the awareness of the early messages among children learning that in my child development classes, reflecting back on my experiences with my siblings, being their caretaker. Having the reflection and the recent memory of what happened to my family. And then going and hearing what people were voicing in this meeting, of their concerns about this new law that had been passed by the state legislature that required all facilities caring for over six children to be licensed. They couldn't get any information on how to do that. They didn't know what it meant. They didn't know what the ramifications were, and there was paranoia that at
some level this was the first move by the government to take the care of children away from black families. And of course, having these experiences very fresh in my mind, I think, is when the determination then became a passion.

RK: I'd like to back up just a second on a couple of things. One, you spoke about the people in the NAACP, the Justice Department, the American Friends Service Committee. How much contact or how useful were these kind of civil rights, different kinds of organizations and people? Were you starting to meet people when you were in college in some of these outside organizations, places in the North, other places in the South, that were working on this issue? When do you start developing a sense of yourself as an activist?

SH: I think I did that in college. You spoke about the usefulness. I think extremely useful. At the time that we were introduced to members who were a part of the American Friends Service Committee's organization, it was very valuable for, one, us to experience people who valued us and what we were doing, and had information that did not have to come from the local government. It was like there was a chance. We felt there was hope. It was also very valuable to see people who we believed at the time, and certainly I felt, didn't have to be here. That were committed enough to something to put themselves in some danger to make life better. That I put together in my mind was something later, in college it was, that said, we made some decisions not from the help of anybody outside encouraging us to. It came out of our own belief and our own desire to better
ourselves. And then the hammer dropped on us. But there were some other people who were willing to risk trying to offer opportunities for us to really achieve ultimately what we wanted, by their support and their involvement. And the act of their support itself became something that was an inspiration. What I saw myself becoming at some level was a provider of that same kind of hand to people who wanted to make their lives better, and that if I could, in my life, use that in a way that helped to create an opportunity then. . . . And not only could create that opportunity, but in the process try to change a system and create a new one that valued all peoples, then my life was very worthwhile. In some respect, I was giving back to what had been given to me.

RK: The other question I was thinking about was this whole bill to regulate these groups. One of the things that I was interested in was this notion of the state kind of moving in and regulating these. On the one hand, that seems like perhaps a useful thing of standards and upgrades and things like that. But on the other hand, as in the case of, say, midwives is another example of another profession who moves in and actually undermines a very valuable resource, not only in the black community, but in most kind of working class and poor communities in the country. It seems to me you were aware of that with this bill and this whole kind of just change. That something that had been very important was being threatened.

SH: I think what was really present in that meeting there in that initial meeting of FOCAL, the people there, the paranoia
that came out of what they saw happening in the school situations, that after the desegregation of schools, they saw good black teachers being displaced. They saw principals who had excellent reputations no longer having a school. Either they would have some kind of job that was rather insignificant or they didn't have one at all or they were told that they had to go back to college and upgrade themselves. So in essence, the black community were seeing, at some level, the desegregation situation really dismantling a very important part of the black community's culture and structure there. So it was generally felt that left to its own, you know, measures this law was going to do something similar. They were already experiencing a reluctance on the part of the state social services welfare agency in providing information to communities who were requesting information. So it was not that they would have, I guess, been necessarily skeptical of it, had not it been in the height of this experience and the experiences of desegregation, and was already beginning to feel the resistance of the state to provide information so that they could meet the law. And at the same time, it was saying, "Cease operating." They saw that to mean then, if what we're doing, it's a way to really close down all of our facilities which leads us to no other choice but to select those that you have and that you will favor. It ultimately means that the care of our own children is going to be in somebody else's hand. So that was the real scare that was in the minds of folk.

Clearly as we proceeded with looking at this problem, of looking at what could happen, people were very clear that they supported
quality. They felt that it was imperative for black children to have the kind of quality enhancement. Because the fact was those kids were going to end up in schools with white kids who had some previous enhancement and exposure to child development or educational kind of stimulation. And they felt that it was imperative that that be a part of that. They equally felt, though, that the control of that should be in the hands of the family and in the hands of the community that the child was from.

RK: Maybe you could just talk a little bit about how the organization was set up, some of the people that were involved.

SH: Well, I left that meeting that day quite stimulated, even though I was using half a mind there. And again, the American Friends Service Committee [AFSC] who had been one of the sponsors, the AFSC and the Selma Inter-Religious Project were the two sponsoring organizations for that initial meeting. The American Friends Service Committee was selected as the secretary. Volunteered to be the secretary for the group, in the process of getting the organization formed. And it was a staff member from AFSC that had mentioned to me that there were internships available through the Southern Education Foundation, and that I might want to apply for that, and use my first year in support of the development of this organization. And of course, that was exciting to me because I was going to be graduating soon, and needed a job. I certainly didn't feel I had any idea about organizing, but, in fact, I did.

You asked about early on about my beginning to view myself as a kind of activist. I had become involved in college with
some student activist kinds of things. I remember Leon Hall, who
had been a member around the edges of SNCC, and Butch Wright, and
they were students in the civil rights movement. They had come
over and talked to me as we had launched efforts to start a Black
Student Union over at Auburn. So I had begun to really
participate in workshops and sessions that were beginning to help
me development an activist kind of mentality. Then, of course,
having become an intern, being selected to be an intern,
continued that role as I began to travel the state to inform
people of this new organization, to try to recruit board members,
and members to participate, and basically to get a feel for what
was happening in communities in response to the new Child Care
Act. So on the one hand, I was out there in the community with
people. On the other hand, I was being provided information and
sent to meetings and so forth where I was learning more and more
about the rights of people, particularly as it related to
programs that were available to support community development,
providing services to families, and in essence, services and
programs that black folk had never ever dreamed, I suppose, that
could be of benefit to them.

RK: You really kind of built this from the grassroots
yourself? You were the only. . . ?

SH: I was the organizer. The staff person for the American
Friends Service Committee was working more at that point with the
steering committee, looking at shaping the by-laws, looking at
the development of the first proposal. But yes, I was the
organizer. I was out there in the community, making contact with
the folk. And a lot of those contacts came out of contacts that the AFSC had from its work around the whole desegregation of schools. So that was my entree into many of the communities. Others were people were just hearing about this organization and was making contact, saying, "We're having a problem. Could somebody come and help us figure out what to do?"

RK: What did you find when you went out to the communities, in terms of existing child care?

SH: Well, the things that I found first of all was how much the people were like me. The communities were like my community. I mean, a lot of it was rural. We had a few urban areas, but no matter where they were, I put faces on them. They were my aunts. They were the women in the church. They were the people that I knew. I don't quite know what I was expecting, but that was kind of surprising, as my first kind of looking at something broader than my community. The other thing shocking to me was how different the child care situations were than the ones I'd experienced at Auburn University in studying Family and Child Development, and having gone through the child study laboratory there as a part of my training. I kept thinking, well, where's any of the stuff that I just saw. This is two worlds. These things don't even nearly, you know, come together to be similar.

So, in a sense, I had to relearn, in a way, how to take what I had learned--and I couldn't do that for a good while. . . .

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RK: And also some of the successes that you had. If it helps to think of this first block of time, first six or seven years, seven, eight years, as one period of time.

SH: As a matter of fact, I guess a way of looking at that, the easiest way for me to not struggle with giving too much detail, is to kind of look at the first seven years in terms of what we saw as being the successes that came out that period. What were some of our struggles, and then, of course, how was the second phase of the work different from that, and what were some of the things that we learned and so forth. That will kind of help frame it in a way.

RK: What, in this period, did you see yourself doing as you started out trying to accomplish?

SH: Well, after the organization really got on its feet, this was kind of an evolution, in a way, but it was very clear at the end of that year, in the fall, when the organization had really, in a sense, its first big state-wide annual meeting, that its mission was to be a vehicle for those communities who needed information, who needed support and technical assistance, and for it to be a place where people could come and mobilize and share and gain knowledge and information to take back in their community. There was the hope that this organization would become the voice for low-income families who really cared about having a role in shaping the quality of care that their children received.

RK: Was the Headstart Programs or the concept of Headstart
influential in all this? Because I'm struck by the similarity in a way of this parent involvement, community involvement.

SH: Headstart was certainly in place in a number of communities, and, in fact, one of our first board members was the director of the Alabama Council Headstart Program. Not necessarily though. My sense is that the emphasis on parent control had far more to do, and it really was more about community control, with the fears that again the care of children would really be removed from families, and there was a real fear about what that meant. So much so, that the organization's name had community control in it as a way of lifting that up and making that really very, very high, in terms of the agenda. So there was a sense that this would become a voice for community control of the care of its children. And that this also would become a vehicle that could provide the kind of resources and support that ultimately would enhance the quality of care that children received. So there was an acknowledgement that at some level we can't be satisfied with just babysitting, or maybe this person has it over here and this one doesn't, so we'll just kind of go along with that. But it was an acknowledgement that good training, quality care was a very important objective of this group. And the other one was that clearly the community is going to need to have basic information to meet licensing requirements by the state. It was not a sense that we should fight those requirements even. It was not an objection to the law itself, but it clearly was that we need the resources to meet it, and we need that because we need to be sure that care child remains in
the community that reflects the identity of our children, and
that parents and the community must have control of what that
care is.

RK: Where there demographic changes going on that increased
the need for child care in this period? Were more women going to
work? Were the kind of extended families that you had grown up
in and supported you, as more and more people moved off the land,
those kinds of things...?

SH: There were a couple of things going on. Yes, as far as
demographics go, Alabama was having industries relocate here for
the first time during this period of time. You had many people
who were going to work in jobs that were not domestic or field
work for the first time, particularly down in the Black Belt.
There were several, I think, opportunities created by plants that
were relocating there. But the second piece was that there was a
natural climate that was ripening for child care anyway in the
country. Because this was right on the heels of consideration of
national Comprehensive Child Care Act. The famous one that Nixon
vetoed in 1972 that would have been a comprehensive piece of
legislation addressing the growing numbers of mothers who were
entering the work force, and the first time, I think, since the
Depression, at some level, that there had been any
acknowledgement that there needed to be some role that government
played in ensuring that you have a child care delivery system
that could accommodate that need and was not totally perceived to
be the responsibility of the mother to find good child care. So
those were two things that were influencing. It certainly
influenced the state to begin, because I think the state was making ready itself, as was the case with many other states. And in fact, the FOCAL model was one that had, at some level, been viewed by national advocates such as Marian Wright Edleman and Evelyn Kay Moore and members of the American Friends Service Community as vehicles for communities, those representing low income families and black families, to ready themselves to be able to receive federal dollars. So again, the problem was really created in a sense by Alabama, kind of as a state jumping on the band wagon to make sure that it had in place requirements for those that were going to be getting in the business. On the other hand, when the problems began to be created, the whole notion that this organization could, in fact, live, be created and be a vehicle for the community was not something that was just limited to the state. Because there were four other states that had sister organizations. The second year after I was intern, I was the program specialist for the National Black Child Development Institute. Again, working to continue to build this organization, and they had a southern office that supported similar efforts in Mississippi, in North Carolina, in South Carolina, and Georgia.

RK: So you're interacting and there is a lot of information?

SH: Right, there's a lot of interaction. In the second year, I'm involved in interaction that is really looking at dynamics that are going on in the organization of similar groups, although they took on different kind of shapes. But yes, it was
not kind of a single strategy. It was a part of a larger strategy as well for this region.

RK: It seems to me that in a fairly short period of time you did quite a good job of organizing. I mean, you had quite a large membership and a lot of activity. I'm amazed that by the mid-70s, '77, '78 you got a. . . .

SH: That was really amazing. It truly was. There was some concern in the initial year of FOCAL that one of the reasons that training had to be such a critical issue that people were feeling that if we were to be able to link the whole problem around being licensed, then the next one was going to be training qualifications. That was the belief that that would be the next piece that would be raised up, that would become an obstacle. So the organization decided it had to be a training resource to communities, to provide training opportunities for people. And truly, in '74 the state began to consider training requirements that were a lot tougher. The organization at the time was strong enough to be able to impact those policies in a way that allowed for the organization to become one of the training entities there. It also was able to influence the state not to make the training requirement be college course hours, but rather training that was provided by an acceptable institution. Because again, that would have cut out just an enormous number of individuals who would not even be able to pass a college entrance exam, let alone have the resources to get to a college program, and have transportation and the monies to do that. So we were able to get that done. And I think following that, you know, the ground
swell just, I mean, when people heard that this was an organization here that was providing training and it was moving around the state with this training, I mean, we didn't recruit any more. Folk were just, you know, again, we had only two staff people and a board, a very involved board, by the way, but not many of those board members in positions to really be trainers. So you basically have this staff person who was trying to identify the resources, and I was still pretty green with this stuff. But to pull together these resource people who could be the trainers for this, and we would have upwards of three hundred people at some of the sessions who were wanting to get the training. But we said it as one of the best kept secrets around, because before the state was quite aware of what was going on, there were about forty-five programs licensed. Because they weren't really interacting with each other in any kind of way. So we were going out there, and before it was known, there was this huge network of programs, day care programs, really licensed. And that was really needed. One of the strategies that I really brought over from my childhood, having the experience of our house being bombed and having unexploded Molotov cocktails not go off and being presented to the chair, and then having seen written up that there were no signs of foul play in the burning of this home, made me quite, of course, skeptical of press, not to mention law enforcement people, but decided that there was no reason for us to be very visible about the work of the organization. And I think it was probably 1985 before we really did a press conference.
RK: Really?

SH: That directed attention to our work. And at that time, we saw that being a very strategic part of the strategy of what we were needing to do and felt we were in a position, having established a kind of track record that needed to be in place, as not to then be, in a sense, defined by the media, and then you would have to really spend a good bit of time trying to react to. That was a deliberate move on our part to not be very visible.

RK: How did you manage to influence the state of Alabama in the way that you did, because there are a number of points in which you were actually quite influential in getting people put on state boards, getting laws or administrative.

SH: One of the things that I think really was very valuable was this organization started out being very much connected to national organizations. The Children's Defense Fund and Black Child Development Institute, was what it was called at that time, were particularly valuable to us in helping us to really stay on top of what the regulations and requirements were. And we were, in many incidences, much more knowledgeable about what those were. That was before the shift occurred back to the state level. So we had basic information. We would go out and train out folk about what that information was, and keep them abreast of that. So when we would go into a policy meeting, you brought in people who already knew, and often times it was rather embarrassing because some of the state officials didn't know what the requirements were. Again, there was that feeling that with these people being as knowledgeable as they are, you know, we
don't necessarily want to get tangled up in any kind of law suit. There was always a vote--it was good thing they didn't know at that point how much I didn't see that as a strategy [laughter]--we always kept very much present the subtle notion that if we had to take legal action, we would. That helped us to be, so I think that, again, the belief that the information that was received needed to be shared by a larger group of folk, and that it was more than one person who was viewed as the person who was knowledgeable. And at that point, the board of FOCAL, there was a good bit of emphasis being placed on board development, and most of that board development time was basically being spent learning about information that would have some kind of direct connection to policies.

RK: Your kind of immediate group of people you're trying to serve are the people who work and direct and run day care centers of one sort, and then there's the children themselves. What kind of impact would you say, during this period, you felt that the good quality day care that you trying to help your clients deliver, what kind of impact did you think that would have on children and how would it address issues of poverty and whatever issues you saw?

SH: Yeah, that was always the centerpiece. It was always the centerpiece. As a matter of fact, it was only in the late '70s before at some level there was attention being placed on the fact that there was a heavy make-up of the provider community in the organizations network. It was initially our community. It was initially our children, our future, and what is going to be
needed for us to give them, equip them, to better their lives, because ultimately we were talking about our lives. So that's where the emphasis, and whenever we talked about the adults, it was the adults preparing themselves for what they could give to the children. How to make that better. It was only, I think, around the late '70s when we were involved in some of the committees drafting that federal regulation by the Department of Health and Human Services at the national level that when you talked about staff ratios, when you talked about child-teacher ratios, clearly you were talking about, at some level, lower ratios being more costly on the part of the center, and providers were clearly aware that you would have to pay staff people. So it meant at some level that this particular policy meant this. That was the first kind of awareness of that, because, again, what you had for the majority of the programs, you had generally an older woman who had reared her family, had some access to some limited resources, was able to use utensils and different things out of her own home to help supplement things that the child care facility needed, and generally it was other like minded individuals, some of them younger who had children themselves, that were brought in to work with this person, with the dream she had for children in her community. So it was not a kind of definite business, and here this person is hiring.

But when things began to be more stringent about having these facilities operate from a business perspective and paying them minimum wage and that kind of thing, many of the programs really reached a point where those requirements were a real
disadvantage in that it forced people to take on a business kind of formality in the running of the program. But it was when clearly providers began to make some distinctions between themselves at some level and the rest of the people, parents and other people working in the program, because we got a couple of situations where just people did not perform or there had to be a choice of somebody being let go when you had to pay minimum wage. Then in some instances we had people going and reporting this. What you ultimately ended up with was the facility or an individual being charged a fairly large sum of money because of a penalty by wage and hour. And I think those kind of things were the things that caused people to begin to say at some level, well, we are at more risk here and that we need to be more careful about how we bring people on and what is the formal kind of relationship that exists between us.

But even with that, there were several instances where there were positions that the organization had to take that in the short run it would be more costly to operators of these programs, but in the long term it would be a stronger benefit for the family and the community. That people took the hard-nosed decision, you always had the people there, the Mary Robinsons down in Freedom Quilting Bee, that would stand up and say, "Listen, folk, who are we here for anyway? We can't short change our children. But who are we ultimately here for. We aren't here for salaries for ourselves." And she would stand up in the meeting and cut the issue, and of course, people would take the position that was always in the long run the best one for
children, the best one for families. And that's how we've consistently done that, even as we became more aware that in many of our meetings and policy discussions you had the person who was directing the program or the operating the program present there, but it never failed. Even when we had to make a decision in the early '80s because, with the reductions that had taken place with the new block grant that cut back the services so severely, we lost so many programs. And I remember down in Selma one of our life board members, Miss Sutton, stood up at a meeting and said, "You know, I don't care who's in office, whether it's Reagan. I don't care who's the governor of Alabama. Our children are our children, and they're going to always be our children, and simply because they say they're not qualified, and we've got to take them out of the program, does not mean that the welfare of those children isn't our concern. And we must do something about that." And began what resulted in the formation of a state-wide sliding fee scale. That didn't bring back all the families, but it supported the provision of service for a greater number of families than would have. And that came out of a meeting of about fifteen folk, and here's this woman who is 70+ years old now, still coming to every meeting, and stood up and said, "Hey, our children are our welfare and our concern. We must be responsible for them." So it's happened that way in many instances where there was a hard decision that had to be made. Some one stood up with the moral, spiritual, visionary, looking at the benefit and the value for the community.

RK: It's a wonderful continuity in the communities between,
say, the generation of yourself and your mother—I mean, they did things in more informal ways, in a sense, but both the vision and the hope and expectation, and also the commitment was there both in the organization and down at the grassroots in various local communities that you were working with.

SH: Right, exactly. It is there. So it's very hard to separate, again. It's very hard to separate. There have been times when people have tried to put labels, in the sense of what the organization is. I mean, again, you have had school teachers because at one point it was retired teachers who brought much of the skill and the resource and the vision, or some person who had been in an activist role in their community. And many of those programs were named for Jonathan Daniels. You know, you've got M&M Day Care Center named for the twin girls that one of them was killed in Mercidian down in Choctaw County. You've got people who have created their visions of programs and offered names that carries on a tradition that speaks to things that people were proud of and embraced in their communities. While there were day care facilities serving kids, in many ways these became vehicles for people to live out their visions that they've had for many years. Many folk who worked previously and cared for families in domestic situations are basically in a job where they may have been an insurance agent, or at some level, never having been in a job that they felt they could be what they wanted to be. You know, the child care facility became something. The organization of FOCAL became a place, you know, for them to gather, for them to feel good about their roles and their leadership and later on
their businesses. It was much harder to get people to see their programs as businesses. They basically saw them as a service to the community, and when we would say, "Please, you've got to follow the staff-child ratio." "Buy honey, what is this girl going to do? She's out of her job. She needs to go seek a job, and go to interviews. She can't take these three children along with her." "Yes, but Mrs. Sanders if you keep the three children here and somebody comes in from the state, you've got more than your staff-child ratio. You're going to be penalized." But it was very difficult, and even with all of that many of those women made choices. They said, "No, if I can't do that, I don't need to be here because part of what I'm here for is to support these families, to support these young mothers, and to give these children the kind of love." And they would tell you, you know, "All a child needs is love. That's all you need. All the stuff y'all talking about here in this program right now, they don't need that. They just need to know that somebody loves them and is going to listen to them."

RK: So what were some of the problems and the frustrations and the limitations of FOCAL in this first period?

SH: I think one of the real frustrations that I remember during the early period of FOCAL and that carried out quite a while was what I felt was the real callousness and lack of caring and downright, I think, arbitrary actions by the Department of Pensions and Security, at that time. Particularly the county offices. It was clear at that time that there were resources available, but it was a real contrariness on the part of that
agency about supporting families. There were attitudes that were racist about being a support to black families. There were attitudes that really, I think, had to do with a belief that mamas ought to be taking care of their own children, and we don't need to be getting into doing that. It was a perpetuation of this stereotype that if you care for a mama's child, then she would then have time to lay around and play around. There was not any kind of connection between, it seems, that you're an agency that's in the business of welfare, and if you provided child care, you would prevent that same family from being on welfare. There was no connection between that. And they had resources, and would refuse. . . . I mean, the providers of the child care facilities would have to jump through hoops. They would go through all kinds of wasting of time and energy trying to cause the department to place a child in the program that clearly either was being neglected, that mama couldn't get a job, the mama was depressed, the mama was angry, and that the child being there in that facility was going to better able that child to be ready for first grade when they got there, as opposed to wandering around in the streets throwing rocks, you know, by themselves.

Again, I'll never forget, down in (B     ) where this day care person told me, she said, "This agency right now has plenty of slots that they can place, and here's a family that I have begged and pleaded, 'I want you to go see it,'" and I went there with her and she rang the bell. And here was an individual, a man, who was either paralyzed or something, but he was dragging
himself on the floor, his body on the floor, just kind of dragging, and there were a couple of youngsters, ages one, maybe two, and there they were. And there was all the filth and the dirtiness, and the kids were dirty, and the place was filthy, and here's this person, obviously, can't take care of himself. And they're in this situation because a mother has left with her cousin because she has no other choice. She's on a job somewhere. And I'm thinking, you know, it has to be really cold hearted, uncaring people who will say that the resources that are there available to you, you cannot have foresight to see that this is going to benefit ultimately your community. I saw those situations time and time again, that were the real frustrations, because I saw a lot of energy lost. I saw people turning back to the state slots that were taken and used in more creative counties where you had a director who was much more alert and bright and sharp to the point that says, "Hey, this is a benefit to my community." But particularly in the rural counties, particularly in the counties in the black belt, consistently we were having to badger and push and struggle with persons around giving service. And then there was the changing of the policies. You get this thing accomplished on this end, and it's like it unravels over here. Those times were rather frustrating. And you were trying to get the community, to get the leaders, in fact, black leaders, you were trying to get policy makers to understand that child care is a benefit to the community. It's a benefit to the state. Educationally, it saves money for the state. It helps us to break the cycle of poverty. It's an
employment opportunity for mothers to work. It was so difficult
to get people to recognize the benefit, because there was the
mind-set was a mother's responsibility, and the state had no
business being in the business of that. I think those were some
of the most frustrating experiences.

RK: You talk in some of the writing that it was also a
problem in the black community itself about trying to get people
mobilized around these ideas. You felt a real lack of. . . .

SH: Yes. I think as we began to move toward, the first
years of FOCAL was very optimistic. People were all excited
because there was the belief that the poverty programs, the Great
Society programs, all is going to be, we're moving toward a land
of milk and honey. Toward the latter '70s, we began to see that
that probably was not going to be in the distance future, and we
saw more and more of an re-entrenchment of some of the attitudes
that had been previously held. We saw funding becoming tighter,
and as we saw those resources drying up, our efforts were to say,
hey, to all of these people we've got coming to these training
sessions and so forth, "Hey, folk, let's mobilize. Let's get
ourselves involved. Let's assume responsibility." The more the
federal government retreated, the more passive we saw our
membership become. And this became again a very frustrating time
for us because we were kind of examining, what were we going
wrong? Immediately, I remember thinking, God, maybe I'm losing
some of my skill here as an organizer. We're not able to get
people to come, and we saw people doing more posturing
themselves and trying to seek favor from the white case workers
and so forth. As we began to encourage people to listen, "Let's mobilize. Let's look at assuming responsibility for our own communities, for our children ourselves." While people agreed with that, there was this passiveness that existed that was really frustrating. And as an organization and as a leader in the organization, I was, for a while, questioning whether or not, I had lost my ability to do this, to be able to mobilize, to be able to galvanize the support needed to have people to move forth. And I guess people were in a way recognizing--because at this point, I was still kind of looking at, if we just organize ourselves well enough, we can cause the government to do something different. And it took a while before, there was a period of reflection and a period of looking internal, for me to become clear, and, again, I have to give a great deal of credit to my colleague here, that has almost in a sense, you know, a co-director in this organization, Jack Gilbeaux. Because, I think, from his place and having been a person who had spent more years in the War on Poverty programs and so forth, I mean, he was beginning to say, "Sophia, this is something that's just not limited to FOCAL. This is more national. This is national place, a national mood, that we see existing. And in a sense, what we're trying to do, at some level, is extract something from government that is not there. It's not there. So we can get all the folk to go down there to the state house we want to, for what? What do we come away with?" And it was in that place of self examination, frustration, and border line disillusionment that what we came away with, and began to be much more aware and
in touch with, is that what the phenomenon had to do with, our own sense of ownership—"our" meaning African Americans—of the destiny, you know, for ourselves in our community. And that for as long as there seemed to be some degree of hope that the government was going to do what it, you know, was supposed to do, that we were happy and excited and, you know, really motivated. But at some level when that began to change and there was people retreating, we had no sense of how to step forward and assume responsibility for the welfare of our own community. And in fact, what we began to see was people posturing themselves in ways to fit some kind of label that would provide and offer them security. That somehow if I could just be quiet enough as a black person, and show people, big people, white people, how good I am, how nonthreatening I am, that they will ultimately take care of me. Now, of course, that was not limited to blacks, because in some ways, I think, there's the same thing of women feeling like, if I can be feminine enough, you know, helpless enough, dependent enough, then I'm going to find some male who's going to take care of me.

We began to become aware of a piece that we saw, and is called by many, internalized oppression, internalized barriers, racial scripting, whatever you want to call it, but it is the belief, at some level, that if I can define myself by a certain definition, that somehow somebody else is going to take care of me. And discounting at some level the power that I have, you know, to do that, to achieve the vision. And in fact, it precedes even the discovery of power. Somehow the vision is
contaminated with that knowledge that somehow if I look pretty enough, if I act quiet enough, if I'm passive enough, the vision is that somebody else is going to look after my own welfare, my own benefit, and it's a discount of the power that we have to do that. That evolved over a period of three or four years, before we were comfortable enough and had been able to draw out of this whole internal examination, enough concepts that we could put some handles to, and to be able to come away with something that we could build strategies around and incorporate into the organizing strategies, into the work, into the training, into all of the work that we were doing. Prior to this period, the organization had provided training. The organization had provided technical communities to meet the requirements that they needed to meet. The organization had been an advocate, a voice, around parent control, parent involvement, community control. But clearly what we were recognizing at this level that, while we had been very successful with that, we have gotten a lot of action and involvement and changed policies. . . .

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SH: That had to do with our perceptions of ourselves, and our perceptions of our own power. We had not begun to address the connection between racism and poverty, between classism and poverty, the "isms" and the conditions that people were in. And that if we didn't begin to address those things, what we were going to find ourselves doing, at some level, is mobilizing and going out here, changing some policies, changing some things, but ultimately when the climate changed—we had a change in administration, we had a national climate that began to look differently at what was right and what was wrong, what was popular and what was not—that ultimately if we didn't begin to address those issues, we were going to experience over and over again people abandoning themselves. People operating in destructive ways, in detrimental ways to their own welfare. I mean, we clearly could see case history after case history of people going in meetings and sabotaging those meetings, because they were much more interested in the connection to the person there who happened to represent power, who happened to represent influence, than they were about achieving what it is that they felt was in their best interest. That those things would get in the way. We saw it happen. This example that we continue to remember because it's so vivid. In the early '80s, Alabama had a windfall from the Gulf Coast there with oil reserves, and in one drop of a hat, this state got 500 million dollars dropped in its lap. It was in the height of the cuts in services to our state. We also had a governor at that time who was turning back federal
dollars, saying we needed to dismantle this system of charity and whatever. We were able to mobilize the human service community.

We were able to get a bill written that basically set aside a small portion of the interest that would be received by the state to help replace and restore significant cuts that had taken place in human services here at the state level. We could not get support for that by members even of the black caucus. We did manage to get one person who sponsored the whole bill for us, and in essence, changed a figure around in the bill that even if it had passed, it would have been a sabotage of the bill. And basically what we heard people saying was--because there was the bandwagon at that time of the governor of building roads, building concrete and mortar things, bonds and so forth. Nobody wanted to stand up to talk about the basic services, the basic needs of the people of Alabama, not just the black folk of Alabama.

So it allowed us to begin an examination of where we were in the state in a larger context. And what we came away is recognizing that the leadership in our state, in essence, operated almost from a reactive, rebellious, and in some respects, welfare mentality. We only did what the federal courts made us do. Our basic services were only supported if there were federal dollars to support them. We never could make the decisions to do that. We had about the most regressive and oppressive tax system in the country, still do. And that the basic support of education was not a priority. We didn't support our own natural resources, the people of the state, poor black or
white. So in looking at the whole question of leadership, we began to ask ourselves--and I was telling myself, my goodness, I'm just a child-care person. I'm just a child-care advocate. And, quite frankly, I was told by some of my black colleague legislators, "What are you doing over here? Child care, you're supposed to be taking care of the children." But I had to examine why is it that I didn't perceive myself to be leaders. I kept thinking, "I know there's smart white folk in this state. Why are they letting the folk running the government do this?" I mean, I was saying, "Why?" And finally I had to say to myself, "Are you thinking they're smarter than you? Do you think they know more than you? I mean, actually you see the issue. What's your role in this?"

And it was coming face to face with the perceptions that we all buy into the notion at some level that the "other people are the big people," are responsible for our welfare, my welfare. I had to, myself, go through an examination of my own fears, of those fears about whether I was smart enough, whether I knew enough, whether, in fact, I would be taken seriously. And oh, people really don't know. If they know that I really don't like to write, if they know I can't write at some level, oh, they will change their attitudes about me. All of those little critical messages over and over that we say. And again, as a black woman there were messages about my race as a black person, messages about my gender, my class, my physical appearance. I mean, all of those were pieces that piece by piece by piece I had to look it when I asked myself the question, "Why aren't you providing
the leadership that you feel is necessary for this state?" It was the evolving of that process that we call internalized oppression, and I'm not claiming ownership of that. But certainly in that we saw clearly when you look at it in terms of its racial context, racial scripting, that until we begin to make some connections to our legacy, our history, the messages that we have been given about how we should be in our society, then we cease to be able to envision and assume the responsibility to move past those messages to take up a leadership role.

We evolved six principles over a period of four years that became the framework that we build our work around here. Visioning, having a vision. Some of our folk really found this difficult. [Laughter] Actually, the way it evolved, we started with taking responsibility because around the '80s, '81, we were saying, "Where's our folk?" So we thought we've to lift up taking responsibility. We can't wait. So we went and were taking responsibility. By midways through the year we said at our second quarterly meeting, "Taking responsibility for what?" And then we went back to we must have a vision, because if we don't have a vision of what it is we're taking responsibility for, we're not going to take responsibility for it. And that vision has to go beyond what we feel the visions of those who have been limited and can only see this far. To see ourselves in ways that we have not experienced before. To see ourselves assuming that responsibility for ourselves. To see ourselves creating for our communities and our families the where-with-all to have quality life. That evolved. Then it was proactive
planning. And again, as we look back on our own activities, we saw that much of our response and our strategies had been built around reacting to something, i.e., the 1971 Child Care Act. Part of it was reacting to the fact that that was being oppressive to us. We could not limit our actions to those reactionary things, but also look beyond. Have a ten year plan, a twenty year plan for our community. To be able to know that I'm going to spend so much of my time over here trying to, you know, put out the fires, but some of it has to be put into development for the long haul.

Another one of the principles was moral and ethical principles. Again, the belief that we know the difference between right and wrong. That we will not decide at some level to abandon what we know is right, either in the name of politics, expediency or whatever else we may call it. But fairness and a belief in the oneness of all of us as human beings. Another one is risking. And Martin Luther King spoke of this. Having the courage to stand up for something, whether it's life threatening, whether you're the only one standing up for it, whether you're being ridiculed or not. But the courage to step out and represent what you believe to be right. The other is nurturing.

And each one of these evolved. I remember when we did the nurturing one. I asked everybody in the room to stand up and turn around and hug somebody. And I said, "At least hug them for five seconds without letting go of them and don't pat them." One lady started to cry. She said, "I haven't been hugged in sixteen years." Each one of these had just the power, a powerful,
profound kind of impact. We recognize that people were so needy, so needy of strokes, so needy of nurturing, so needy of something that makes sense. That they can operate from kind of a place of conscience with something that made sense. They didn't come easily, and we were struggling. And then quite frankly, given that we were living, we had to be writing to people saying what we were doing and whatever. And we had some of our funders who thought we had lost it. [Laughter] Not only our funders, some of our other friends there, too. "What is FOCAL trying to do over there? What are they doing? They've now gotten in psychology. What is this stuff you're talking about?" And we're saying, "Is it true that this is what happens in our community?" Well then, if it's true, if, in fact, black folks have never stopped and examined the fact that we're operating from a script. That we, at some level, have operated from a brainwash.

You know, everybody acknowledged that Patti Hearst needed to be deprogrammed when she came from her captures, but nobody wants to acknowledge that. That what we're doing is living out messages that were just as clear from our experience with slavery, and were very necessary at that point for survival. I mean, the number of our folk who don't want to do lesson plans, who are scared to death when you talk about writing lesson plans. And we say, "Do you know what kind of children you want to grow? Do you know what you want those children to be? A lesson plan simply is your guide to help you get there. You're clear about that. Why are you so afraid of writing it?" Where does that come from? And helping people to become aware that we're no
longer going to be killed for writing and reading. That we tattle on each other. [Interruption] "Oh God, what's wrong with you all? Y'all are blaming the victim." "Blaming the victim?" "Well, what you're doing is standing up telling white folk what our problems are." I said, "Honey, they already know. I'm sorry to tell you. They know as much about us as we do, more, at some level, of how we behave." The point is we are fooling ourselves when we try to run from the notions that we don't like to buy from each other. We've got studies to prove that when you talk about working together, associations, and working with each other, every group chooses their own group as a comfort level, and we tend to want to do that with each other. But we prefer to go and be a part of other groups.

When we start to talk about this notion of racial scripting, and the fact that we needed to begin to derobe, deprogram, and begin to examine, and do it with each other, because as long as there was a white person sitting in the room, we were going to spend far more of our energy caretaking of that white person. Trying to dodge around, not say things to make them uncomfortable. Our mind was going to be preoccupied with caretaking of the white person. Therefore, we needed to be in a setting—-that's why we call it the Black Women's Leadership and Economic Development Project, because we saw that black women were more eager to begin to examine and deal with these issues. But the fact of the matter is that we have been conditioned over a period of time to be the nurturers and the caretakers of white people, even to our detriment. And there's nothing wrong with
that. We're all a part of the human family. We should love white people. We should love all people. But when you do that to your own detriment, you are sick, and you need to examine why it is that you are doing that. And know that it's going to be okay to recognize whatever part is there, because you didn't put it there. But it's our responsibility to look at it now, become conscious of it, and try to put some other information there that now makes sense. And when the person stood up in the meeting and said, "What are y'all talking about all this black stuff? 'Cause ain't nothing that don't have white folks in it is good. You ain't gonna find nothing that's good that's got all black folk in it." And that, unfortunately, was not just her belief alone. This Saturday we had a statewide session up in Birmingham, and one of the child care leaders in that area said, "Why is that I've always heard that FOCAL did too much of this talk about black stuff?" She said, "I guess that's why I have never felt comfortable being a part of the organization." I said, "Well, interestingly enough, the organization is open to all people. And there are white people who are part of this organization. In fact, white people have stood up and said, at a similar meeting where a person stood up and said they were uncomfortable with all this blackness, said, "I am so happy because today I learned things about me that I never knew, and I appreciate that." And she said, "Well, it seems to me that you would be able to convey the same message that you want to without using the word black." And I said, "Well, at some point, we hope we will, but as long as people are uncomfortable with the use of the term, then that
means you've got work to do," as long as we're uncomfortable. I said, "Right now, if we're talking about having children in our care for ten hours, eight hours, and we're talking about the fact that we spend more time with those children, in many ways, than their parents. If we haven't begun to examine how we feel about ourselves, our own identity, how positive we are about who we are, it is very difficult for us to pass along that same positive message to children, because it's going to be lived out in various ways. Some of the ways are going to be, you walk in the classroom and you see nothing but white faces on the wall, or maybe a token Martin Luther King somewhere on the wall. You're going to find the things that you say to children perpetuate the same negatives that we have about each other, the negative messages about black folk and our no-goodness and our lack of being able to..." I said, "The one thing that, in any group of black folk that you can get in unison, is black folk ain't," whatever. I mean, you can generally get applause or generally get something. That is perpetuating, whether you believe it or not, a negative message about you. And then it always interests me that you will have a bewildered white person walk up and say, "Well, why do you have all the black-on-black crime?" Well, why do you think you do? You get a group of people who basically, at some level, have been told not to like themselves, not to like me, not to like my face, not to like my hair, not to like my nose, not to like lots of parts of me. Then obviously the person who looks like me is easier for me to not like them. Then you've got us all grouped up together with no sense of our own power,
frustration, and it's much easier. You see it with frustrated parents with their children, mothers with their children. There's nothing mystical about that.

The curriculum that we're now developing that embraces the six principles that we talk about, the ( ) curriculum, which is not a curriculum, by the way, to deal with a course of study inside the classroom, but it is a course of study for adults that look back, creating an environment that enhances the kind of educational goals that we want children to have. So in order to do that, you start with a reexamination of my own sense of worth, my own goals and purposes for my own life, and my own vision for what I'm here for and the children that are in my care. Calling it ( ). Again, we teach more powerfully by our actions than what we say. It's from that premise again that we believe ultimately that empowerment, ownership, assuming responsibility, starts with people being more conscious and in touch with one, what do they want? And that's very difficult for many folk, very difficult. We went through a process where we had to have people, every meeting, close their eyes and envision.

One person said one time, out of sheer frustration, "I'm fed up with this, because it's not going to get us anywhere. It's not going to happen. These visions we're talking about. It won't happen. Nobody's going to let us get it. So why are we doing this?" And it was very difficult to step by step, strategically, have people go through processes to allow them to even believe in the power of visioning. And then from that, looking at what, right now, are the barriers that I see that prevents me from
achieving that. And almost to the letter every time, the list has far more to do with what people have seen as being internal or intangibles that don't cost money. Having to do with trust, having to do with honesty, having to do with fear. Beyond that then identifying the resources. What are the resources I'm going to need? And it's our belief again that once a person can envision what they want, they're better able to marshal all of their resources. In fact, this process is one that I co-chaired just a couple of weeks ago in the Leadership Montgomery piece for the community of Montgomery. Because we don't a vision for this city, and bringing people together in a daylong session called Interchange, that begins to look at, what do we want for the city of Montgomery five to ten years from now? And for the 225 people who came, all walks of life, for the most part business leaders, people who are in organizations in education for the most part, it was very difficult to have those individuals articulate a vision, conceptualize a vision. It was much easier to deal with the problem. We don't have this. We don't have that. One reporter was pushing me to say, "Well, what do you mean by this vision stuff?" I said, "Well, what is yours? You have a vision, your sense of you, what is yours?" He said, "I want to be able to walk through West Montgomery without getting mugged." I said, "That's a problem, by the way, in the way that you have articulated that, perpetuates the divisions in this community. Stereotypes that keeps us divided. Because in that, in the way it was stated, there is the notion and the stereotype that in West Montgomery, black folk gonna mug you. So already you've got
a continuation of the divisions of the community. Now, how can you restate that in a way that's a vision, not a problem?" He says, "Well, I want Montgomery to feel safe." I said, "Wonderful, because in your vision to feel safe in Montgomery, then we can look at what are all the ways that we need to identify to help us move toward a safer Montgomery." Then you're rallying everybody, because everybody wants to feel that way. And it was very difficult. Just that little piece is not nearly as easy as it seems, but it's been part of what we have, for the last five years, felt a lot more comfortable at incorporating. And now, it's much easier.

When I co-chaired the governor's legislative task force on child day care at the state level, that piece, I was very clear about my role there. But I knew very well that this work was not the development work. When I'm doing a workshop with a group of women or a group of individuals that's beginning to struggle with what are those messages that I got that told me who I was that now result in my acting and operating this way, or not acting and operating this way? For me, that is far more rewarding than passing a legislative mandate, because I know ultimately that somebody probably in the next administration can come in and change that mandate. Although it's going to benefit some families. But in the long run, when people are able to discover for themselves their own power, white or black. For white folk I say, "Until you recognize that your destiny is tied to mine, and that racism is destructive for all of us, and you're not working to eliminate racism for my benefit, but rather for yours, then,
and only then, do you take some ownership for trying to change attitudes both within yourself and with your cousins and with your uncles and with your families, as I am working to do that with my own." Because I believe that we can't exist in this country and not have been affected by racism. That we maintain the system at some level, either from our doing it from the top down, or doing it from the bottom up. As long as the line is there, the system is being maintained. And there are many positions that say black folks can't maintain the system. I say, "Oh yes, we can maintain it." Because as long as discount my own power and my own worth, then I am helping to perpetuate that system.

RK: This is one of the things that so missing in this culture these days, this sense of vision, this sense of hope for the future, and I think it's not just... It's certainly more prevalent in certain groups than maybe in others, but it's kind of systemic, almost. It's everywhere. I'm thinking that in this project that we're doing that the fact--I mean, you've articulated this much better than I have--that one of the things that we want to do is to be able to get to the point where we can say that this is one of the things that we need to do. We don't need just to know technically how to provide better day care or better health care or welfare programs for poor people or to deal with the issue of poverty, or socioeconomic development, but behind all this is some sense of the need for a vision, a sense of purpose, a sense of values, a kind of morality that guides us both in our work and in our ( )
SH: And we can find the ways that that can happen if we believe that. I think if we develop the vision where we really recognize at some level that, again, we have the power, each one of us has the power to try to make our world the way we want it to be. And we're crippled if we're not represented there in the dialogue at the table for doing it. We each have that power. Then I think what we miss then is the opportunity to create ways for that to happen. And I think that we're talking about a process that provides people the opportunity, a safe enough opportunity or environment for people to explore, what are those things? What are those messages? What were you told as a kid about black folk or these folk? What was I told? Now, how does that live itself out today? What are the other messages you were given? What is it you want right now? How do you want to move through that and become different? My belief is that when we're able to do that, even though we have different ideologies, our philosophies might be different, it allows us to stay in the room to do what needs to be done for all of our benefits. And that's where we've broken down. We've compartmentalized ourselves, polarized ourselves, and all of that that says, I don't talk to this one. This one doesn't talk to me. You're Republican. I don't talk to the Democrats. All of that. We've got all of these lines of division that keeps us from being in the room. And we really, I thought, did some good work with an alliance of child care advocates here at some point. And what we came away with recognizing at some level, it was in our best interests to be able to look at those things we could agree on and work on
those. At least staying in the room, you know, enough to be able to know. And part of that comes from when I know what your history is and you know mine. It helps me to have a level of understanding. I may still not agree. You may not agree. But as long as we understand why we are as we are, it keeps us here together enough to create and shape and work together on what is going to be in the best interests of all of us. Some people look at that and say, "That's too soft." We've had funders say, "Too intangible, can't measure it," can't, you know, whatever. We've had other people to say, "Well, what's going to be the product?" We say, "This is the product. The process is the product."

"That doesn't make sense. How does it help poor people? How does it provide child care to poor people?" We say, "It's not done in isolation. The work has to be done in the context of something." So we're not talking about just setting up all these groups where you don't do anything but brainstorm about whatever. But it's a recognition that that level of awareness needs to exist. Then we consciously build ways to help address, so that we do develop that understanding, as we move along to address issues that are affecting our lives in the immediate sense. They're not isolated, and it's one over the other.

RK: A question that comes out of this, that I think is interesting and kind of leads us into this discussion of the Black Women's Leadership and Responsibility Programs, all of this must have been both very liberating and also very difficult, this whole process of reevaluation that you're going through. I wonder if you could talk maybe more personally about what it felt
like for you yourself to kind of take control of yourself, and take control of the situation, beginning to recognize that you have to provide that leadership. You can't just wait for somebody to do it. What it meant in terms of your relationships with other people, your relationship with your family? How other people felt about you and saw you, because I know that that creates tensions. It creates problems, which is why it's difficult for people to do. Maybe you could talk about yourself a little bit, and then we can talk about how you think about generalizing that to, say, black women and leadership.

SH: I think that when I became clear that this was a process that would require our own individual struggles. That it was not something we could go read and come up with some particular kind of strategy and go out and do a workshop on or offer people. That ultimately the piece that was the tool that was most powerful to convey the message, the most powerful tool was our own work, our own message. That was rather scary for me, and it didn't come all at once. I was kind of floundering in a somewhat embarrassed state, that I didn't know the answer. I mean, I had gotten pretty comfortable and confident around my skills. So at some level, I was kind of embarrassed with the knowledge. I was kind of embarrassed with some of concepts, because some of the things that I was beginning to become aware of was, you know, "You mean at some level we're really that hooked to white folk? You mean, we have this kind of liking for them." That was kind of embarrassing. You don't want to say that too loudly. Well, it helped me to know that it was mutual
at some level. But as I began to struggle with that, there was a time that I knew that I had to create a place for my own struggle, my own growth. And that's what propelled me to black women. Heretofore, I'd never identified myself as a feminist or "women." I mean, I was an organizer, and if anything, I was a civil rights organizer, activist, or whatever. So even to start to think about "women" felt a little kind of alien to me. But it was very clear that I could identify with that. I participated over in Atlanta at Spellman College, now this historic National Black Women's Health Project, and Lilly Allen was doing the session in this room. There was about 350 women in this workshop, and I heard women stand up over a few feet from me and talk about being molested, one woman for the first time sharing in this meeting the situation which caused her to lose the love of her brother, because he felt she was responsible for his Dad having to leave home. On several occasions, hearing women stand up and talk about suicide. The one most striking was the woman who said, "I was going to kill myself, and I gave myself until after this meeting. I said I was going to come, and if there was no more hope, then I was going to do it." I mean, I'm sitting there going, you know, because I've always known black women to be strong women, and they were the pillars. And here we're talking about all these women, and the women who were standing there crying, talking about their hurt from their color, because they'd either been ridiculed because they were light skinned or they were dark skinned or their hair or their nose.

I had been toying with whether or not I wanted to really
start some women's thing, because I'd been a part of the Southern Rural Women's Network, and kind of saying, "Well, Billie and I are close. I don't want to start something that's competing."

And that had been wonderful. That had been the vehicle that helped me to make the connection with black women. At some level, though, I knew we weren't dealing with some of the issues around the scripted messages, and the internalized oppression, and the way that I had a need for it with my own life at that moment. So I left that meeting deciding, "Whatever it is, Billie and I have to work it out, because I can't wait any longer. I mean, we've got to have a vehicle for black women to be able to come and share and get support." I remember coming back, and we would be in workshops. Actually, I went to the hospital a couple of times and a woman would be coming in pushing the mop or the technician with the machine for the EKG, and I would say, "Oh, you look so tired," and actually felt guilty, lying in the bed being waited on by people who were seemingly far more exhausted than I was. And I would say, "What's wrong?" And they would start talking. I'd say, "The Black Women's Project, come to such and such time." [Laughter]

It was wonderful, and it became a place, a safe place, for me to struggle, and for me to grow, and for me to share all of my scares and my fears, and get the kind of nurturing support. It was difficult to try to struggle with that as a program at the same time you were the biggest beneficiary [laughter], you know.

I really had difficulty. But it became a source of strength and safety. Then I grew to the point where I didn't necessarily need
that vehicle for myself, but I needed another one, and at this point, I moved with SWEC, Southeast Women's Employment Coalition, which became a wonderful laboratory for me with white women and mixed women and lesbian women and all kinds of women. Then I moved on past that support network, and then I needed another one that had white men in it. So I facilitated the formation of a group that had white males, a priest, because I was dealing with the issue of religion. It was the priest, a white contractor, a black salesman, anyway. And out of that particular support came away with the piece that became the most useful for me at the legislature, because it was out of that support group and out of those struggles that went on there, that I was able to take the faces of the males in those support groups and put them on the ones at the state house, those that were looking past me, did not even give me the benefit of existing. At that point, however, that person became individual who had his own fears, his own prejudices, and I had an agenda. And I could identify with that, and interact, and discount the discount, and move ahead, and, in fact, confront. Did this with the chair of the task force on a couple of occasions in ways that didn't allow for us to totally sever, but, in fact, built a level of respect that caused my leadership to be quite effective in that vehicle. It was that place that I discovered, my God, talking about world view, talking about leadership in this state, I recognized that at some level I knew a great deal more about what this state needed than a lot of folk over there. And in fact, this whole hang-up about writing, the statutes were written that had my handwriting, my
thoughts, my whatever, and that was a very powerful experience, an affirming experience of my leadership. You were great.

END OF TAPE 2, SIDE B
RK: What other kinds of things do you think we need to be working on doing? Where do we need to be going? What's your next five year plan?

SH: One of the things that I am very clear about is the need for leadership that embraces some recognition and valuing of the concepts and principles that we've talked about. I'm quite aware that it is important that that leadership is not simply limited to poor people, per se, although that's clearly where this organization's focus is. I do believe that we must find a way, across all lines and backgrounds in our society, to equip people to be able to recognize and facilitate others coming to an awareness that the power is within us. And it's important for us to get in touch with that power if we're going to significantly impact our world. As an organization, and we certainly have for the past couple of years now, been in another period of reflection and examination of where this organization goes from here. We have seen individuals budding. People who have been through our work are now developing and blossoming into leaders. We have seen ourselves being able to build in place others who have some capacity to address issues. And the board has had to struggle with the fact that we are being constantly called upon in this region, and at the national level, to provide our model of organizing strategy. And how do we reconcile that with our state wide mission? We're celebrating our 20th anniversary this year, and in that celebration, trying to reflect upon, celebrate, appreciate, renew those who have been a part of this organization
in various ways, whether they've been membership, board members, parents, supporters, funders, whomever.

We have had a major change in the delivery system for child care in the last year resulting from block grant funds, that we don't basically see as negative, but clearly will require some continual leadership and pushing in there to ensure that we don't topple this upside down and find, again, ourselves at the bottom. I think we're kind of on the back side now, coming down, of this process of examination, and see that we will always at some level have a hands-on connection and involvement with the communities. That we know that there has to be that direct kind of contact and connection. At the same time, we think it's also important that we try to posture ourselves in ways where we can provide more support to other organizations who are wanting to incorporate the capacity to further enhance, again, this approach and these concepts that we have tried to evolve in our work.

And at the same time, we see there's a need for a stronger regional presence. It worries me about what's happening in Mississippi and Georgia and some of the other places, and we do have friends that we collaborate, that certainly we network with, but we haven't looked at that in any kind of organized way. We were part of the African-American Organizers, bringing together a summit last February. It was a year long process, and in part what we were really addressing, again, was the vacuum of leadership, in the sense, to address the present issues that hopefully help to tap into latent powers of poor people, of black people as well. It is our belief that, again, someone said that
FOCAL has been organizing in communities, and now it needs to become an organizer of communities at some level. And we recognize that there's a need for that and a role for that. But I feel that if we can take what we have learned and experienced and have it become a tool in such a way that that can be shared, we see again trying to facilitate that by leadership development work that looks at expanding the base of individuals, facilitators, so to speak, that can be in positions to be a resource and provide T.A. for this model.

In my own reflections of the last year, one of the things that I became aware of is that there were certain things that happened in my life, aside from the major ones that I've mentioned, that helped me formulate my own ideas and my own thinking. Part of those had to do with my participation in, as a college student, really, participating in seminars, forums, discussions that helped me to frame out and get a sense of and understand and get clarity, and, in fact, to shape my own thinking about things. That is not very available in our communities now. The internship was an important vehicle for me in helping to, again, nurture my already developing skills as an organizer, and the internship, by itself, you know, sets out a time for one to really practice, that's quite different from your having to take on a job and then try to pretend you know certain things that you don't know. And really, I kind of came back with the notion that I thought it was time for FOCAL to, in a much more kind of strategic way, try to forge those kinds of opportunities for young people. Certainly, I believe that
leadership development is an area that we will focus a good bit of our attention on in the coming years, because as I struggle to find people who can help us implement this work, to carry it out, I'm having real difficulty doing that. Other folk are having difficulty with it. And along with our nurturing and being a resource and a child advocate, we feel that we must focus more of our attention, as well, on targeting our youth at the age of fifteen, sixteen, eighteen, whatever. We're going to do some nurturing of this model to be used with black males, young black males, because we think, as much as we possibly can, we need to say to our young black males that you're not invisible, and it's not just that you're raised up when there's the negative part to be raised. Just as with black women, there was an affirming piece for black women. We feel that as an organization that it's important now for us to make that same kind of statement about black males. So we clearly see ourselves forging ahead with new territory and discovery and learning and sharing and evolving really, again, with a continuing presence, with the whole message of our assuming responsibility for our lives and our children's lives and the work that goes along with that. If we want to, in fact, grow children that meet those educational goals and the visions that we have for what we want our future to be, that we will continue to do. That we hope that we can influence teacher training in ways that will, in fact, cause our teachers who are coming out to become teachers to recognize that this is very important. It is important for you, and important in how you view the role of parents in working with the students, that
you're going to be working with. All of that is not yet in the form that we expect it to be, but we're in pretty much our second or third major evolution as an organization, so it's not nearly as scary this time. We know that we stay with ourselves, we stay with the process, and good things happen when we kind of get to a place where we feel we have pretty much gotten a focus of what that thrust is going to look like.

RK: I think it's remarkable that you've been able to go through these transitions. It's something that most individuals don't do, and certainly organizations. I'm also struck by how holistic your visions and notions of both what the problems and the solutions are. There's a lot of commonality among people that we're interviewing and talking to. I'm not sure that people have, well, they have parts of that thing that you articulated in a much more sophisticated way. But the kind of holistic nature, both of the problems, how they're all—poverty, race, discrimination—all these things are connected. And also how we have to look for solutions that deal with all of these different things.

SH: Exactly. Well, we recognized that it was really difficult to deal with child care in isolation of the other needs of the family. This was the early '80s, especially when you were talking about child care competing with food and shelter and other things. And even, by the same token, as a child care advocate organization, no manner how effective we considered ourselves as an advocate organization, we couldn't just push headlong with no thought for the fact that, if you were basically
talking about taking funds away from this program that meets this particular need of the family or this group of people, I mean, ultimately where was this going to get us. So at some point, we had to take some of our resources and try to build up where there was a vacuum, a leadership, whether it was in the human service community, whether it had to do with advocacy work, ( ) of groups, whether it had to do with the aged, the senior programs. We formed alliances with them. Whether it had to do with women's issues. This organization has recognized that it's going to take all of us, operating from our strength, to really bring to the table what needs to be brought, if we are going to have the kind of quality life for ourselves. And then we have folk who say that is so altruistic and so idealistic and so naive, and I say, again, "What is the other option for me?"

RK: They haven't got any better ideas either [laughter].

SH: Yeah. I believe--I mean I can't see it--but I feel that I have to work with all the energy and passion within me, believing that that's what I'm here for. That is my mission here. That's what I've been given. That's the insight I've been given. That has been the talent that God has given me, and it is my responsibility to use that to the best of my ability, and I leave that up to the future in terms of whether it actually can happen down to the letter. But I've seen things. I've seen positive changes. And I do believe in the power of visioning. I remember August 16th it was, absolutely, in 1984, we had a vision session. We periodically do these for the staff and the board, and I said that in my five-year plan I wanted to develop a world
view, and I also wanted to visit Africa. At that point, it was just Africa. It wasn't any particular place, and by next July, I was in Africa, presenting at the World Conference of Women to people from very many different countries. Sharing much of this, although some of the pieces weren't there yet. And I thought, my word, I would have thought at least it would have taken me five years to get there. And didn't believe it when somebody called and asked me if they could submit my name to this. "How can I get to Africa? I can't get to Africa." "Well, can we submit your name?" I said, "That is a joke. No." They said, "Well, can we submit your name?" I said, "Okay, if I can make the presentation from Alabama, yeah, go on." And then it was months later that the Ford Foundation scholarship became a possibility, particularly for minority women, to get to that conference. But there's just been time and time and time again in my life that I am very in touch with, when I can see it, and believe that it's something that I do want, and it begins the process of possibility, of making it happen. And without that, we're left to other folks, to live with the visions of others, you know, who may not necessarily be what we want, or at least we're deficient because we only have somebody else's. And I believe this world and its diversity is for a purpose, and when we talk about the future, then when we don't have the collective representation of our diverse backgrounds in our natures, our genders, whatever, in that decision making and shaping of, if it does not accommodate that, then we're deficient. And we'll have the struggles that we have, and we will have the suffering and the pain that goes along
with that.

END OF TAPE 3, SIDE A

END OF INTERVIEW