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Oral History Interview: Vivian Williams Fleming

Vivian Williams Fleming

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ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEWS WITH

MRS. VIVIAN WILLIAMS FLEMING

May 15 and 16, 1997

Charles Town, West Virginia

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Transcriptionist: Gina Kehali Kates

RW-N: . . .Vivian Fleming in Charles Town, West Virginia. Ancella Bickley and Rita Wicks-Nelson are doing the interviews. Okay, you can start.

VF: Well, my name is Vivian Williams Fleming. I was born in Atlanta, Georgia, March 9th, 1920. My mother and father both were Georgia people. And I went to school from kindergarten through college there, in Atlanta. Starting with Oglethorpe, which was a private school connected with Atlanta University, and graduated from Spelman College, where I ended there. And from there, I went to Syracuse University in Syracuse, New York, and got a master's degree in mathematics.

RW-N: Can you tell us the dates of that? Like, do you know the date of your high school graduation and. . . ?

VF: I graduated from high school in 1936, from college in 1940.

RW-N: Now when you say from college, you're talking about from Spelman?

VF: From Spelman College in 1940.

RW-N: And then did you go right on to Syracuse?

VF: No, I went to Atlanta University first. And worked on a degree. And the faculty changed there. We had a Dr. [inaudible name] from India. We didn't quite understand each other. [chuckling] And he, his textbook, it was German. So, after that I stopped, married and went to, finally went to Syracuse because Syracuse offered me a fellowship and a work program to work with Dr. Robert Davis there. He was writing a textbook. And that sounded quite interesting. So, that's where I went.

AB: Would you uh, go back and tell us a little bit more about your parents please? What were your parents' names?

VF: Oh, my father was John T. Williams. And my mother was Ada Ross Williams. They were both-, my father was an Atlanta person. My mother grew up in rural Georgia, with her, she lived with her grandmother. And she grew up in rural Georgia, but their education was what they called normal in those days. My father was into mechanics. My mother was in home ec. But neither one of them graduated. They stopped, married and had a family.

RW-N: But they did go to normal school? (VF: Mmm-hmm) So now normal school is. . . .

VF: What they had before you started getting an AB or BS or anything. Mmm-hmm.

RW-N: Right. So it was after high school they went to normal school. (VF: Went to normal)) Do you know what schools they went to?

VF: My mother, Atlanta University, and my father, Tuskegee Institute.

AB: What about their parents?

VF: No, I don't know that much about them. That's something we've been digging into. And maybe if you noticed that picture laying over there, my son, we dug up those pictures, and my sons put them together.

AB: But did you know their names?

VF: Oh, yeah, I know their names.

AB: Could you tell us what those are?

VF: My mother's mother was Eugenia Cargyle Whitfield. (RW-N: Would you spell Cargyle?) C-a-r-g-y-l-e, -g-y-l-e.

AB: And your father's?

VF: Uh. . . his mother's name was Caroline Elaine Williams. Now, other than that, I didn't know her maiden name. But my mother's mother had been married twice. She was a Ross, because my

mother was a Ross. And then she married Whitfield. He was my mother's stepfather. I knew him, but I did not know my mother's father. He was dead.

RW-N: So your mother was raised with her mother's mother. (VF: Grandmother, mmm-hmm, grandmother, mmm-hmm) In a little town?

VF: I think it's Shadydale, Georgia. (RW-N: Which was a small town?) Small, mmm-hmm.

AB: Uh, were they, uh, did they farm or how did they make their living?

VF: Well, uh, my mother's grandmother, they were farmers. And, of course, when they came to Atlanta, I don't know what they did. And I imagine that my grandmother was farmers. But when she came to, when she came to Atlanta early—because she left my mother there—and she worked in factory work when I first-, before my mother came to Atlanta.

AB: Do you have brothers and sisters?

VF: I had one brother and one sister. They're both deceased.

AB: But you all grew up together in Atlanta?

VF: We grew up together. Mmm-hmm.

RW-N: And where were you in the family?

AB: Were you third?

VF: I was middle. (RW-N: Middle child?) Mmm-hmm. [chuckle]

RW-N: And your brother and sister, what kind of work did they do?

VF: Well, my brother worked for the post office, and he was a photographer. And my sister was in charge of housing in the uh, one of the islands in New York City. That's where she died. (RW-N: And. . .) She was into that type of thing.

RW-N: Did they also go to college, as you did, perhaps…

VF: My brother went for awhile. He went to Tuskegee. And my sister graduated from Spelman College. We had no choice. [chuckles]

RW-N: You had no choice. . . to go or. . . ?

VF: You had to go to school.

RW-N: Because Mom and Dad said that?

VF: Said it. Said, "You go to school."

RW-N: Uh-huh. So you all went on to school.

VF: So we went to school. My mother said, "I don't want to have to take you by the hand and walk you to school every day. But you will go to school."

AB: How is it that you went to Oglethorpe as a private. . . elementary school?

VF: I started out, I couldn't get along at home with my brother and sister. [Recording briefly interrupted as VF converses with her grandson, William] They-, well, I thought that I was the oldest and that they was supposed to do what I said do. And of course, that didn't work. [chuckles]

RW-N: You're saying you were kind of bossy? [laughter]

VF: I guess so. So my mother thought that the best discipline for me was to put me in school, and that was the only place that would take me at age four.

AB: You mean you were bossy at age four?

VF: [more laughter] I was. Such things as, you know, you have your own little play table, and I didn't want any-, want my brother to eat on it. He was older. And I wouldn't let his plate stay on it. I'd push it off. And my mother decided the best thing to do was to put me in school, so maybe somebody else could tell me cause she said she would kill me if she had to keep me. [laughter]

AB: So at four-, how did you get to school? Did you walk to school?

VF: Walk, my mother walked me to school, walked me. And you can go up the street, go through uh, where is now the stadium, and go across the bridge. She walked me to a certain point. And I could go across the bridge and go on down to-, it was up on Atlanta University campus, and I'd walk on through the walkways and go on to school. That was kindergarten, and there's where I started kindergarten at four. Then first grade at five.

AB: And you stayed there all through uh, school, all through twelfth. . . you graduated?

VF: No, no. Mmm-mmm. I graduated from Booker T. Washington High School, which was the public high school. I had met up with people, and I wanted to go to school there. And, of course, they never questioned it. If that's what you want to do, and so long as it's school, then you go. The same way they never questioned church. My parents were Methodists, mother, father, and grandparents. But I met up with and decided to become an Episcopalian. So they decided so long as you go to church, go where you please. But you have to go to church.

RW-N: Now, how old were you when you decided on your-, on your church?

VF: I was, I'd say, tenth grade.

RW-N: And why did you make that decision? Had you met someone from the other church?

VF: Well, in the Episcopal church on Saturday afternoon, they had what they called the Cotton Dress Ball. And we would go out there on Saturday afternoon, pay a nickel to get in, dance. And they had punch. And we'd drink punch. And we buy that like for a few pennies. And then the priest would say, "See you tomorrow morning," which was enticing. (RW-N: Uh-huh) And still I had an aunt, who was much older, my father's sister. And she did not allow, she did not want us to dance, and she was very particular about the kind of music that we had in the house.

So I liked the freedom of the church there.

AB: Uh, at what age—back to your schooling again so I'll get it straight—how many years did you stay at Oglethorpe?

VF: Oh, I stayed at Oglethorpe through the fifth grade.

AB: And where did you go. . (VF: From there?). . mmm-hmm.

VF: I went to Washington High School.

AB: Okay. And you stayed at Washington. . .

VF: I stayed at Washington until I graduated from high school, skipping the uh, ninth grade. I was never in ninth grade.

AB: So you got what we used to call a double promotion in those days?

VF: Well, we called it accelerating. (AB: uh-huh)

RW-N: And we called it skipping. [laughter]

VF: Well, the group, they, but they did things that really encouraged you. If you made A's or made certain grades, they had what we have-, called the honor trip, during the summer. And there would be a bus load of us, with teachers and proper chaperones, and you get to go on the honor trip. Of course, we paid a small fee but not that much. One year we went to Philadelphia, stopped all along the way. Then another year we went to Chicago, came back through Kentucky, stopped at Louisville and at Mammoth Cave, and came back. Now, that type of incentive made us study hard to get a chance to go.

RW-N: I want to ask a question about Oglethorpe. Was that connected with the University? I mean, did you have student teachers there or…?

VF: We had, I don't know if there were student teachers or not, but (RW-N: But it was

connected) it was connected with Atlanta University.

RW-N: with the University; it was a University school. (VF: It was) Did your brother and sister also go to school, into kindergarten?

VF: They went to kindergarten.

RW-N: Cause that was unusual for children to go to kindergarten so young. It was not in the public schools that early. (VF: It's not public schools)

AB: See we didn't have any kindergartens in West Virginia. I didn't go to kindergarten. That was not part of my experience.

VF: Well, no, we had kindergarten. And you go in the mornings, and they keep you most of the day, I guess till about one or two o'clock. And then you go home. And that's where I started. I don't know why. But I always thought it was part of, supposed to be a part of life. [chuckle]

RW-N: So, so your mother and father were really committed to all of their children starting school (VF: starting. . .) kindergarten. . . .

VF: Starting school, that's right.

AB: Uh, if we might go to the church experience, uh, what was the church experience? The Methodist church was more strict in the early years. Were you all active participants in church, in the Methodist church? I mean, Sunday services, prayer meetings, did you do all of that?

VF: Yes. [laughter] Uh, my mother's grandmother was very active so far as the Methodist was concerned. She lived in rural Georgia. But her sons, she had two sons who graduated from Morris Brown College and became ministers. And they lived in uh, Valdosta, somewhere in south Georgia. I never knew them. But every year she would send so many pigs and so much this, you know, to help pay their tuition and for the support of Morris Brown College. So it was just a part

of us, something, you know, it had to be. And then with the church that we went to, my father's family gave the land that the church was built on. Which I resented. I didn't have anything to do with it but uh. . .[laughs]

AB: Why did you resent it?

VF: Because they thought you had to participate and take an active part and be up front at everything. . . regardless. I didn't sing; they thought I had to sing on the choir. And I couldn't sing. [chuckling] You had to learn. And in every program, you had to participate. We had programs like children's day, you know, all the whole year, you had programs. And you had to be on, in those programs. And you had to be a part of 'em. And, of course, my sister became even sponsors of some of 'em. I didn't stay long enough.

AB: So, uh, then, when you discovered the Episcopal church, it seemed to meet the needs that you had. (VF: That's right) Now, did you have any difficulty in, when you went to the Episcopal church with a different kind of more ritualized service or so?

VF: No, I didn't. I seem-, I enjoyed it. Because uh, well, I felt it was quiet. That was the type of thing. It was a quiet service that I enjoyed. I never liked emotional types of services. Nothing that was very emotional would I take part in. I shy away from those things.

AB: And uh, you were confirmed then?

VF: No, I was not, because it would create too much of a problem so far as home was concerned. But when I met and married my husband, he was Baptist; as you know, Mt. Hope and that area, everybody is. And I decided I was not gonna be Baptist. And he then decided he was not going to be Methodist. So, I said, "Well, I'll tell you what. Let's be confirmed in the Episcopal church," and we were. Both of us. (AB: Where?) We were confirmed here together. In

Charles Town. Mmm-hmm.

AB: Uh, so the Episcopal church, uh, was totally different from what you had been accustomed to?

VF: Yes, it was not emotional. That's what I couldn't, I don't like all that emotion, you know, people-, when the minister's preaching, let me listen. Don't be answering him; I want to hear what he's saying.

AB: Did your family, your mother and father and brother and sister, ever go to the Episcopal church with you?

VF: Only here in Charles Town. Never. . . and when I go to Atlanta, I will go to church with them. After I left Atlanta to live, when I go back to Atlanta, I go to the church. Since my mother died in 1980, I have gone down and gone to what I term my mother's church. And I still help financially to support that church. I just don't go. [laughter]

AB: Let me change the subject. I'm noticing as I'm looking at you, your high cheekbones, do-, is there any Indian in your family?

VF: Yes, my father's mother was Indian. No, wait just a minute. Let me show you some of them; they are right here. [interruption to show interviewers pictures] . . . that one was Cynthia Cargyle. And this one is my mother's mother, who is Eugenia Ross Whitfield. That's my mother. And this is my father's mother, Carol Elaine Williams.

RW-N: And you just finished telling us that she has some American Indian.

VF: She has Indian, mmm-hmm, she has. Now, the others, I really don't know. (RW-N: Yes)

AB: I see the cheekbones here. Mmm-hmm.

RW-N: Do you know if there's any white in your family? (VF: Any what?) Any white? There's

American Indian. Is there any white back in your family?

VF: My father's father was white. (RW-N: Your father's father was white) Mmm-hmm.

RW-N: These are some good looking ladies. And beautiful pictures, too.

AB: I like that. . .

VF: That's my mother. (AB: I love that.) Uh, we were going through, after my mother died, my younger son with his father, was clearing out the house. I was born in that house and reared in that house. And we had to get rid of it, because we-, nobody was taking care of it properly. And uh, so we thought the best thing to do was sell it. I hated to see it just go down, down. And he got a big brown bag and he gathered all the pictures that he could find in the house, and just put 'em in that bag. And one Sunday they were here, and we were talking about it and pulling them out. And they were asking me who were these people, who were these people. So, I told them. And the oldest son took the pictures and had 'em framed. I didn't know he had them. So, he brought them back, he said, "This is all I could do, I couldn't tell-, I don't know who they are. But uh, you'll have to write the names." And that's as far as I've gotten.

AB: That's a wonderful project in that you are identifying them. I think that is uh, is so interesting. We were, yesterday, over at Page-Jackson [a former school building] and we were looking at the pictures, but they didn't have names on them. And for strangers like me, who come in, it would be nice to know who the people are.

VF: My husband gathered those pictures. See, every year, we would have pictures made. And he saved those pictures. And when they closed Page-Jackson School, he uh, asked the board of education—he was on the board of education—to uh, put them up and call it the Page-Jackson Room. I've never been in it, but I know about the pictures.

AB: Well, it's really a nice, nice room. Uh, let's go back to your family. You said you went to a private school. And you spoke a moment ago about your, your family donating land for, uh, the church. (VF: My father's family) That sounds like they were kind of well-to-do.

VF: They were not well-to-do; they were hard working people. And my father—course his mother was 47 years old when he was born—there was seven of 'em in his family. And he was the baby in the family. And they started off with that church in a boxcar. You know, these railway boxcars. Well, by that time, his older brother had bought a, quite a large piece of land and he gave part of that land for the church.

RW-N: Now, were they a farming family? (VF: No) No.

VF: They were city people. His, his mother worked at what they call a boarding house. She was a cook at what was a boarding house. They didn't call 'em hotels then, I understand. And uh, I don't know what his father did. But I do know they always talked about, her name was Caroline Elaine, and they called her Miss Caroline. [chuckling]

RW-N: And did you know them?

VF: I knew the grand-, I knew my grandmother. (RW-N: Grandmother) But I did not know the grandfather. They said that he dropped dead at Five Points in Atlanta, oh uh, before I was born. But I didn't never get to know him.

AB: Was this the white grandfather?

VF: Uh, yes, that was him. Which created quite a problem, because the body had to be claimed. And when his sons went to claim him, they didn't want them to have him, because they said that he didn't belong to them.

AB: Well, tell me, how could a white man and a black woman, uh, have a home together in

Georgia at that time?

VF: I don't know. You know, a lot of things that I read in the paper, I know nothing about, because I never saw them. Because where I-, as I came up, I didn't come across that much prejudice. The way my-, the way I was brought up, I was not allowed to go in a small store. I could go to a department store. My mother did not allow us to-, you know how these shops in town? We were not allowed in shops. My mother told me, "With your temper, you should not go in one." And so, from that, I didn't have a lot of problems. Because every place I went, I could try on anything I wanted. I've heard people say they couldn't. But I never had that problem.

RW-N: But you went to particular stores? (VF: Particular stores. . .) Where your mother directed you.

VF: Department stores, where she directed me.

RW-N: So do you think it's possible then that she was directing you to the places where it would be most comfortable for you?

VF: I think she was. Because they were very protective. All of them were very protective. And especially of me.

RW-N: What about when you went to the movies? Did you ever go to the movies as a youngster?

VF: She would take us to movies in town. But we had a lot of neighborhood movies. And in our neighborhood, like the Ashby Theater, the Royal Theater; those were all black. (RW-N: Mmm-hmm) Owned and operated by blacks. Just like the drugstores were. We had Amos Drugstore; they were in the black community. We had department stores in the black community in Atlanta.

RW-N: So, you had a lot of things in the black community that met your needs?

VF: That's right. You had no need to go to these other places. Now, that didn't mean you just sneak off and go. [laughter] (RW-N: yes, yes) But I had no need to.

RW-N: Right. Did you ever go into a theater where there-, it was segregated?

VF: Yes. And that was, and after I came here. They had certain areas you sat up in the balcony. I went in to that.

RW-N: Now, when did you come here?

VF: I came here in '48.

RW-N: Okay. So, you're talking about after '48. . .

VF: After '48, when I came here. . .

RW-N: . . . .you still had that experience in this area?

VF: That's right. And in some theaters in Atlanta, like the Fox and some of those theaters, we called 'em the Fox Theaters because they had the uh, oh, what is it? After the movie, they had the live shows, you know, on stage. And we went to that—Vaudeville. Well, I liked to go out there sometimes, because I liked the Vaudeville. (AB: Mmm-hmm) But you had a certain area. You sat upstairs and that was that.

RW-N: So as a youngster growing up, you didn't seem to be terribly aware then. . . .?

VF: I wasn't too aware, but for one thing. . .my father had a sister, she was the only sister he had living. And I couldn't tell her much different from a white woman. I didn't know the difference.

RW-N: And this was your father's. . . ?

VF: My father's sister.

RW-N: Right. And you didn't make a difference; she was just your aunt.

VF: She was just my aunt. (RW-N: right) And I think that has a lot to do, because even at Atlanta University, there were white teachers. (RW-N: Uh-huh) Spelman College, there were a lot of white teachers. And so, I think that has made a lot of difference in my life. That's why I said, I was not qualified.

AB: No, that doesn't have anything to do with it. It's a different experience, but certainly one that we need to know about, uh, as well. Uh, so did you have any uh, interaction with rural Georgia while you were growing up?

VF: My mother had a friend, or she had a friend of a friend, who had a farm in Madison, Georgia. And every summer, she would pay this lady to-, they would pay her to let us come down and visit like two or three weeks. My mother had a cousin who would go down with us. And this cousin would do the cooking and, uh, and we stayed down there and that gave us an opportunity to do a lot of things, even walk to church at night, and uh, ride the wagons and milk the cows and things like that, that I-, she say you need to know a little bit about rural life. That was 'til I got old enough to go to camp.

AB: Uh, it sounds as if your mother uh, was interested in giving you a good education and a variety of experiences.

VF: She was, she was. She was kind of unusual.

AB: Was she unusual in other respects?

VF: Well, I don't guess she was too unusual except that she inspected your clothes and inspected you when you went out the door, you know. People lift up your skirts to see if your slip is clean, and all that kind of thing. I thought she was unusual. I say, "Nobody else worries about things like that but you."

AB: What was your home like? How big was your house that you lived in?

VF: Let's see. We had six rooms, three bedrooms, living room, dining room, kitchen, straight, you know, straight through living room, dining room, kitchen, hall going down the center. And on the other side, three bedrooms and bath.

AB: So, it was all on one floor?

VF: All on one floor.

AB: Do we need to say goodbye to William? [referring to Mrs. Fleming's grandson, who was leaving. Taping resumed] Did you share your bedroom with your sisters?

VF: Yes, with my sister.

AB: And as the bossy one, how was that? [laughter]

VF: Well, she was a person who kept house. I never had to keep house. She did all the, you know, the cleaning because she wanted everything in a particular place. I was the one who did the cooking and took care of that side of the family.

RW-N: So you had chores?

VF: Oh, yes, we had chores. I did all of the cooking. And during the summer months, especially during the summer months, I was given the budget for our food. And I was to buy food and uh, cook and serve decent meals and if I was able to hold on to any of that money, then it was mine. [chuckling]

AB: So that encouraged you to be thrifty? (VF: That's right)

RW-N: And your mother worked in the home, outside of the home. . . ?

VF: She did not work while we were growing up. But as we began to graduate and go to college, then she worked. But other than that, she was there.

RW-N: What did she do later on, when she worked outside of the home?

VF: She taught in the-, for the blind. There was a blind school right across the street. And she taught handicapped, things, handicrafts for the blind. I might have a few of 'em here yet that she … And I was lazy. I didn't want to make handicrafts; and I didn't want to do handicrafts. I didn't want to sew. And they would not do those things for me. She wouldn't. Said, "If a blind person can learn to do those things, you got two good eyes and you can, too." [chuckling]

RW-N: Now, where she, where she worked there, was that run by-, was that priv-. (VF: city) Run by the city? (VF: Run by the city, mmm-hmm) And were there mostly black people who came to that school?

VF: Mostly, mmm-hmm, to the blind center. We called it the Blind Center, mmm-hmm. Because they taught things like-, they made wallets, you know, leather wallets, they made brooms, sweaters. Oh, they did a lot of things that, you know, people, blind people do. Well, not just blind people, but handicrafts like anything else.

RW-N: And did she work there for several years?

VF: She did, mmm-hmm. And that school burned down since she died. And they did not rebuild it.

RW-N: Okay, but so to come back into your home again, uh, your mother was there full time when you children was growing up? (VF: when we were growing up, mmm-hmm) And your dad was doing what at the time?

VF: Uh, he was uh, he worked for Seaboard Allied Railroad Company.

RW-N: Would you say that again, please?

VF: Seaboard Allied Railway (RW-N: Would you spell that?) S-e-a-b-o-a-r-d, Seaboard Allied.

AB: And what did he do?

VF: Mechanic.

RW-N: Yes.

AB: Oh, that's right, he had gone to Tuskegee and so he was doing mechanical work.

RW-N: Now, did he keep pretty steady hours in that job, or did. . . ?

VF: He went at—he's like William, he worked from 3 in the afternoon until 11 at night. Sometimes he would work over, or he would later, and he would bring an engine in to the uh, railway station in the morning. I liked to go up and meet him, get on the engine, and ride on into the station. [chuckling]

AB: So uh, your home was a fairly steady income home. I mean, there were no periods when anybody was really out of work and money was just not there?

VF: No. No. They might, he might not have done the right thing all the time with it, but it was a steady job, mmm-hmm. And then he, at one time, he had buses that ran in the black neighborhoods of Atlanta, when I was small. That was before Georgia Power Company took over all of the transportation. And he ran those buses from one black neighborhood to another one across town, back and forth. And he had drivers. Well, when uh, Georgia Power Company took over, they got the monopoly for it, he had to give it up. So, he turned those buses into transfer trucks. And he had what they called at that time a dray line and had other people hauling things from one place to the other with that dray line.

AB: Sounds as if he was a very ingenious kind of person in. . . .

VF: Well, he could have been. As I say, it wasn't that he always did the right things with his money. But uh, he made it. [chuckling]

RW-N: When you refer to that, what do you mean by that? Occasionally he would. . .

VF: He would drink.

RW-N: He would drink. . . okay. [VF chuckling] So some of the money went for drinking.

VF: Went to drinking, mmm-hmm.

RW-N: Uh. . . was that a problem in your home?

VF: Only at times. That was because my mother did not drink and she did not approve of it. And we would get a kick out of him buying it and hiding it. And we would steal it from him, give it away. [laughter]

AB: When he drank, was he unruly at all?

VF: No, just sleep.

AB: So, there was no disturbance in. . . (VF: No). . . in your home? (VF: No) Who. . .

RW-N: Just between Mom and Dad? Is that right?

VF: Well, she wouldn't like it. And she would fuss. But he didn't pay her too much attention. He wouldn't say anything.

AB: Who was the disciplinarian in your. . . ?

VF: My mother. Because you could-, I could get away with most things with him. And, he called himself being strict and I asked him for some money, and he said, "Well, I don't have any." And he would be in his room counting his money. And I'd be peeping through the crack in the door, you know, where the door closes. And I'd say, "Now, you told me you didn't have money, but you have such and such amount of money, and why can't you give me part of it?" And he'd give it to me to shut me up. [laughter]

AB: So did your mother spank you?

VF: No, she should have, but she didn't.

AB: What do you mean, she should have? [laughter]

VF: Because I found out that she would not spank me because she couldn't stand to hear me cry. She said I had the most pitiful whine when I cried.

RW-N: So does that mean you took advantage of that?

VF: I guess I did. [laughing]

AB: So how did she punish you?

VF: She'd make you go sit down or something. But that didn't bother me. Because when she'd make me go to a room or sit down, I would get a book or something and I would read it. So, that time didn't, didn't bother me at all.

AB: Was there music in your home?

VF: Yes, there was. Everybody had to take music. My brother played the violin for a while. I played the piano until I became paralyzed. I had one year of paralysis in the right arm and hand. And uh, after that, I wouldn't go back to it. I had so many things to catch up with. And that's when I decided that I had to live life on the fast lane because I thought something might happen and I might not be able to do it.

RW-N: How old were you when this happened?

VF: I was. . . I was in college. I was a uh, sophomore in college. And I lost all use of the right hand, shoulder, and right leg. They never really found out what the problem was. We, at first, she thought maybe I had a, what is it most people had at that time, became crippled? (AB: Polio?) Polio. They thought that, but I did not have polio. And I don't know what it was. They never found out.

AB: And it just went away?

VF: Well, I stayed in and out of the hospital for, oh, off and on during the year. But I did not stay out of school. I had a good friend who came over, who went to school at Spelman. And she was from Meridian, Mississippi. And uh, she would help me with carrying my books and what not.

AB: Did you have trouble walking, though?

VF: No, I soon got back on my feet to walk. But I had trouble with my hand. I couldn't write. And my arm was folded up. (AB: And it just. . .disappeared?) Well, I went to the hospital. Now, this was an experience. I went to the hospital and the doctor who delivered me was French, a Dr. Duvall. I don't know his first name. But he was a Dr. Duvall. And he was very prominent, in the Georgia, prominent in the Georgia Baptist Hospital, which was an all-white hospital. He took me out there to the hospital. And I was in a room but the door stayed closed. The door could not be open while I was there. And I know that. . .

AB: So they wouldn't let-, they wouldn't know that you were there?

VF: That's right. Because I was black. And I don't know what they did. I know one of the things was water that they had me in. And whatever he did after that, I began to walk and I can remember the days that I first raised my arm. My mother was cooking and I was standing in the door looking at her, the kitchen door, and I raised my arm to scratch my head. And she screamed. You would have thought. . . it scared me; I didn't know why she was screaming. And she kept screaming. In fact, she wasn't gonna stop. And so finally I said, "Momma, what's happened? What happened?" She said, "You raised your arm." And [inaudible] and I just automatically raised it.

RW-N: Now, this physician was a white physician?

VF: Yes, he was French white.

RW-N: Uh, do you have any knowledge of why you were delivered by this man?

VF: Yes, uh, it was bad weather—I was born in March—and the reason why I know is because he told me and my mother told me. He had been to visit a neighbor where we lived. And instead of going back out to the sidewalk—he went to the wrong house—instead of going back out to the sidewalk and going across, you know, down to her house, to the next-, where he was supposed to be, he came across my mother's yard, front yard. And she told him that if I had been white, you wouldn't have been walking all over my grass. But since I'm not, you have taken the liberty of walking in my yard; stay out of my yard. And so he went on. Then, when the morning that I was born, it snowed and it was so bad and they could not get a doctor. And they had to call him and he came. And he never let us forget that he was not supposed to be walking there. [chuckling]

AB: Why did they call him?

VF: Because he had a drugstore in the neighborhood and he lived next door to the drugstore.

AB: So, he was nearby?

VF: He was nearby. And so they called him when they couldn't get anybody else to come.

AB: Did, uh, white doctors ordinarily attend black patients in Atlanta?

VF: I don't know. I don't think in the home. Because after that, he was my doctor. He even delivered my oldest son, my oldest child. And he became my doctor from that-, from the day I was born until I came here to West Virginia. So I don't know what other people did so far as, you know, doctors were concerned. Because that was the only one I knew.

AB: Was he also the doctor for your mother and others in your family?

VF: No, no. (AB: Just for you?) Just for me.

AB: So then after that day, when your arm moved, (VF: Mmm-hmm) uh, your condition steadily improved?

VF: Steadily improved. They moved me-, my mother told me to go to the campus, that I stayed home long enough. So, I lived on Spelman's campus.

AB: Had you been on Spelman's campus before that? (VF: I had) Before, you had lived in the dorm when you first (VF: Yes) enrolled? (VF: Mmm-hmm) And then you came home during the sickness, and then you went back?

VF: I came home for the summer. And that's when I got sick was during the summer. And then after that, I went back to the campus. I went back to the campus because I was young. And every place—and I had friends who were much older. And every place they went, I wanted to go and the things they did, I wanted to do. So, they decided that it was cheaper. Of course, I had to work to help pay my way. But uh, they decided it was better that I live over there and get permission from the dean, who my family knew. My mother-, he was a friend of my mother, and my aunt particularly. And if Dean Lyons say you can't go, then you can't go.

RW-N: You have, you have described yourself on and off as a child who might have been a little hard to manage. [VF chuckling] Do you see yourself that way, as a child?

VF: As I've gotten older, I do. But at that time, I didn't see it. I just wanted to do what I wanted to do.

RW-N: So you had a strong will?

VF: I, I did. (RW-N: In that respect) Mmm-hmm. And in schools, too, because when I decided that uh, we had some friends. And I was in the eighth grade. And these friends were tenth grade. And we decided, there were two of us, that we would be in the tenth grade, that we knew as

much as they did. [laughs] So, we went to the tenth grade homeroom. And we went to a lady who was, she had a leg, she drug her leg. I guess she had a broken hip, or something, uh, Hannah Buchanan. And they came to transfer us out of that room and take us where we were supposed to be. And she said, "If they got enough nerve to come in here with me and they think they can make it, let 'em stay. If they can't make it, then they will have to go," the two of us. And we made it.

RW-N: So, this is the grade you skipped? (VF: Mmm-hmm) You decided that you were going to skip that. [laughter] And you made it. (VF: And made it) Where do you think you got that sense of strong will, or confidence in your own decisions?

VF: I guess I got it from my mother, I don't know. Because-, well, in a lot of instances, the type of punishment that she issued was not strict like, you know, a lot of people. She just kind of went along with us and tried to show-, and reason, tried to reason with us.

RW-N: Do you think as you look back at that, that was a good way to mother?

VF: I think it was. Because now, my sister, who was younger, she decided that she was through with school and she was not going to college. And my mother say, "You are going, if I have to take you by the hand and lead you every day, because you'll not grow up and say, 'you sent the others and you all didn't send me'. So, you're going." So, she went. And later she found out, when she went to New York to get this job and got this job, she wrote my mother one of the nicest letters and told her she appreciated her making her go.

RW-N: So your mother would reason with her children, but there were certain things that she felt were important and she would have her way about those. (VF: That's right.) Does that describe it well? (VF: That's right.) Uh-huh. And was your father sort of on the periphery of this? Your

mother was mostly dealing with the children.

VF: Yes, he didn't bother with us too much. And, of course, so far as punishing was concerned, he was too strict and his hand was too heavy to punish the girls. [chuckling]

RW-N: Did he punish your brother?

VF: Every once in a while. I don't think she allowed too much of that. That was her gold child.

RW-N: That was her gold child? Is that right?

VF: She loved boy children. [chuckles]

RW-N: Uh-huh. So, you two girls felt that?

VF: Well, we felt that, we would tell her that, that was your gold child.

RW-N: Uh-huh. And what would she say to that?

VF: She would just look at us and shake her head. She didn't bother us too much. She did not believe in uh, harsh punishment. That was just not her belief. She thought that if you had a head on your body, that you was supposed to use it. She was strict about, oh, quite a few things. You could come by the house and you could sit on the porch, and you wouldn't hear a sound. You'd think nobody was there. But everybody would have been at a different place, and she had you someplace reading, you had to read.

RW-N: What kind of books did you read?

VF: Any kind, all kinds, any books, and I still do the same thing. I sent about fifty books to the library yesterday, that I have read this year.

RW-N: What kind of books are you reading these days?

VF: Well, since I have been. . .whatever they send me. But I have been reading adventure books, uh, since I've been sick, I've been reading Harlequin. I've been reading Harlequin Presents.

AB: Do you read murder mysteries?

VF: Not much. Uh, when I came to this area and I worked and what not, the doctor stopped me from reading too many murder mysteries, and too many, uh, scientific books. Because he said that's not the way; what you read, if you're gonna teach and deal with children, you need to read something that you can relax with. And you don't want to be hyper. And if you read all these books like you're reading, you will still be hyper and it won't relax you at all.

RW-N: So, when you were a child, did you tend to read some science books? [recorder beeping]

VF: All the time.

RW-N: You read a lot of science books when you were a child.

VF: I read a lot of science books, mmm-hmm.

AB: Uh, let me go back again, with the illness that you had. Uh, once that passed and you regained the mobility in your arm and leg, uh, did you ever have any problem with that again?

VF: Yes, every once in a while. Even after I married, my collar bone would raise, just, you know, like come out of socket. And of course, when my husband live, he would know how to tape it back down. And then we would work on it with heat and all, and it would get better. It would go and come. And since I've been. . . .

END TAPE 1 - SIDE 1

BEGIN TAPE 1 - SIDE 2

VF: Oh, it was just. . . I thought that it was arthritis, you know, since I have been older. Because I haven't had that problem in recent years. But I do have that aching and what not in the arm. So, that's what I-, you know, I don't know what it is. But they told me it would go and come.

AB: And you said that because of that you decided to live your life in the fast track; what did you

mean by that?

VF: I decided I was gonna get married, I was gonna have children, and all the things that other people would do, but I wasn't gonna fool around and do it. This was when I decided to stop going to school.

AB: And did you stop?

VF: I did, I stopped. I graduated but, see, I was going on toward a master's and all, so I stopped working on that. And, and got married and had a family. Then I went back to school. I said, "Well, now, I can go back to school."

RW-N: You wanted to make sure you accomplished getting married and having a family?

VF: Mmm-hmm, I did.

[tape interruption]

AB: I'd like to ask you a little bit about Spelman, because uh, Spelman always. . . outside, I guess to other people, seemed as if it was a school that was a little bit beyond the ordinary for black women, that there was a certain quality of woman who, the Spelman woman, uh, is that, was that your experience?

VF: I never thought too much of it being beyond the experience. There were things that you were expected to do. We were expected to go to chapel every morning, prayer meeting on Wednesday nights, and participate in the different activities they had. In the evening, you had family-type dinner served, that's the way the dinner was served, and one person would always be the hostess at the table. And, of course, you acted as if you were the hostess. If someone at your table wanted something, you'd signal the waitress to bring it to them, or what not. Otherwise, if you were absent, then somebody else would have to serve as. But there were just so many little things

like that, that you did, I guess it was part of it.

RW-N: And were you taught, uh, the proper utensil—forks and knives and spoons to use—and where they went, was that. . . part of the eating experience?

VF: That was at home, that was at home.

RW-N: Spelman did not do that?

VF: No, mm-mm. But they put them out. But at home. And I did the same thing with my boys. They didn't like it, but on Sunday afternoon we'd open the table and I would serve them anything from cocktail on. I put out all the forks, make 'em use the pastry forks and the what not. And uh, they didn't like it. And my younger son, he couldn't do-, and I made them dress properly for dinner.

RW-N: Which you had to do at Spelman, probably, too?

VF: I, no doubt I did. That's why I did it, I guess. It was part-, it was just a part of me. (RW-N: Yes) And my younger son, who disliked it so much, if he couldn't do anything else wrong, he'd take his shoes off. [laughter]

RW-N: And at Spelman, what kind of course work did you take?

VF: Math, science; my major is math. (RW-N: uh-huh) And so, for the most part, I did math. My senior year at Spelman, there was an instructor who went-, who taught at the high school that was connected to Spelman, who got a fellowship in California. And he went away to school. And another girl and I, who was my classmate, we took over his classes and taught. And that was quite a different experience from the way you teach in a public school. You made out your lesson plans and you made your units. And every student worked at his or her own speed. Somebody might be on unit 5, and somebody else on unit 4. But they worked at their own rate of speed.

And then once a week, or if you thought maybe two times a week, then you had oral class discussion. I've never taught that way since I left there. But I taught that way then, in my junior and senior year.

AB: You, you were still a student? (VF: Mmm-hmm) Were you doing that under somebody's guidance, or were you just totally responsible?

VF: Well, to a certain extent, we were supposed to have somebody's guidance, but since we took over his class work, quite a bit of it was on our own. But it was looked at before. You didn't just go out and teach it. You had to turn it in.

AB: Did you give the final grades?

VF: Yes, mmm-hmm. That was-, and then, afterwards, they counted it as your student teaching.

RW-N: How did you decide that you wanted to teach mathematics?

VF: I always liked math. And at Spelman, I liked math, I liked the teacher. And I liked the idea that a lot of the advanced math classes were taught on Morehouse campus.

RW-N: Ah-hah! [laughter] The plot thickens.

AB: Why did you like that?

VF: I liked the competition. I always liked to compete so far as, you know, mental things were concerned; I liked to compete with them.

AB: So, Morehouse was all male, (VF: Mmm-hmm) Spelman was all females. (VF: That's right) So, when you went to Morehouse, you were in classes with the fellows. And so you were competing against (VF: Against them), uh-huh.

VF: Sometimes they didn't like it because they wouldn't do their work, and I didn't have anything else to do but do my work. And they say that you, that we made it harder. It'd be a couple of us,

most of the time. And they say that we made it hard for them, because it made the professors expect too much of 'em.

RW-N: That was a good experience for you?

VF: It was, a very good experience. And that experience carried over when I went to Syracuse. For the most part, the graduate classes were all men, because my major there was still math and science.

RW-N: Now what made you become a teacher?

VF: I was interested in chemicals. I wanted to be a formula balancer, at that time. But uh, I had an offer for Chicago when I first came out of college. But they found out that I was a woman, and a black woman, so that didn't work out.

RW-N: Now, is that in chemistry (VF: In chemistry) when you said formula balancer, or did I hear that correctly? (VF: That's right) So, you wanted to go into chemistry?

VF: I wanted to go into that phase of it, mmm-hmm, as a formula balancer.

RW-N: The school that you were interested in was. . . .?

VF: I wasn't-, it wasn't necessarily school. It was a company. (RW-N: okay, uh-huh) And of course, I don't know if they told 'em or what not. But so, when I graduated, I turned 20 in March and graduated in May. And they said that I was too inexperienced, too young mentally-, physically. (RW-N: For that job?) For that type of job.

RW-N: But you believed that it might be other reasons?

VF: I don't know. I have often wondered if my mother had had anything to do with it cause she also thought that I was too young. (RW-N: Uh-huh) And you know sometimes, you don't have to say it, but she can kind of say something else, and they'd get the idea.

RW-N: Uh-huh. So, was it at that time then that you decided to go into teaching?

VF: Well, I really hadn't decided. But a friend of mine who had been to Spelman was teaching. And she was teaching in a rural community, where you teach in the summer months, and then school stops in September, where the kids would go back to a farm and pick cotton or whatever they had to do. And then school would open up again, later in the fall. Well, there was a woman who worked with her. And this woman was in summer school, and consequently she couldn't work during the summer and go to summer school. So, they found out that I didn't—wasn't really looking for a job—and asked me if I would work during the summer. And I did. That was my first, I guess, true experience so far as working. My first true experience so far as-, well, I had more than one class in a classroom. I had never even been in a classroom where you had two grades in the same classroom. But I went to that. And I worked there, I guess, about six weeks during the summer. Then I went back to school in the fall of the year. And went to school for one semester. There was a woman who had been to Spelman College, and she taught in elementary school. She married, and was getting ready to have a kid. So, she was gonna only work one semester, that was into Christmas. And after Christmas, she was gonna stop school because she was expecting this baby. So Spelman asked me if I would go down and work in her place. They had to find-, she had asked them to find somebody. So, they said, "You the only person we know who is not really tying themselves down with a particular job. So, will you go down there and uh, finish the school year for her?" And I did. And that was in Griffin, Georgia, which was about thirty miles south of Atlanta, which was quite an experience. And that's where I met Q D. That's when I met him. (AB: this is your husband?) Mmm-hmm.

AB: Now when you say that was quite an experience, why was it an experience?

VF: It was because, uh, then I lived in the home of family, with a man and his wife. I had never lived in anybody else's home. And uh, there was another teacher there, which we shared a room. I'd only shared a room with my sister and my roommates in college. And she was older. But her experiences were quite different from the type of experiences that I had had. And we cooked for ourselves, we cooked together. We walked to school together. No, she went to one school and I went to another school, 'cause she taught elementary school-, taught uh, primary. And I had a fifth grade class. And uh, then being a rural community, you couldn't walk out on the street and catch a city bus or a city trolley. And I was not accustomed to that. [chuckling]

AB: When you said that her experiences were different from yours, what did you mean by that?

VF: Well, she had grown up only with a mother, and her mother was a domestic worker. And, of course, she had helped and done things along with her mother. And I tried to fit in with the types of things that she did; it was kind of hard for me to do cause I had never been accustomed to that.

RW-N: Now, do I have this straight? When you were at Spelman, before you went into that temporary teaching job, you had had some teacher education courses?

VF: Oh, I went to summer school every summer that I was at Spelman, because there was nothing else to do. And that kept you out of trouble. So, you went to summer school.

RW-N: And did you take courses that prepare you (VF: I took courses. . .) to be a teacher?

VF: Yes, I took courses in elementary education. I got an elementary education certificate. I took courses in secondary education, because the women there, the people there, were coming back to renew their certificates. You know, at that time, they had everybody go back and renew certificates. And there was good money to be made. If you took classes with some of the older people who were not grasping what they were supposed to get in a hurry, you could take those

classes, then you could go out from class and tutor those people, and they would pay you.

AB: So, it was sort of a business opportunity for you, as well.

VF: [chuckle] It was, mm-hmm.

AB: And, and you used that summer to take just whatever courses. . . .

VF: Whatever-, well, you'd look around-, you'd look around and see who was taking certain classes. And you'd see a group of older people in one class, and they're kind of nice people. So, you maybe take that class. You had to pay for it, but it didn't matter.

RW-N: So, you weren't doing it necessarily to become a teacher yourself?

VF: No.

RW-N: Uh-huh. But you were able then, because of that course work, to go into that school. . .

VF: I was, mmm-hmm, and teach.

RW-N: And then what happened after that? How did you become a teacher?

VF: Well, after that I married, uh, and I was not going to be in a place where I could go into business with my husband. He was a teacher. In fact, he was the principal of a small school, not the one I worked in. So, I reapplied and I got a job teaching, and as an assistant principal of an elementary school. As long as we lived in Georgia, I taught and was assistant principal in an elementary school. And the woman I worked with was an extremely smart person. And I learned quite a bit from her. She was an elderly person, but I learned quite a bit from her. And that's how I really started and stayed into teaching. Because after I married, well, he was teaching. That was the thing to do.

RW-N: Can we stop for a moment then and talk a little bit about your husband? (VF: Mmm-hmm) You said you met him that summer when you first went to teach? (VF: mmm-hmm) How

did you meet him?

VF: We went to a faculty meeting. And, uh, everybody who's new had to stand up and introduce themselves. And I was not really new, because I had been there the spring before. But uh, he was sitting in the front. He was very, I guess you might say, a jovial type person, outspoken. And he said, "There's some people over there. They haven't introduced themselves." And this woman who I was sitting with, she got up and introduced herself. And I got up and introduced myself to the crowd. And after the meeting was over, he came out and he said, "Well, since I've met you, now I want to talk a little bit more with you." And that's how we became friends.

AB: And what was his name?

VF: His name was Quince Dandridge Fleming. They called him Dan down in Mount Hope.

AB: But you called him QD?

VF: Because he called me Vee. [chuckling]

RW-N: And he had come from Mount Hope, West Virginia? He had been raised there?

VF: He had been raised there, he finished high school there, Du Bois High School. He went to Tuskegee to school. And he had met my brother at Tuskegee. Cause my brother had gone to Tuskegee. And from Tuskegee, he worked in a smaller community, Odessadale, Georgia. And then he had transferred up to Griffin, Georgia, and that's where I met him.

AB: And how long did you date? Or when did you begin to date?

VF: Well, after that meeting, he began to come by quite often.

RW-N: Now, you were about uh, 19 now?

VF: Twenty.

RW-N: Twenty. And how old was he?

VF: Oh, he was five years older than I am. Mm-hmm. And uh, we started dating. And I was engaged to marry a fellow. This fellow came down to Griffin and he passed by-, he came by the house and saw this fellow sitting on the porch. He said with his legs crossed and his socks way up his legs. [laughter] So, then, he became real serious. Well, this fellow went away to work, went to California, to work. And while he was gone, he kept pressuring me to let's get married, let's get married. So, I told my mother that I was gonna get married. And she said, "Well, I hope you do, cause you can't make up your mind what you want to do." So, we married December 7th, 1941. (AB: Really?) Mmm-hmm. We had a house wedding. And uh, the house wedding was in the morning. And when the wedding was over, we were standing in front of the fireplace and all. And uh, my brother wouldn't come in the room. He was in the dining room. He opened the door and say, "Pearl Harbor has been attacked, and we're at war." So, everybody forgot that there had been a wedding, and everybody got excited about the war.

AB: So, did-, you were married in Atlanta, at your mother's home? (VF: Mmm-hmm, yes) And were-, how many guests were there?

VF: We didn't have many guests, because she said she wasn't gonna fool with me. [chuckles] We just had, you know, close family. We had family and a few friends, but it wasn't a big wedding.

AB: And what did you wear?

VF: I had a uh, street length dress. I didn't wear the whole, you know. . .because she had started preparing for another wedding for me when I had changed my mind. That's why she didn't want to be bothered with it. (RW-N:Yes)

AB: So, now the war has started. How did that affect your life?

VF: Well, not too much because he ran a cannery for the government, where he canned

vegetables and meat. This cannery was connected to the school. I don't know if they had it in this area or not. But in our area there, they, the government provided all the equipment. And uh, people brought things into can. And then they would buy whole fields, like whole fields of vegetables. And they would can the whole-, all the vegetables, the people who came and worked in the cannery. Uh, beef, or meat, especially beef, they would can it. And they would seal it in just ordinary tin can, and they marked it with a blue something. . . because it was just written on the can what it was. And those cans were shipped out. And consequently, he did not go into the service. He did not-, he was not an active soldier. He operated that cannery.

RW-N: Was that. . . I'm sorry. . . was that a full time job for him?

VF: Yes, because it was connected to the school. See, he taught (RW-N: uh-huh) and he was teaching canning and cannery. (RW-N: I see)

RW-N: And that food had something to do with the war effort?

VF: Yes, because it was shipped out and used for soldiers and what-have-you.

AB: So, was he continuing to teach at the same time he was running the cannery?

VF: Yes, he was, because students worked in the–you know, as his classes come in, they worked in the cannery. But he always said that he owed West Virginia so much time. And that was why he came back here to work. He, I don't know, I can't tell you about that, because I don't know how people did that. But if the state or something helped you to go to school, you supposed to come back and work so long within the state. And he'd always say he owed West Virginia time.

AB: So, that's what brought you uh. . .

VF: That's what brought us back to West Virginia.

RW-N: Now, how long did you stay in Georgia, after you married?

VF: I stayed in Georgia longer than he did. [laughing] I stayed in Georgia from then 'til 1948. I came here in '48. He came here in '46.

RW-N: You were not too excited about moving to West Virginia?

VF: No, the only part of West Virginia I had seen was Mount Hope, Charleston, and there's another little place between Mount Hope and Charleston that I thought that he might have come. But it had a lot of factories. And it's not too small either, but I can't think of the name of it.

AB: Would that have been Montgomery?

VF: I think maybe it was Montgomery. Because they had a nice little high school or something there. And then uh, he had an offer in Lewisburg. But instead, he chose here, because it was closer to Washington. He said I would get along better here. And he came to work, and I didn't even come. I didn't come to see it.

RW-N: So, you really did not want to move here?

VF: No, I did not.

AB: Both your sons were born by that time?

VF: Yes, they were born in Georgia.

AB: And they stayed with you in Georgia while he came here?

VF: That's right. I had a friend who came down from Dayton, Ohio, and lived with us; we had a house there. And uh, she lived with me those years, the two there, and helped me with the children while he was here.

AB: Now, were you still in, was it Griffin? (VF: Griffin, Georgia) You stayed in Griffin (VF: Mmm-hmm) and taught and took care of the children?

VF: Mmm-hmm, I did.

AB: Uh, then in 1948, you moved to Charles Town?

VF: I moved to Charles Town.

AB: And what did you think when you came to Charles Town?

VF: I didn't come alone. My mother came with me. [chuckle] As usual. And she couldn't stand it. She hated to leave me here. And we lived around on the main street there, in a little house, very small, had living room, kitchen and a kitchenette went across the back, and it did not have an indoor, have indoor plumbing. But we were renting the house. So, my mother went to the owner, and asked the owner could she put indoor plumbing in the house. And they deducted the cost, gradually, from the rent. And she said, "No." And my mother said, "She was almost born in the bathroom. She's never lived in places like this. Now she's gonna come here and live in this cold weather and go outdoors." [chuckle] So, that was in June. And we moved in this house right here, that September 1st. (RW-N: With indoor plumbing, in this house?) We didn't have it, but we had it put in before we moved in.

RW-N: Did you. . . then you bought this house?

VF: We bought this house.

AB: So you have lived in this house, then, for (VF: Since September 19,) almost fifty years?

VF: That's right, since September, 1948.

AB: Uh, it's a lovely place. Did you all have to do much to it when you came here?

VF: Oh, we remodeled it totally inside.

AB: And where did your husband work here?

VF: He taught in the high school. He taught, uh, physical ed; he didn't teach physical ed, he taught vo-ag. And he coached until the state stopped him from coaching. He coached basketball

and football. I think he started some of the first teams here.

AB: Why did the state stop him?

VF: Because they felt like it was taking too much time from his vo-ag work.

RW-N: That's Vocational Agricultural?

VF: Vocational Agricultural, mmm-hmm.

AB: Now, uh, when you came here, the Eagle Avenue school was still in operation?

VF: It was still here, it was still here.

AB: And he taught in the high school portion of that, which was Page-Jackson?

VF: That's right, mm-hmm.

AB: Uh, and tell me-, I understand that that school burned.

VF: It did. It burned. I can't tell you when. Because, let's see, we moved down there in, we moved down there in '51 or '52, and soon after that, that school burned. They used that building for industrial arts. And, of course, like most schools, they had oiled the floor. You know how they put that oil on the floor to keep the dust down? They had used oil on the floor, and these boys were taking shop. And they always believed that some of these boys might have been smoking and left a cigarette or something. And, of course, when it caught, it just went up like paper.

RW-N: You're talking about some of the students?

VF: Some of the students, mmm-hmm.

AB: So, uh, by that time, had the new Page-Jackson building been constructed?

VF: The one that the board of education now, that one had been constructed. We had moved out of that building.

AB: So, you had moved into the high school? Where uh, part, but the elementary kids were still at Eagle Avenue?

VF: Yes. . . no, the elementary kids were not there.

AB: Where were they? You mean, when the building burned?

VF: When the building burned, they had moved down to what is now the, uh, board of education building.

AB: So, uh, do you mean the whole school? Now, let me see if I understand. Page-Jackson was one through twelve. (VF: That's right) I mean, not Page-Jackson, Eagle Avenue school was one through twelve?

VF: But they had named, I don't know why, but when I came here, one through six was Eagle Avenue. (AB: Mmm-hmm) And seven through twelve was Page-Jackson.

AB: But it was all housed in the same building?

VF: All in the same building.

AB: Now, then they built the new building, which is where the board of education is now (VF: is now) and did all of those grades, one through twelve (VF: No) move over to that building?

VF: No, only seven through twelve. So Eagle Avenue stayed up on the hill here.

RW-N: Which is actually Eagle Avenue, right? **VF**: Which is Eagle Avenue, mmm-hmm.

AB: So, the Eagle Avenue part of, that's the one through six, stayed in the same building.

VF: Stayed in the same building.

AB: And the others moved?

VF: And the others moved.

AB: Now, were those youngsters, one through six, still going to school in the Eagle Avenue

building when it burned?

VF: Oh, no, they had moved.

AB: They had moved? (VF: Mmm-hmm) And so, the building was just used for shop (VF: Just used for shop) at that point? Where did the one through six move to?

VF: They eventually moved down where the Page-Jackson building is now. And, of course, the Page-Jackson building-, at first, we had a volunteer integration. And those who wanted to go to the other schools, could go. Those who did not want to go, and chose to stay at Page-Jackson, stayed. And uh, so, the school had gotten extremely small by that time, so far as the high school was concerned. Because people who went to Shepherdstown stayed in Shepherdstown, instead of catching that bus coming all the way over here.

RW-N: And went to integrated schools there? (VF: Mm-hmm) Uh-huh.

VF: The students could go, but the uh, teachers didn't, the faculty didn't. The students went.

RW-N: So, Eagle Avenue school and the Page-Jackson schools and when they moved, they were still all-black schools?

VF: When Page-Jackson moved, all blacks went.

RW-N: And so, then integration came as the first step, but it was voluntary for a while?

VF: Voluntary. And you could go where you wanted to go. And I think that one of the things that a lot of people resented was that some of the, friends of people in the elementary school would select certain kids and tell 'em, "Now, you go to Charles Town, and you go this place, and then you all, you all, are a little slow and dumb, go down to Page-Jackson." They did that. That was it.

AB: Uh, where were you teaching?

VF: Page-Jackson.

B: And what did you teach?

VF: Math.

AB: And so, when you first came to Charles Town, the first job you had was math. What was that? Junior high school?

VF: Well, I tell you what. When I first came to Charles Town, I applied for a job as a elementary school teaching. And uh, I did not go down and apply for this job. I called and asked for an application. The superintendent sent me an application by the home ec teacher; I had met her. So, he sent me an application. I filled it out, and he said, "Come down, I'd like to meet you, so, at least I'll recognize you when I see you." So I did, and they hired me as an elementary school teacher.

RW-N: Was that very soon after you arrived here?

VF: That was the fall after I came here. And he asked me why did I want a job. He said, " You didn't say why on your application." I said, "My sister-in-law told me that I'd never work in the state of West Virginia as long as my husband worked in the teaching field, because they didn't hire husband and wife." So, I said, "I've got a bet going with her, and I want to win the bet," because truthfully, I didn't care whether I worked or not. And so, he hired me. And he said, "Now, if I hire you, do I get part of your salary?" And we laughed about it, and laughed about it until after he died. But uh, he hired me. Then, I did not have a transcript, or anything to prove that I was qualified to teach. He just hired me on what I said. And I worked in the elementary school here for about three days, and my transcript came. He told me to come down to the office, that he wanted to talk to me. And I thought he wanted to fire me. But he didn't. He said, "Your

transcript came, and it showed you've had quite a bit of experience in math, and you're not asking for a job as a math teacher. Why?" And I told him that I didn't think the two of us should work in the same building, and that I thought I'd have a better shot at working if I took elementary, since I was qualified as an elementary teacher." So, that was on a weekend. And Monday morning I went to the high school, and that's where I stayed.

AB: So, now, the school—you went to Eagle Avenue first three days? (VF: Mmm-hmm) What grade was that?

VF: They didn't have a grade for me. So, they split two classes, and I had second and third grade. (AB: In the same room?) In the same room.

AB: And then, when you moved into the Page-Jackson, and what grades did you teach there?

VF: I taught math, seven through twelve.

AB: And you were there until Page-Jackson closed?

VF: I was.

RW-N: And your husband was also?

VF: He was also.

AB: Then what happened?

VF: Then when they closed Page-Jackson, I went out to the-, I had heard that they were gonna close Page-Jackson. So, I went to the superintendent and told him I wanted to know if they were going to close Page-Jackson. My husband and I had started buying a house in Washington. I had applied for a job in Washington, and had gotten it as a meteorologist. And uh, [chuckles] he said, "Why?" And I said, "Well, I want to know, because I have applied for a job and I've gotten a job as a meteorologist, and uh, I want to know what we should do." So, he said, "Now, when you

get a letter or something from us telling us that you have been fired or the job no longer exists, then you worry about it. But until then, you don't have a thing to worry about." So, they sent me to the high school for half a day, and to the junior high for half a day, which I resented. So. . .

AB: Why?

VF: Because I felt like I was as qualified as any of 'em, and that I—more so than some—to teach high school math. And to send me out there for half a day and send me to junior high for the other half, I just resented it, and I didn't want to do that. Because you work at one school and then you drive over to the next school, that just didn't suit me.

AB: Had you finished your-, had you been to Syracuse by that time?

VF: Yes, I had. And had done experimental work at Syracuse. At Syracuse, we taught as experiments, we taught algebra to third grade people in a slum community. That was the type of experiment that Dr. Davis had us to do. And I felt like that I had had as much experience and as qualified as anybody. And that I was not going to stay there. And I told him so. I said, "Well, I'll work this year." But I started handing in my notice, he said, "Well, I tell you what. If you give me a chance, by the fall of the year, I will put you in one school, and you will stay there." So, the fall of the year, after I worked that one year, I was given a job in the senior high school. And then I ended up with all of the advanced math there that next year.

AB: And did you stay there until you retired?

VF: I stayed there until I retired.

RW-N: And you were satisfied with that?

VF: I was satisfied, because I had a class that I could do anything with. And uh, that class, I would teach 'em by units. And uh, whatever they were interested in, then they'd have to do

research on their unit. Then I would have them to write it up, just like you would a term paper or thesis. And then I would invite the other teachers in, and they would have to explain their paper and defend all questions that was asked of them, by the other teachers who were there. And I invited teachers in from the other-, people from Shepherd, because I worked over at Shepherd for a little while, too much at night to trans-, to go back and forth in bad weather, so I had to give that up. And they enjoyed it and I enjoyed it.

AB: What about your husband's experiences? What happened to him when the schools integrated?

VF: When the schools integrated, uh, he taught science and vo-ag in the high school. They didn't give him the two schools at all, just that one school, science and vo-ag. Then uh, after that, when we moved into the new high school building, he became the vice-principal.

AB: And he stayed there until he retired?

VF: He stayed there until he retired.

RW-N: Now, this is the vice-principal of. . .

VF: Jefferson High School.

RW-N: Jefferson High School. (VF: Mmm-hmm) Which is here in town?

VF: Here, out, it's out, mmm-hmm.

AB: This was the consolidated school that brought…

VF: That was the consolidated school.

AB: Brought all the schools, the area schools together.

VF: Mmm-hmm, all the high schools together.

AB: Mmm-hmm, mmm-hmm. Well, I'd like to back up to Georgia again, if we may. Uh, I

wonder if you'd talk a little bit about your social life when you were growing up in Georgia. I mean, when you were a child, what kind, what kind of social life did you have?

VF: Well, in Georgia, when you grew up, we used to call it, those of us who grew up there, we called it the 400 group. You were not allowed to go a lot of places. A lot of areas in town you were not allowed to go. You learned to be devious.

AB: What, what do you mean by that?

VF: On the east side of town, some areas were kind of rough. And we would sneak over there, walk over there, that's a long ways. We'd walk over there. And I found out, and somebody will call and tell Mother before I got home that, "We saw her on the east side of town." So, then, I found out that if I call my mother and let the telephone ring and then after it ring and she answers, don't say anything, just let it hang, just drop the telephone that you're in the pay booth, just let the telephone hang, and that would give you a chance to get home before somebody came along and picked it up. [laughter] And you get home in time to explain yourself before somebody told your mother. [laughing]

AB: So, when you all went on the east side, did you go to visit people or did you go to cafes or dances?

VF: No. We'd go to movies. And then they had a dance club, Top Hat, and we'd go there, we loved to go to the Top Hat. Because all you did was dance. Well, see, she said you don't go.

AB: Were there clubs and organizations, band, anything like that at school, that you participated in?

VF: I didn't, I participated in organizations, but not like, I didn't participate in the band or anything. I just, you know, just different clubs, you know, those little social clubs. And of

course, we had social clubs. And with us, just like this group had a club, and let's see, we were the [inaudible name]. And then there was a boy group who had clubs and they were the Tin Knights. And we would give parties and what not. We gave a party almost every week. And the party was such that you didn't have uh, all these records and what not. Maybe somebody in the group would play, and you would push the piano, sometime, in the doorway. And you'd dance in that room, you'd dance in this room, you know. And that's the music that you had.

AB: What about school activities, like a junior/senior prom?

VF: Oh, yeah, you went to the junior/senior prom. We went to the-, we had junior/senior prom. And of course, we went to that. And whenever you go, usually a certain group who more or less hung together all the time. And with me, there was a fellow, his mother and my mother had been friends. And uh, Quinton liked certain girls. And if he liked a girl, he said, "Oh, Vivian, I like so and so. What about inviting her to go?" All right, so, I would go get that girl, because that's who he wanted to. [chuckling]

RW-N: Now, who is this?

VF: This is a fellow who went to school; well, he was my brother's age but he went to school in Atlanta, Morehouse and all. But even in high school, I was in that class. See, I was in the class. When I decided to go to school, I went to school early and when I decided to skip a grade, that put me in the classroom with a lot of older kids. (RW-N: Yes) Nobody in that classroom was my age, except this girl and I, who-, we were buddy, buddy together. And so, they would tell us to go, you know, if they liked-, one liked Marion, say, "You get to be friends with Marion, invite Marion to go with us." You know, and things like that. And so, and I said, "Well, I can't go cause I've got some house work to do or something." And they would come over—Quinton

would come over—and , oh, he'd help, whatever I had to do, mop the kitchen or what else. Just to get a chance to go out and get these girls to come and go with us. [chuckle]

RW-N: Did, did you keep in touch with some of these young friends?

VF: I kept in touch with them until uh, my mother died in '80. And whenever I'd go home, they'd always entertained, you know, when I went home. But so many of them moved away, like to Chicago and to Cleveland. And my mother kept more in touch with them in a sense than I did, because if I was going home for the summer, I was always-, I would always go and stay for four or five weeks. She would have them to come over while I was there. And that's how I truly kept in touch with them, because she entertained them while I was there. And they would come by to see her when I was not there. She was more, I'd say, a young people's person. I call her a do-gooder. [chuckle]

AB: So you could date and what not when you were growing up. That was no problem with your family?

VF: Well, as long as they came to the house. She did not tolerate your stopping somewhere and talking with somebody. Because her saying was, if you, if they got something to say to you, or you've got something to say to them, bring 'em home, they can come home. And she could come in any time. We had a roll-, the rug rolled up in the front room, dancing, drinking kool-aid. Or in the winter time, we had a fireplace, popping popcorn and all. And when kids would go home for holidays—a lot of kids who could not go home for holidays, they didn't have the money like they have now to go home. Sometimes I'd have so many kids there until we had to sleep across the bed and put chairs on the side of the bed to put your feet in.

AB: Your parents welcomed that? They never objected to that?

VF: They welcomed that. . . always.

AB: Were you all ever tempted to drink and smoke?

VF: When I moved on campus, we smoked. I didn't smoke at home, but-, and I was too dumb to know she could find out. [chuckle]

RW-N: Did you continue to smoke?

V F: For a while. Until I married and I went home. And one day, well, my mother said, "I'm sick of you coming in here smelling like smoking. You need to come here smelling like cologne." Because he never smoked. [AB chuckling] But that didn't bother me, until one day I was teaching, right here in Charles Town. And you know, you ask a question and you can't get the desired answer, and I kept asking this question and I couldn't get a desired answer. And I went to the-, picked up my purse, took a cigarette out and stuck it in my mouth, and when I got ready to strike a match I looked around, there was a room full of people, and all of 'em looking at me. I put that cigarette down and I have not smoked a cigarette since.

AB: You mean, you didn't go through the withdrawal?

VF: No, that was withdrawal enough. [chuckle] When you look around and you've got a classroom full of people. And I was in uh, that was before Page-Jackson closed. And all of them sitting there big-eyed, looking at you.

RW-N: So, so you thought that you were setting a bad example for them? What was going on in your mind, that it affected you that way?

VF: Uh, I have always been the type of person that nothing and nobody was to control me. And I decided that that cigarette was controlling me. (RW-N: Uh-huh) So, that had to go. Because nothing and nobody was supposed to control me.

AB: We were talking a moment or two ago about your social life when you were growing up in high school and what not. What about your social life at Spelman?

VF: Well, there are only so many things that you could do when you were at Spelman. Because you lived on the campus. And anything and everything, [recorder beeps] and everything that was happening on the campus, naturally you participated in. The only thing that you were not supposed to participate in was when uh, we did not have sororities there at that time. But when the fraternities from the other schools had their conclave in the winter, you were not supposed to go. And I had, I was at the point I didn't care whether they sent me home or not. So, and I'd asked to go and Dean Lyons said, "No, you know you can't." So, I would go anyway. And half the time, I'd meet up—I remember meeting up with Dean Lyons one day-, one night, at a dance. I stayed with my aunt then. I'd sneak off and go down to her house and stay. And she told me that night at the dance, she said, "I'll see you in my office tomorrow morning, right after chapel." And then I went to her office, she say, "I expect you to be back on this campus before dinner. Nobody gave you permission to go to that dance last night." But I did. [laughter] But I had wanted to do everything that the other kids were doing. And my mother put me over there; I felt like it was punishment. Because she said that I was too young to be going to these places and doing the things that the other kids did. And I guess I was just resenting it. That's why I would take a chance and go.

AB: Uh, this fellow that you were engaged to, did you meet him then? Before you met your husband, you said you (VF: Yeah) were engaged.

VF: I knew him. I met him before I even got sick, I knew him then. Because when I got sick and my arm and all, he'd come by and we'd go places and walk together. And I remember the first

thing we went out to, a group of-, he invited them over to the Top Hat. And we went over there that day, and all my friends were there to meet me. And uh, oh, we had a nice time. My mother knew I was going. But I didn't know where we were going. (AB: Mmm-hmm)

AB: So, they had planned a surprise for you?

VF: They had planned to surprise me.

AB: Uh, would you talk a little bit about holidays at your home? How, how did-, were holidays celebrate-, celebrated?

VF: Well, I guess you might say they were celebrated is –Thanksgiving - of course, we always had all the family and friends in. And as I got older, all the kids who could not go home, I would invite them, regardless of what we had, how little we had, or what, we'd share that with them. Just like we would at Christmas. And, of course, in the summer time, Fourth of July, and all, when people would come, there'd just be a porch full of us, and a yard full of us. Because there was Spelman, Morris Brown, Clark University, Morehouse, all of us there.

END TAPE 1 – SIDE 2

BEGIN TAPE 2 - SIDE 1

AB: …[tape] two with Mrs.Vivian Fleming, Charles Town.

RW-N: So, we were talking about the holidays and how you celebrated them. And you were describing how very often you had a house-full of young people, right? What happened at Christmas uh, when you went home?

VF: Well, those who couldn't go home for Christmas were welcome to come and stay. (RW-N: Did you have a Christmas tree?) Always. Fireplace in the front room. And of course, the house was gas heat. That's another thing I was not accustomed to, because the house was gas heated.

But we had one big coal stove in the dining room. My father wanted that big coal stove in the dining room. And we had a fireplace in the living room. And also, a gas heater. And, of course, we'd sit down and pop corn. But we would just have a house full of people who uh, kids who, if they wanted to come in, they were always welcome to come. We didn't have much. We had, uh, hot dogs, and in the summer we'd cook hot dogs on a charcoal bucket. Do you know what a charcoal bucket is? (AB: Mmm-hmm) It's a bucket and it has a grate in the middle of it. And you have charcoal fire above it and the ashes would fall down in the bottom. And you could put a wire across the top or you could spear your hot dog and cook it. And we didn't have all this fancy barbecue grills. We just used the charcoal bucket and cook hot dogs and things.

RW-N: When you were very young, uh, at Christmas time, was that an exciting time? Because of getting presents? There always gift giving or not much of that?

VF: It, it was gift giving, but it wasn't too much gift giving. You know, we didn't give a lot of, lots of presents. A lot of things she made, my mother made, you know, and would give us. But if we got a doll or something like that, or a couple of dolls and all. And I come from a family there are not many children in the family. There were three of us. My mother was an only child. And my father had brothers and sisters who were much older. In fact, his mother gave him to a, one of his sisters to raise when ,uh, he was small. And from that he went to his older brother. So, so far as family, we didn't ever have much family. (RW-N: Mmm-hmm) And I don't have any left. I'm the only one left.

RW-N: You didn't have a lot of cousins around (VF: No), but, so you shared with friends.

VF: With friends because-, and uh, my mother was accustomed to sharing with friends, because she did not have, you know, brothers and sisters. (RW-N: Yes) She said there were three of

them, but she was the only child who lived to get to maturity.

RW-N: When you were a child, what was your perception of yourself as being middle-class, or did you feel. . . . At Christmas time, for example, you said you didn't get a lot. But in fact, were you always satisfied with what you got?

VF: Yes, I didn't know any more. So . . .

RW-N: And did you feel that relative to your friends, you were getting as much as they were, or more?

VF: I thought we were getting as much. My father ran this dray line, I think I told you before, he turned his buses into dray lines. (RW-N: yes) And he hauled for companies, shoe companies. He hauled for Nunley and Norris Candy Factory. And he would bring home big paper bags of loose candy. And of course, I didn't ever eat it. I never did eat much candy; I never liked candy. And we would give it away, [inaudible]. [laughter] We didn't know anything else. And he would bring all these things in on the truck, as the trucks would come in. And we'd go up on the truck and pick off whatever was left there that we wanted. And during the Depression, like stores would go out of business and he would-, they would move stores and, see, he would bring all these things home that stores had to give away and get rid of. And so, the do-gooder would have us, as soon as he'd go to work in the afternoon, she would have us [laughter] (RW-N: Do-gooder mother) Uh-huh, she would have us taking candy, food or whatever else she had, to people who she felt like needed it. And we'd have to be drudging along. And this heater that we had in the dining room, my mother'd bring cans, shoes, or anything in that big heater. It had a lining in it. And when Daddy went to work, she'd have us taking buckets of coal to elderly people (RW-N: Uh-huh), that's where she got, where I gave her the name. . . . [chuckle]

RW-N: And so, you felt that you had at least as much as other people, in that respect, you had more than some.

VF: More than some. But she always shared it. So, you didn't really think too much about it. (RW-N: Yes, uh-huh, but you never felt poor?) Not really, we never really felt real poor. Because we all had something, and we had to do. As I was telling them the other day, you know, once upon a time, people had curtains, and you used stretchers; you'd starch the curtains and you'd use stretchers. (RW-N: yes) When I was from about from the seventh grade up, I stretched curtains for people. I'd get up in the morning, I'd put those stretchers out on the front porch. We had a long front porch. And I put those stretchers out there, and set them. Then, I'd get up in the morning and pin that stretcher full of curtains. And stretched them. And then, in the afternoon, I'd take them off. Maybe I had some for somebody else to do, and I'd change the setting and I'd tend those. Well, I'd get twenty-five cents and some people I only got ten cents a curtain to stretch. I didn't have to wash 'em, I just had to stretch 'em. Ten cents a piece. And see, I thought I was making big money. (RW-N: Mmm-hmm)

RW-N: So, you worked. . . a little to earn...

VF: I worked the whole time, all of my life.

RW-N: You worked all of your life earning some money. When you were a child, were you allowed to keep this money?

VF: Oh, yes, that was mine. If you earned it, you kept it. But the only thing she'd tell us was, don't throw it away—be thrifty. And that has lived and stayed with me forever.

AB: Did that follow in your own child rearing practices? Did your children work?

VF: Yes. Just like–now you can say, this grandson, he usually works two jobs. My sons worked;

they worked in, uh—the youngest one cooked out to the race track.

AB: So, you had two sons?

VF: Mmm-hmm. Two sons. But that wasn't all I had. I had two sons and I had a nephew who stayed here with me until he was a junior at Shepherd College. My sister died, and I took him. And he went to Europe, to Holland, with a speech group, and he-, with a language group. And he didn't come back. That was in '78. And my husband and I went to-, he went to Germany and we went to Germany looking for him in 1980, no, 1978, we went to Germany looking for him. And he would not come back. He moved over to France. And he's the one who-, he hasn't made much of his life, and I've been very dissatisfied and unhappy with him. But I don't go along with him. I don't encourage him. As long as he's self-supporting, and not down and out, I won't help him any more. Because I think I helped him too much, and that's how he got over there.

RW-N: How young was he when you began to raise him in your home?

VF: I, well, my sister's children, I kept them here most summers all of their life, because she worked. And her husband was a merchant marine. And uh, every summer, I'd get those children and keep them. All, just about all summer, until it was time for them to go back to school. Except one summer, I didn't keep 'em. I think that was the summer of '59, or '58. My husband went to school in Wisconsin. Of course, he was constantly going back and forth to school, and I wanted to go out with him. So we went to River Falls, Wisconsin and stayed six weeks. So my sons went to New York to her, and kept the children while I went to Wisconsin. But other than that, I kept her children.

RW-N: Did you and your sister and brother help each other in other ways?

VF: Well, now, I kept my brother's son for one school year. He-, after he-, my brother was in

service. He and that wife divorced and she came to Washington to live. And I kept his son, that one, for one school year; I think he was fourth grade. That son uh, graduated from Howard, and he worked in World Bank until he got multiple sclerosis. He got that about two years ago.

RW-N: So, your brother and sister and you continue to stay in close contact with one another throughout your lives?

VF: I did, with both of them. They didn't always. But I stayed in close contact with them and always did things for 'em. They called me country. (RW-N: Uh-huh)

AB: Because you lived in West Virginia?

VF: Yeah, and because I gained so much weight after I came here.

AB: And your mother continued to live in Atlanta until her death?

VF: Until her death.

AB: Did she live alone?

VF: After my father died. My father died in '72, and she died in '80, and she lived alone. But she lived alone, but I went down in her latter years, I would go down at least once. Well, I first would go every six weeks, once every six weeks, to see that her bills are paid. Then I started flying down once a month, to check on her and see that her bills were paid. And the one thing, you know, as I say you can't serve two masters. She died in the summer, and I was in South America. I went to South America–QD wanted to go to South America. And I felt like I had spent all my time back and forth, doing things for my family, and I felt guilty about it. So, I said, "Okay, we'll go." So, we spent forty-one days in Brazil, Uruguay, and Argentina. And we were on our way back and we got a call that she had-, she died in the house by herself. But I think it was so hot, and she had closed up the house too tight. And uh, she had a heart condition. And

that was what it was. I went down before we left and the doctor told me, I asked the doctor about it. He said, "She might last a year, two years, she might last two days." He said, "Now, you can't just stop living to come back and forth to stay here with her. So, if that's what your husband wants to do," said, "why don't you just go and do it this time?" Because that's how she ended.

RW-N: Before we stop today, can you tell us a little bit more about your sons? What their names are, how old they are?

VF: Well, my older son is Quince D., Junior. And uh, he works in computers, and he lives in uh, Raleigh, North Carolina. My younger son, the one William Scott—well, the older son is fifty-, he was born in '43. So, he'll be fifty-four this year. The younger son was born in '45. . . so. . . he'll be fifty-two this year. And his field was math and physics when he was in college. And he worked for IBM. But now, and when working for IBM, he went every place. He would be lecturing in Finland and every place else. But now he has enough years and time in to retire, but he's not really old enough. And he's doing something with uh, Martin. Let's see. . .Lockheed Martin. And he's on assignment in Anchorage, Alaska. That's how-, why I went to Anchorage.

RW-N: You recently visited him, you were telling us.

VF: Yeah, uh-huh. And when this assignment is over, he'll come back to this area. But that's just the type of thing that he has done with his life. He has worked from one place to the other; he's lectured all in France and Italy and all with his—he was in dyes with IBM. That's what he started out with.

RW-N: Uh-huh. And how many grandchildren do you have?

VF: I have six.

RW-N: Now, the one grandchild we met here today. . .

VF: That's one of the younger ones. The oldest grandson is Ronald C. Fleming and he's a doctor in Columbus, Ohio. He's practicing medicine there. The second one is a girl, and she lives in Atlanta. She went in service. She's out of service and she's married and back in school in Atlanta. The next one is a granddaughter; she graduated from Fairmont State College. And uh, she worked-, she lives over there in her father's house in Germantown. And she works over there. I don't know what she's doing. But she's doing something with computers. So long as she's self-supporting, I don't worry about her. And, of course, this is the next one. Then I have a grandson. . .

RW-N: And the next one you referred to is living with you now, temporarily? And is, will soon graduate from Marshall University.

VF: Will soon graduate from Marshall. Mm-hmm. And uh, well, he. . . when they were growing up, the mother and father, for religious reasons, divorced. The older girl, it was in her junior year, it was-, yeah, her junior year in high school, and I was retired. So, I spent that school semester, I'd fly down to Atlanta on Monday morning, he'd leave his car at the airport, and I'd drive over to the house. And I stayed all week, and I'd leave on Friday afternoon, and come back here. And I did that March, April, May, when they were first divorced.

RW-N: Uh-huh. And this was with your younger son? (VF: That's the younger son, mmm-hmm) And do you have grandchildren from your older son?

VF: My oldest son has four children. His oldest son who's the-, who's the doctor; then the daughter, who was in service, and that girl's a senior in college. She went to school one day, and she came home, she called me and said, "Guess what happened today?" And I said, "I don't

know." She said, "I joined the Army." I was ready to kill her. [chuckles] And, of course, he has two other sons. And uh, (AB: That's William's father?) No, uh-huh, that's the oldest son, that's Junior, QD, Junior. And uh, his oldest son just would not-, he got tied up in athletics. And he was only going to a big ten school; and since he couldn't do that, he just stopped. And he has been in all kind of schools until finally, as I've told them, that it's time for me to live and I'm not spending any more money on tuition. And then the younger one had a, he was born with a kidney problem. And his half sister, who's my oldest granddaughter, came in here from Germany and gave him a kidney. She was a donor for him. Now, he's back in school; he had to stay out the year he was so sick. Now he's a sophomore. He's the youngest grandchild. And he's a sophomore at James Madison, I believe it's James Madison. It's over toward Washington.

AB: Harrisonburg.

VF: No, Washington DC.

AB: Oh, okay. Now, uh, the son whose children you flew back and forth to Atlanta to look after, that was your. . . (VF: Youngest son). . . your youngest son. That's William's father?

VF: That's William's father.

AB: And he had. . . (VF: two children). . . two children. William and (VF: Erica) and Erica, the sister. (VF: Mmm-hmm) And this was the sister who donated the kidney?

VF: No, she didn't, it was. . . my oldest son's oldest daughter, he's only got one daughter. And she donated a kidney. And this brother she gave it to was a half brother. (AB: I see) And so she donated a kidney to him.

AB: Uh-huh. So, uh, William, then, grew up in Atlanta, until. . .

VF: Well, I brought William here in the seventh grade. Had he not, if I had not brought William

here in the seventh grade, William would be somewhere in prison now. [laughter]

AB: So, you practically have reared him?

VF: Mmm-hmm, I have.

AB: When you were going back and forth to Atlanta, was your husband still living then?

VF: Yes, mm-hmm. He stayed here. Well, I was retired; he was, too. But we didn't want—guess it was school crazy—but we did not want to take them out of school during the school year. And that was March. So I had March, April, May, the three months, uh, to go back and forth. And I went down every Monday morning and uh, of course, Bill was going from one place to the other working with IBM. IBM transferred him to this area. And I would keep his children. And after I went down there the first time, too, and I found out that uh, the children were not doing what he-, they thought they should be doing. And the principals told me that they would contact the mother and she would not respond and that William would come to school and tell the principal that "My father didn't come home this weekend, he's still working this place, or that place." And that William was spending more time sitting in a hall outside the principal's office than he was in the class room. And, of course, he did not appreciate my going into the schools, [chuckle] he said, running his business. But I did, and then when the school year was over, I brought them back here. And the mother did not even contest their coming. She didn't contest the divorce-, him getting the custody of the children.

AB: Do they see her now?

VF: Occasionally. She is better now. There for awhile she didn't have anything to do with them. And we would send them to her at-, during the summer. She worked, but we thought that one child or two child-, and she is reservationist for Delta. And we thought that one child, or two

children, you know, for part of the summer, she would enjoy. But one summer she was there-, they were there-, and she told him to get out of her house because they did not want to conform with her religious beliefs. So, my oldest grandson, the one who's a doctor, uh, was in Atlanta visiting with his mother. So, he went and got them. And uh, he brought 'em up. And of course, he's not that much older than they are. But we always made a car available. And he was visiting and had our car down there. So, he brought them up, when they were there visiting. And last summer, he took William to the Olympics. (AB: Oh, my) Well, see, they are all very close. And they just, whatever is going on, they do.

AB: So, you have fairly frequent contact with your sons and grandchildren?

VF: Very frequent contact.

RW-N: And have had?

VF: Always had. Now, the son who's working in Alaska, he can call during the day. Of course, the hours are different. Now he calls me two or three times a week. Because he can call from work, from his office there at work. And I can contact him at work there.

RW-N: So, when you were a young woman and you decided to, uh, get on the fast track and have this family, we're now seeing the results of that in this close family, right? You're all-, you're close right now with your sons and your grandchildren?

VF: Uh-huh, I am. But see, my mother had-, I didn't have cousins, you know how a lot of people have cousin so-and-so? And I didn't have 'em. And my uh, father's mother being so old, she died, you know, when I was quite young. So, I didn't have the grandmother. And my mother's mother was not around us. She died, I guess I was about ninth grade when she died. So, truly I didn't really have family. (RW-N: yes, mm-hmm) And that's what I wanted. And my

mother said that I didn't marry QD, that I married his family because it was such a big family.

RW-N: Because you have a West Virginia family, too, now, on your husband's side.

VF: Oh, yes, there were ten of them.

RW-N: Uh-huh.

AB: And you got along with all of them?

VF: With all of them. For one thing, if I did not get along. . . if they said something to me that I did not agree with, you can rest assured they got an answer. And when their children would come, just like with these, when they came, and came here, this was my house. They couldn't be over there at home and tell them what to do over here. I did not allow it.

RW-N: Uh-huh, uh-huh. But you worked that all out with his family? And got all of that worked out?

VF: Yeah, I just told them. [chuckle]

RW-N: You got all that worked out. Is this a place that we could stop?

END TAPE 2 - SIDE 1 (and first interview)

BEGIN TAPE 3 – SIDE 1

RW-N: . . .Vivian Fleming, and we're in her home. And this is the second interview. Mrs. Fleming, we've touched on a lot of different things the last time we talked to you, but we thought we'd like to start by going back and asking you about your teaching career. Now, you've told us about uh, where you have taught, and how you came to West Virginia and got your job. But we'd like to ask you uh, a few other things. (VF: All right) When you came to West Virginia, the schools were integrated. (VF: They were not integrated) They were not integrated. They became integrated, right? And you had to make a shift, then, right? (VF: Yes, uh-huh) Can you describe

that to us in a little more detail, in general, how that went? The new kinds of things that you had to get used to. . . ?

VF: Well, I had, really, no problem, except the changing of schools. I just could not kind of cope with the idea of working in one building in the morning, (RW-N: Yes) and the other building in the afternoon. But after I got accustomed to that, I had no problem.

RW-N: And. . . did-, was this the first time that you were working with white students?

VF: Only when-, I had worked with white students when I did work in Syracuse.

RW-N: Yes, uh-huh, that was when you were in graduate school.

VF: Yes, that's right, uh-huh. But other than that, it was the first time.

RW-N: Did that go easily? Did the students, uh, respond well to the black teachers? Were there some difficulties, do you recall any of that?

VF: Well, for the most part, I had no problem with them. But there's always gonna be one or two who's gonna try to show themselves and who do not wanna show respect. But I had the upper kids, the more advanced, they came from different type homes. And I can remember one boy came to the door and he said, "Come here, Miss Fleming, I want to talk to you." So, I didn't say anything; I walked over to the door. And when the kids-, when I came back into the classroom, oh, the kids there, who were predominantly white, say, "Oh, Miss Fleming, you shouldn't have gone to that door. That wasn't right." So, I had to explain to them that some kids grow up like cultivated flowers, and that's what they were in the classroom. And some kids grow up like weeds. And that's what he was. [chuckling] And so, I expected more of the cultivated flowers than I did from the weeds.

RW-N: And you had these advanced students?

VF: I had advanced students who could understand that.

RW-N: Who were the cultivated flowers.

VF: Who were the cultivated flowers. [chuckling]

RW-N: How did, uh, how did it go with the other teachers in the school? How many black teachers were in the school, when you first began, in the integrated school?

VF: When we first integrated, the teachers from Jefferson High were separated and sent to the other schools. We didn't have one high school. Some was sent to Shepherdstown, I think a couple or so were sent to Harpers Ferry, and the others were sent to, uh, Charles Town High; it was Charles Town High at that time. There were about six of us down there in the school.

RW-N: Where you were?

VF: Where I was. And, well, some were sent to the junior high. (RW-N: mm-hmm) But uh, nobody had a set-, a certain classroom. We drifted from one room to the other. And according to the size of your class, and according to who was not using the classroom. And the sharing of a classroom was something I had never been accustomed to. So, that was not easy. But I had no problems with it. And that's when I said, I wouldn't work that way again. So, the next year, that's when I was given a classroom. That was the first year. And the next year I was given a classroom. And I was given better classes. I had more of the slow classes the first year.

RW-N: Mm-hmm. And did the white teachers accept their new black colleagues?

VF: For the most part, they accepted them, according to their own attitudes and abilities. We had some who came in, who wanted to be Miss this and Miss that, you know, wanted to make sure you called them that. And if they didn't call me Mrs. Fleming, I would have not called them Mrs. whatever their name was. (RW-N: mm-hmm) And I was adamant about it. [chuckling]

AB: Uh, was that a problem that you had growing up in the south about uh, how you would be addressed, or your parents would be addressed by white people?

VF: No, I didn't come in contact with that many, only in the schools. And of course, when you are in a school system-, I grew up more or less with Atlanta University school system. All the people treated each other with due respect.

AB: You talk about uh, Dr. Duvall, I think that was the name of the doctor who delivered you and who became your physician. (VF: uh-huh, mm-hmm) How did he address your mother when he came? Did he call her by her first name?

VF: Yes, he called her Ada. (AB: He called her Ada) He called her Ada, mmm-hmm. And he always called you by your first name? (VF: Always) Did you see that as insulting?

VF: No, because he did not do it in an insulting way. You know, you can say some things, and you can say them nice and be accepted. But you can use a tone of voice that would make people disrespect. And I could understand them, because the day that he crossed my mother's yard, before I was born, she told him she would not let him deliver a dog. [laughing] And uh, she had some nasty things to say to him. And then, I came. And they had to get him. (RW-N: And he came) And he came, willingly.

RW-N: Yes. To go back to the school situation, then, uh, it seems that it went relatively easily.

VF: Well, it did. I say for the most part. And I had made some very good friends. You go into the teacher's lounge, and I know one teacher in particularly, oh, she and I would be there, because I had no homeroom. And we would be in, and she'd say, "Don't let this person, or that person run over you." I said, "Well, you don't have to worry about that."

RW-N: And she was a white person, this teacher. . . (VF: yes, she was; she's still my friend). . .

and she became your friend?

VF: She's still my good friend, mmm-hmm.

RW-N: Do you see her now or talk to her (VF: Yes, I talk to her.) on the telephone?

VF: And she calls to tell me what's going on in the school systems. And said, "I wish you were back out here." [chuckling]

RW-N: So, she's still teaching?

VF: Yes, she's still teaching.

AB: What about your experiences with the parents of the white children?

VF: We'd have parent-teacher conference. And I think that a lot of parents came out of curiosity, to see what I looked like, and what I was like. But I had no problems with them, because I was always just straight forward with them. I never cared whether they liked me or not. And I would not allow them to insult me.

AB: When you say you wouldn't allow them to insult you, how did, how did you deal with that?

VF: I would just change the subject. Or I'd say the interview is over.

RW-N: Do you think that sometimes they tried to insult you?

VF: I think so. And that, too, depends upon the uh, type of parent. You find some parents-, now, you have to understand that they have problems, just like we have. And some-, in some instances, I said that uh, they felt inferior. They felt because you had an education and they didn't, the only thing they had that made them better than you was their color. So, you'd have to understand that and be able to turn it around.

RW-N: So, you tried to bring some sense of sympathy to those relationships?

VF: In some instances.

RW-N: In some instances, yes. [laughter] Well, did you have-, did you ever have instances where it was difficult to be sympathetic and did you ever get angry and tell people off?

VF: Many times. [laughter]

RW-N: Can you give us an example of that?

VF: I can't tell you right now. But I would. . . I would just let 'em know that was it, and that they were not gonna walk over me. That's what I'd tell 'em. I'd say, "No, I'm here in the position, and if you don't to respect me, you respect the position that I have. And if you think that I'm not capable of doing the job, then, the people for you to talk to is the board of education, not me." (RW-N: Mmm-hmm)

AB: As you look back on your life, uh, what impact do you think being black has had? (VF: Like what?) Well, do you feel that your life has been circumscribed, or, uh, or do you think that uh, if you had an opportunity to remake yourself, would you remake yourself as a black woman, or poka dot woman, or. . . ? [laughter]

VF: I think I would make myself as a black woman. It makes no difference. Because a lot of people talk about problems that they had, that I didn't have. And the only place I saw them was when, uh, somebody else would talk about 'em, or I would read 'em in the paper. And truthfully, if you stop and think about it, a lot of instances, you would be just as angry, or could get just as angry with the black parent as you did with the white parent. So, this is why I never bothered. One of the things that bothered me most was if something happened in the school that kids didn't like, the first thing they would do, would either run to the NAACP, to complain and report. Or, they'd run to the principal. Well, I had no problem with the principal. . . at all. He never bothered me, and I didn't bother them. And he would say, "That's her classroom, and I cannot

run it." I had had that disagreement before the school integrated, with the principal trying to-, just walk in my classroom and not respect me; you know, walk to the door and say, "Come in, so and so," you know, just as if I wasn't there. So, of course, we had had that out, because I told him he could not do it, that as long as I was there and in charge of the classroom, that would not happen. And when he had something else to say about it, I just got my little bag, came on out the classroom and let him have it.

RW-N: Now, this, this particular principal was black or white? (VF: He was black.) So what you're saying is that color isn't always the issue.

VF: No, it's not always the issue. And after he found out that he could not-, and of course, the word got around, said, she's not gonna let him do it, then I had no problem.

RW-N: What kind of teacher were you? Would you-, do you think the kids would call you strict, or. . . ?

VF: I think some of them would, but do you know I have, still have, a lot of good friends among the students. Black and white. I had quite a few who run away, now one in particular, and he was white. But he teaches math at the University-, West Virginia University. I have quite a few doctors who I had in class. I had some who, when they went to college and took the test, they were advanced math students, and they did not take the first year math. I have some who comes around now. I had one boy, he could have been a smart boy, but he put his head down and wouldn't do anything. And I would crack him on the head with the ruler. [laughter] He was white. His mother worked in the Governor's office. And he comes here dutifully. I kind of looked for him this morning, because he's a carpenter now. And he usually come around to see when we have a storm like we had last night. (RW-N: Uh-huh) If the storm left me here, or if he

needs to come and repair something.

RW-N: Uh-huh. So you have-, so when you look back on your students, you say, "Well, they must have cared about me," because some of them are still showing up.

VF: That's right, that's right. Both. I had-, as a friend of mine told me, said, "You've got one white one and one black one that really comes to see about you, don't you?" I say, "Yeah, they still come. They're the ones I had the most trouble with." [chuckling]

RW-N: Uh-huh. Is it fair to say that you have gotten a lot of satisfaction from your teaching?

VF: I have, I really have. As I look back and think about it, I've had-, got a lot of satisfaction from students before we integrated. And a lot of students since we have integrated.

AB: As a person who was in math, uh, it seems that your skills were somewhat beyond the ordinary. Do you ever think that, or wish that, you had gone into any other field? I mean, if there had been opportunities for you to go in the space industry, or anything like that?

VF: Well, without a I doubt I would have. And at times, I have been interested and have wanted, and wished that I could have. And the reason for that is-, well, now, I have, the youngest son is a mathematician. And he went into IBM, as I said, that's William's father, because it was there for him. And he just walked right into it. The day he graduated, he just walked right into it. Well, after he had to uh, leave IBM, because they down-, downsized, and I said, "Well, what are you doing?" I said, "You haven't missed a day of work." And he said, "No, I haven't. I've been busy." But he said, "I'm working, don't worry about it." And I found his picture on the cover of a magazine. I brought that magazine home. I have it over here. I brought that magazine home and asked him what he was doing. And he said, "Mom, that's not your business." And that's why he's in Anchorage now. Whatever he's doing, he's still doing it there.

AB: So, you see the opportunities, uh, had changed by the time your son came along (VF: That's right.) and uh, maybe if you'd come along at the same time, some of those opportunities may have been available to you.

VF: That's right. That's what-, and we have always talked about it. Because I can remember them telling me when he was in high school, said, "Momma, let's run away, let's go to Alaska and get a job. Or let's go this place and get a job. Daddy and Skeet doesn't want to go," said, "but we can go." [chuckling]

RW-N: Now, some of the opening of opportunities may have to do with technology and change. But do you also feel that for black people the opportunities have opened up more?

VF: I'm sure they have. Because there wasn't many things that you could have gotten a job in. I had tried. And I was not interested in just teaching. I did that because I was not allowed at home… When I grew up, I'd never had a summer job. My summer job was to keep house for the family—they worked—and things like that. And of course, if I did their laundry, they were supposed to give me something. And I cooked and, you know, and kept the house, and any money that I saved out of that was mine. And I often felt like if there had been other opportunities, I might have gone out and done something different. (RW-N: mm-hmm)

AB: So, do you think that your family sort of protected you, then, in the kinds of jobs or the work that you were permitted to do? Would your mother have let you do domestic work, for example?

VF: No, she would not have let me do that, not at all. But as I go back and think about it, when I was small, I had a problem, a physical problem. They didn't really know what it was, but they protected me with it. Because that's how I started off in private school. I'd be perfectly conscious and all right in the morning, but about 12:30 or 1:00 I would just go to sleep or be

unconscious. And so for that reason, I was the one who went to the private school, and not my brother and sister. Because they couldn't tolerate that in a public school.

AB: So, you needed the more sympathetic teacher, uh, somebody who would understand what your problem was?

VF: They weren't sympathetic as far as the classroom was concerned. But they knew that by 12 o'clock and all, it was time for me to go home. And see, I couldn't have done that in a public school.

AB: Uh, when we were talking about this yesterday, you were also commenting about your sort of rebelliousness and, uh, and your mother felt that going to school would kind of, uh, tame some of that. Was that true too?

VF: That was true.

AB: You really went to the public school—I mean to the private school—for two reasons. One because of your-, the concerns about your health, (VF: Mmm-hmm) and the other because of your rebelliousness?

VF: Yes, see, I didn't understand that a -, I guess being a child I would not understand why there were so many things that my brother and sister could do. I was the middle-, that they could do, and so many things that I was not allowed to do. I didn't understand it like that. I just decided they were controlling me.

AB: And you think that you weren't allowed to do these things because of your health?

VF: I think it was because of my health. See, I think the problem-, one of the problems was, I understand that my mother had had pneumonia in December, and on up. And I was born in March. And they've always felt that that had something to do with my health, because she was

too ill to do the proper things. And for that-, from the day that I was born on, they were overprotective.

AB: And that was a problem for you?

VF: That was a problem for me. [chuckles]

RW-N: And, and that led to this feeling that you've described about your wanting not to be controlled?

VF: That's right, I did not want to be controlled. And I let them understand that even when uh, we went to the integrated school. I told the principal he was not to be walking in my classroom and he could not control me; that I was gonna do the right thing, but give me credit for having sense enough to do the right thing, and not have them looking over my shoulder.

RW-N: Mmm-hmm. Now, when you came to West Virginia, you had-, you indicated that you really did not want to make the move. (VF: No, I didn't) What persuaded you, then, to come? You did not come with your husband right away. He had-, he…

VF: My father persuaded me. [all chuckling] He said, "Either you're gonna be married, or you're not gonna be married. It's gonna be one or the other. You're not gonna live one place, and he's living in another. So, now, if you're gonna be married, you get on up there with him. And if you're not, get a divorce and stay here."

RW-N: When you stayed in Georgia, was it simply because you really did not want to come to West Virginia?

VF: I just had not seen any place in West Virginia that I wanted to live. (RW-N: Right) I guess I had a different attitude because all I had-, the only place that I had been, had been the areas of Mt. Hope, Charleston, down in that area. And those were the only places in West Virginia that I had

been. And that did not seem like a place that I would want to live.

AB: Uh, why did your husband come to Charles Town, since he was from Mt. Hope? Why up here and not down there?

VF: Well, he was trying in a sense, to satisfy me as well. He had an offer, and I think I told you, Montgomery County and that offer, in that area. And Lewisburg, he could have come to Lewisburg.

RW-N: In the Montgomery area?

[overlapping voices, inaudible]

AB: In Montgomery, West Virginia,

VF: In Montgomery, West Virginia. He could have come to Montgomery, West Virginia, or he could have gone to Lewisburg. He went and interviewed both of those places. But he came here and he found out how close it was to Washington. (RW-N: mm-hmm) And he thought that since I did not want to leave Atlanta, that this being close to Washington, that I would be better satisfied here. So, he chose this one. And I still did not come, because I was so sure it was gonna be like the area down there. And. . .

RW-N: So, you held out. . . for two years. (VF: I held out) You stayed. And your husband, all during that time, wanted you to join him here.

VF: Wanted me to join him here. And he came back and forth at holidays and, you know, things like that. And I think my father thought that I was having a little too much freedom. I had my own house. And my father felt like I had too much freedom. (RW-N: uh-huh) So that's when he decided he would step in. And that was something he seldom did, he never bothered us too much. He never bothered me too much. But when he decided to step in, I thought, well now, I

guess I better make a move.

AB: But tell me, you were, by that time, in your twenties, you were a married woman with two children, and earning your own paycheck (VF: That's right), managing your own home. How is it that at that point-, and you'd talked about control-, that your father could still influence you that much?

VF: I don't know. You know, he was the type of person who didn't have too much to say. But when he spoke, we listened. He would just go along with most anything that you did. But then, when he'd get tired of it, he just spoke and that was it. So much as to having friends, he came home about 11 o'clock at night. And I'd have the front porch and a living room all full of kids, right there by all the schools. And he would walk up on that porch at night and he would say, "Good evening, everybody." He'd go on in the house, and he'd come back out, and he'd say, "Goodnight, everybody." And everybody would scatter. [laughter]

AB: Did that embarrass you?

VF: Everybody [inaudible] expected it. At first it embarrassed me, but then they would expect it. Say, "Mr. Williams be back out here in a minute or so."

RW-N: Let me go back a moment to that issue, that theme of control in your life. Uh, how does that, how did you work that out? How did you work that out, with regard to marriage? Marriage clearly requires people working together in a compromise and influencing one another.

VF: Well, I found out before we married that he was not the type of person who would try to control me. He would go along with most anything that I wanted to do; he would go along with it. And I think that was why I decided, "Well, this is the person for me," is because he's not going to try to be my boss. And that's what I didn't want.

AB: And you discussed that frankly with him, before you married, about what your expectations of marriage would be?

VF: I didn't just tell him that. But he knew that I didn't want to be controlled. . . at all. And he never bothered me with it.

RW-N: So, that never became a real problem in the marriage, then. . . . It was. . .

VF: No.

RW-N: He was always kind of easy to kind of work things out?

VF: Easy to work things out. He had, he had six sisters. And he was accustomed to them. And he was down near the lower end of the pole so far as ten children were concerned; he had the older ones who more or less controlled him. You might know one of his sisters. You know the Bookers in Charleston, live up on Vandalia?

AB: Uh, I know the family. Was that Charles Bookers uh. . . ?

VF: Yes. (AB: Mmm-hmm, I know them.) Well, the mother, Ruth, was his sister. Well, all right, he was so accustomed to them. His brother taught him in high school. His brother was George Scott, and taught him. He was accustomed to them, more or less, controlling him. And then the younger sisters just worshipped him. So uh, I had no problem either, because I could just move right on in with them. [chuckle]

RW-N: Ancella asked you before about whether, uh, being a black person, how that has affected your life. Uhm. . . and it seems that you have made your way fine in the world. But it also seems that you recognize that for black people, there have been more limitations. Is that fair to say?

VF: Yes, I hadn't realized it. But I've also been able to get around quite a bit of that. You know, you stop and think about it, and you just don't go bullheaded into something. But you find

a way to actually get around it.

RW-N: Now, I want to ask you the same kind of thing with regard to being a woman. Uh. . . clearly when we grow up, we are taught to be women or men. And it's not exactly the same, right? Have you felt that being a woman has limited you in some ways?

VF: Well, only not being able to do something maybe that I wanted to do physically. (RW-N: uh-huh) But not mentally. I've always gotten a kick out of out-smarting the man. (RW-N: mentally) Mentally.

RW-N: Uh-huh. Do you think that, that all kinds-, that as many kinds of job opportunities were open to you as a woman, as what might have been had you been a man?

VF: I don't think they were. But then, after you make yourself more satisfied, or you get interested in what you're doing, you don't worry too much about it. I was telling my grandson. They gave uh, government tests here every month, and every month I'd go take the test, just like I was looking for a job. And then, when I would get the job, I didn't want it. (RW-N: Mmm-hmm) But I got a kick out of going and competing, taking the test.

AB: So, that was a sort of personal measurement for you (VF: That's right) with the, with the other group.

VF: Yes, because I took the test, I think I told you yesterday. When I thought that the school was gonna be closed, I went and took the test and got a job as a meterologist. And I was willing to go into that, although I did not want to commute to Washington. So, we went over there and bargained to buy a house. And that's when QD said, "Well, we're gonna have to stop and find out what's what." He said, "Now, we don't want to be saddled with a house in Washington, and not use it." So, it was up near Walter Reed. And that's when the superintendent of school told

me no, that the school might close, but it will not affect your job. And I gave up that idea.

AB: Uh, it seems. . . .is it fair to say you-, your never having any job anxiety was a sort of a-, you had confidence in your ability to get another job, if need be. So, you didn't mind speaking out, if it meant you might be fired. You didn't compromise on that because of fear.

VF: That's true, I never had a fear of getting a job. That's why I think I took the test. I really don't know why I would go and take the test. [recorder signaling end of tape] But I would go to take them, to see if I qualified for another job and applied for the job. And then I'd find a reason to write nice and let 'em know that I could not take it.

AB: So, that kept your confidence going, then?

VF: That's right, I did not-, I felt like I was-, my attitude was, I was looking for a job when I came, and I'm still looking. I could have worked at Storer College. Storer College was open when I came here. But it didn't meet my expectations of a college. See, I had been around and lived around the campuses in Atlanta. Storer was exceptionally small and didn't suit me, so I didn't want that. Then, somebody had told the superintendent of school over in Berryville, Virginia, that uh, I was coming. And that possibly I would need a job. So they called and asked if I was really interested, and that I was a mathematician and did I really want the job. And I said, no, I appreciated it but I did not want to travel. See, this was about 13, 12 or 13 miles across there. I said, "I don't want to travel in the winter time so I think I'd be better off staying here." But I felt like, well, if I really want a job, I can find one.

RW-N: Could you tell us a little bit more about your feelings about Storer College? It was smaller than. . . .

VF: I had been accustomed to the larger schools, (RW-N: Yes) and about that time, uh, the

schools had all moved over together. Morris Brown had come from the east side of town—it was on the west side. Atlanta University was-, had gone to [inaudible] but it became a part of the university system. Because the president of Spelman had-, well, we had money because we had Rockefeller money. So, they bought the name, but they had to put it to use. So, they brought all the schools together. And that one college there-, and from elementary, from kindergarten on-, I had been accustomed to college campuses because the school I started out with, Oglethorpe, was on the Atlanta University campus. And when I came to Storer and I saw the campus there, which was small, and all it just did not seem to me like a university, or like a college. I just thought it was small. And then the people who went to school there were more clannish. You know, like this is this crowd and this is that crowd. And the people who worked here for the most part had gone to Storer. And I decided that that didn't suit me.

AB: Did that make you feel like an outsider here?

VF: Yes, it really did. Because everything-, and I still don't bother with whatever they do.

AB: So, their alumni association has activities or something, and you don't. . . .

VF: They still have the uh, what you call the homecoming and what not. But I never, I have never been. I still have my first one to go to.

RW-N: Some of the things that. . .

END TAPE 3 - SIDE 1

BEGIN TAPE 3 - SIDE 2

RW-N: . . .some of the writers, black writers that I have read, talk about uh, that black women have really a double burden in society, that they have to deal with racism and that they have to deal with sexism, how women are treated in society. And that, so black women are really

different in that way than white women, or black men or black-, or white men. Have you ever-, do you feel that in any way? Have you ever thought of that in any way?

VF: Truthfully, I have not really thought about it in any way. I think maybe it's because I always thought that uh, the way you carry yourself brings on a lot of things. The way you act around people bring on a lot of things.

RW-N: Uh-huh, so you put a lot of uh, a lot of store, a lot of importance to the individual? (VF: to the individual, very much so) And how the individual acts and respond to life?

VF: That's right. Because I can remember growing up, my mother would say, "When you lollygag in the street, then you're asking for trouble. If you're going some place, walk like you're going some place, go and come home. Don't be standing around talking and don't be fooling around. (RW-N: Mmm-hmm) Walk like you're going on business." And I've always. . . that's just been a part. . . you know, you'd think that you're looking for trouble when you just fool around.

RW-N: Mmm-hmm. And I gather then, if you're looking for good things, you get good things?

VF: That's what she would say all the time.

RW-N: Mmm-hmm. Uh, in the 1960s and thereafter, we heard a lot about the civil rights movement. Did you ever participate in that in any way? Did you ever belong to any of the organizations? NAACP, or anything?

VF: No. . . no, I had the younger children, my younger grandchildren. And we went into Washington, because I went every week. I've just stopped going since I've been ill. But we went to Washington every week, and they, they had signs in the windows. And the reason for that is because when you come through certain areas, if you didn't look like you wanted to be a part or

want to get out and do it, they would just reach up and turn your car up. So, uh, I didn't have anybody-, I just didn't stay over there with them, with that. I had enough problems worrying about what my sons were doing. (RW-N: Mmm-hmm) Because they were in Atlanta. They were sneaking into Mississippi, they were sneaking into Alabama, with the group. (RW-N: Your sons?) Yes, they were in school. (RW-N: yes, uh-huh) And uh, I didn't have time to worry about what the other people around here doing, because I wasn't going to get involved, because I felt like I had to be available. I was so sure they were, in their sit-ins and what not, would be in trouble, and I'd have to go see about them.

RW-N: Now, I'm not sure I understand. They were slipping into Alabama and Mississippi. . . (AB: with the freedom riders) (VF: the freedom riders) With the freedom riders, uh-huh, yes. So, you knew that your sons were involved in it.

VF: That's right. I knew that they, in some instances, were involved. Although they didn't want to tell me. But my mother lived in Atlanta. They didn't live with her; they lived on campus. And she said, "I haven't seen Bill for this length of time," or "I haven't seen Skeet," that's what we called-, "and I don't know where he is." And then, maybe when we'd get them home and start talking to them, they'd tell us that they had been sitting-in some place, at a counter where you're demanding service (RW-N: Yes) or that they had marched with a group who was in Alabama, or they would leave the group—students would leave and go into Mississippi or someplace and they'd be marching with them. So, I really did not have time to become too involved with what they were doing here, because I was too upset and concerned about what the boys were doing.

AB: What schools did your sons attend in Atlanta?

VF: Morehouse.

AB: Both went to. . . and both graduated from Morehouse?

VF: No. They neither one graduated from Morehouse. The oldest one graduated from Johnson C. Smith in Charlotte, North Carolina. The younger one did graduate from Morehouse, but he got credits from uh, I don't know the name of the school in uh, Augusta, Georgia. He did summer work there, during the summer. (AB: uh-huh) But they got so wrapped up in doing all these other things until they weren't keeping up what they were supposed to be doing.

AB: Would you tell us the names of your son, the one you call Skeet?

VF: His name is Quince Dandridge Fleming, Junior. His father called him Skeet when he was about six weeks old. I decided that I had had enough of babies. [chuckles] And I decided to go away for a week, and I left him with his father. I said, "Now, I had no help from you; for nine months I took care of this baby. And I'm sure you can do it for a week." So I went on. And when I came back, he said, "Every time I change him or something, he just skeet right up on me." So, he started calling him Skeet. [chuckling]

AB: And you second son. . .

VF: is William Scott Fleming. (AB: And you call him Bill?) And I call him Bill. That's another instance. He was in Morehouse in school and we went down to see him. And uh, went over on the campus. Nobody knew William Fleming. And uh, I said, "Now, don't tell me that boy's quit school. We send him money, and he hasn't said anything." So, finally I saw a boy and asked, said, "Don't you-, do you know William, ah, Billy Fleming?" And I was going to tell him, "He's from West Virginia, but his grandmother lives here in town." He said, "You talking about Scott?" I said, "Yes." And he said, "Oh, yeah, I know Scott." I said, "That's part of his name." He said, "Oh, I know Scott Fleming." See, he had dropped the William and was using only Scott, Scott

Fleming. And that's what he's known as now, is Scott Fleming.

AB: But his mother persists in calling him Bill?

VF: Yes, uh-huh.

RW-N: Now these, these boys were both involved to some extent in the civil rights movement. And as a mother, you were worried and concerned about that.

VF: I was concerned about that. You know, naturally, when you pick up the paper or turn on a television or radio or what not and you see all these things, and you're not sure where they are, or what they're doing, you just wait to listen. You think, every time the telephone ring, you think somebody calling to tell you something.

RW-N: Now if you could put aside that concern, did you believe what they were doing was a good thing to be doing? That it needed to be done?

VF: Well, in some instances, I thought that it needed to be done. And then, after you talk with them about it, so often-, it was my mother, she says, "So often, these kids," she called them kids, "would be sitting-in and what not. And other people were not sitting in." But after it was all said and done, then the kids could not financially afford to go to these places where they had sat in. And everybody else was going. But they could not financially afford to go in it themselves again.

AB: So, what you're saying is-, suggesting that the kids really did the work, if we want to call (VF: Uh-huh, uh-huh) it that, of opening these places, but then could not take advantage of it themselves. The advantage really went to somebody else, because they couldn't afford to.

VF: That's right, who was financially able to.

RW-N: But would you also say that those places needed to be opened up?

VF: I think they needed to be opened up. But I don't know how it could have been done, otherwise. Because see, I came from an area where you had city transportation, and you sit from the front to the back, the white. And the black sit from the back toward the front. And the conductor in some instances would ask someone to move so somebody could get a seat. And especially if there was a vacant seat behind them or something. But yet, and still, when whites would get on the bus, they would sit back so there'd be vacant seats in front of them, saving seats for other whites who would get on. But he-, they would not want the blacks to do that. And I think that created a lot of confusion and trouble. Because I would even do things I shouldn't do. [laughing]

AB: Such as? What did you do, that you shouldn't do, Mrs. Fleming?

VF: I would sit in the-, sit up almost to the front, and I knew all those seats were behind me. And I'd say, "If she wants to sit down, she can sit there." And then if somebody would come to the-, sit in the back of the bus, and we felt like she should have been sitting up nearer the front, she would not sit there comfortably. We'd harass. [chuckling]

RW-N: So in your own little way, you also expressed how you felt about things?

VF: Expressed how we felt, that's right. Because I felt like it wasn't fair. Now, see, these people, these black women coming home from work in the afternoon, burdened down with packages and things, and they'd worked all day and they'd be standing. And then, there would be other seats, but they were not allowed to sit in them. And that's when you would really get angry and start-, you know, harassing, doing things you shouldn't do.

RW-N: So, in certain ways, then, although you were worried about your own kids, you also uh, believed that the civil rights movement was (VF: It had it's place), had it's place, mmm-hmm.

What about the women's movement? The women's movement also, you know, kind of happened at the same time or soon afterwards. Uh, and I think if you had asked people in the women's movement what they were trying to do, they would try to say they were bringing equality to women. Uh, what is your feeling about that movement?

VF: I don't know. I haven't given too much thought to the idea of bringing equality to women. So far as jobs were concerned, I just see if women were capable of doing certain jobs during the war era, why couldn't they continue to do them? Because I know people-, in fact, I have a friend who was a welder. And she was a welder in the Boston area. But as soon as the war was over, then she was without work. She came and became a housemother at Ohio University.

RW-N: So, so you're saying that, that doesn't make sense to you?

VF: No. I couldn't see why if you were capable then, why you so suddenly became incapable.

RW-N: So, you were-, at least with regard to jobs, it was obvious to you that there was some unequal treatment?

VF: There was some unequal treatment, uh-huh.

RW-N: So you would agree with that, although you never entered into it?

VF: No, I never entered into it.

RW-N: Entered into it in other ways. Would you express those opinions? What you're telling us now, would you-, have you said that earlier in your life to different people?

VF: Yes, I have. I've said it. I don't understand why she could do this during the war. So many things. My mother sewed during the war. She worked at uh, factory that made uniforms. We called it the overall factory. Because I don't know any other name to give it. She worked there during the war. And I guess they continually-, people who wanted to work, continued to work

there. But she didn't, she just did it then, because she could sew. (RW-N: uh-huh) And uh, afterwards, so many people who lost their jobs, I said if they were able and capable then, they were still capable. They should have continued.

RW-N: Do you think that uh, women have greater opportunity today than what they did, say, when you were a young woman, (VF: yes) with regard to jobs or other things?

VF: Yes, they do have greater opportunities. But a lot of 'em are so restless. Some of them are fortunate enough to get a job, but they don't stick with it. They change jobs. You know, just change over. I have a granddaughter; she graduated from Fairmont. She went to Atlanta and started taking graduate work. That was the year that I became ill. She used me as an excuse, and she came up and stayed with me. And she has not reentered graduate school. She was supposed to reenter last year. She claims she got sick on that, that day. And she has a job, she makes good money, but still that's beside the point. The point is that she should continue while she's younger, instead of waiting. I tell her, when she gets as old as I am, she'll wished that she had. And that's what I tell this one. Uh. . .

RW-N: You mean that's what you tell your grandson William?

VF: I tell my grandson, William, that uh, he is to get a degree, regardless. I said, "If it's in thumb-twiddling, you get that first degree."

RW-N: [chuckling] And then build on that?

VF: And then build on that. Because it's hard to go back and start over with young people. When you in a group more or less your own age, then that's different. They think sometimes that it's simple. [laughing]

RW-N: You just said that uh, you have told your granddaughter that she should get her education

so that she didn't look back and wish that (VF: And wish that she had) she had gotten it. Do you have any things in your life that you wish that you had done?

VF: Well, a few of the things… When I reached the point of paralysm, and I did not go back to the piano, since then I have wished that I had. (RW-N: uh-huh) And look like every time I think possibly that I would go back to it, something comes up or something, and I can't. The other year I said that I was going back—now there's an organ sitting over there, nice organ sitting in my son's home. It belongs to this granddaughter. She doesn't play it. And I told her I wished that she would go back to play. She was taking organ lessons in Atlanta. This is one of the things that broke up the family. Uh, he-, her mother stopped her, with her religious ideas, saying that if the Lord had meant for you to play the organ, you would automatically play it. In other words, I guess play by ear. And, of course, she stopped the lessons. And uh, (AB: The mother stopped the lessons?) The mother stopped the lessons. And so many things she stopped because of her religious beliefs. That really broke up the family. And I told Erica, I said. "You'll wish one day that you had gone on." I said, "You came-, when your mother and father separated, he got control of you or he got custody of you. And he tried to get you to go back to some of these things. You're gonna wish that you had." Because he had her in ballet. She stopped that, because you're not supposed to do that kind of dancing. Her religion did not allow it. I think that's what has confused the child.

RW-N: Yes. And you seem to be a believer in, in children having lots of different kinds of opportunities to develop.

VF: That's true, that's right, I do, truly. That's why I never stopped this boy from running. He wants to run and he started out a real small kid. He started this running and, of course, he has

developed. And then he went into band. He did quite well. He even played with a jazz band. And I guess if he ever decides to, he could always go back to it, because uh, he knows how. But I still think that he should be exposed and do the things that uh, he wants to try.

RW-N: Do you think that some of your beliefs about that came from the way that you were reared yourself?

VF: I think it did.

RW-N: As a child, (VF: as a child) you were also given those kinds of opportunities?

VF: I was given opportunity to do things. Such as-, and in the mornings, in the summer, we would get up and at five o'clock in the morning, we would be on the tennis court or the swimming pool and it would be hot. But we would have to walk and do it, even though my brother and sister came back and went to work. But yet and still, she'd wake us up and say, 'All right, let's go." And we would go.

AB: This is your mother who would wake you up?

VF: My mother, mmm-hmm.

RW-N: What other kinds of things do you think that, what other kinds of beliefs and influences did you carry from your mother and father's home into your own adulthood?

VF: Well, I don't know, because I guess maybe, well, quite a few. She had a dinner hour (RW-N: Mmm-hmm), and although my father was not there, most of the time, we had to sit down to the table and eat as a family. The table had to be set. And everybody'd sit down and eat as a family, and discuss the different things and tell on each other. [chuckles] About what happened during the day. And then, of course, people-, we had our, you know, different rules. Well, when I came along with my family, I did the same thing. We had a dinner hour. And afterwards, well,

we'd discuss your problems or what have you. And then, of course, you clean the kitchen and all and go ahead. But so many little things like that. And then she had the idea that you go to church and Sunday school. We went to church and Sunday school. When I changed churches and Sunday schools-, well, I went-, I changed Sunday schools. I didn't have the nerve to change churches at first. So I'd raced from the Sunday school I went to, to get to her church. Because that was something you had to do. If you didn't go to church and Sunday school, you could not go out in the afternoon. You know, how kids go out to the park or go places, you couldn't go. Well, I brought that along with my attitude of not being able to socialize in the afternoons if you didn't go the rights places in the morning. So, I think they really had an influence on me, whether I wanted to admit it or not.

RW-N: Uh, what-, who else do you see, besides your parents. . . . Let me ask, let me a ask you a different question first. Do you think that your mother or your father influenced you the most? Or shaped you the most?

VF: My mother. (RW-N: Uh-huh) Because I could-, my father- according to my father, I grew up, I couldn't do much wrong. (RW-N: Mmm-hmm) She was the person, he would say that, "Your mother, she's a woman and I'm a man, and she's supposed to correct you."

RW-N: So, she shaped you the most? (VF: She did, mmm-hmm) Have there been other people in your life who you thought had considerable influence on you, that became your role models? Any teachers or any friends?

VF: Well, I had teachers. My mother had quite a few friends who had taught school, and that's because she had lived around Atlanta and been around the schools so much. And there was one who I really liked. And she would, she became my teacher; well, there's two. One named Evelyn

Ross and one was Idina Minnifield. (RW-N: Minnifield?) Uh-huh, Minnifield. Her mother taught me. And her mother would say, every tub must sit on its own bottom. That was her saying. In other words, you don't look over to see what they're doing on their paper, you keep your eyes on your own. So, that was her-, always be her saying. Every tub must sit on it's own bottom. And Idina always called me Miss Williams, when I was in her class. And that was because I grew up from a baby around here, and I had always called her Idina. And to make me remember when I was in school that I was to call her Miss Minnifield, she would call me Miss Williams. If she thought that I was getting ready to say Idina, she'd say, "Miss Williams, what do you want?" [chuckle]

AB: You talked about your brother going to work when you would leave the tennis courts or so in the morning. (VF: Mmm-hmm) Where did he work?

VF: Uh, they worked in uh, for the most part, like in the Mariott, the hotels. He did more-, a lot of cooking and what not, in hotels. And my sister waited tables at the different restaurants. But not ever in a home, always in a public place.

AB: She didn't want you all exposed to what went in, uh, might happen in a (VF: In a domestic situation) in a domestic situation.

VF: Mmm-hmm. And I went home to work. [chuckle]

AB: Mmm-hmm, you worked at home.

RW-N: Yes. When you look back on your life, what kinds of things really stand out as being important because they really changed you in some way, changed the path of your life? Some kind of events that stand out.

VF: I don't really think of any because there were not too many events that was happening.

RW-N: Even in your own life, decisions you made. . . . Now that you think back, have you made a decision. . . (VF: I might have changed. . . I might have done something). . . .might have had a different path of life?

VF: Well, the only decisions that I actually made that might have changed my life had been had I stayed in Atlanta. It would have been a different story altogether.

RW-N: It would have been a different [inaudible word]. Coming to West Virginia, (VF: changed. . .) put you on a different path.

VF: Put me, definitely, hmm-hmm.

AB: You spoke about going to Washington on a weekly basis. What did you, take your children to museums or something?

VF: Yes, and I went to the theaters, and to the different things they had on Howard campus, because that's what I had been accustomed to doing, was going to the different campuses for things. And they went to the theater every Saturday. I went to Washington to the beauty shop, to the dentist, to the doctor, you name it, everything. I went to Washington. I never had anything done for myself here. So much so until one year, uh, the city buses in Washington was on strike. And my sister-in-law, QD's younger sister, lived in Washington. In fact, she and I started buying a house together; she was not married. And I drove taxi that summer.

AB: In Washington?

VF: In Washington.

RW-N: Oh, my gosh. [all laughing] Now, is it true that most of the women around here do not go to Washington that much? (VF: That's true.) So that made you different in some way?

VF: Oh well, yes. And then, as long as I was physically able, I went to Kennedy airport with my

season tickets and went to Kennedy Center for the whole season for everything. Physical been-, is the thing that stopped me.

RW-N: Until very recently (VF: Until very recently. . .) you were still doing those things.

VF: I was still doing those things.

RW-N: So, you've managed living here to have a broader cultural life by going to the things in Washington?

VF: That's right, because I had been accustomed to going to these things (RW-N: Yes) and I did not give 'em up. So, that's what brought on the idea that we had to have two cars, was because he was an athlete. He was really wrapped up in that. And he went to ball games. And I would even take him to the airport. And he would go to Detroit or some place, just north-south or east-west ball game, and then I'd have to come home. Well, he would take his boys and go on these different trips. And then he also went back and forth to Charleston, down to Institute, with his vo-ag. And that would leave me shut up in the house. (RW-N: mm-hmm) And I decided that I was not going to be shut up in the house and not be able to go any place. So, one day when he came home, I had been down to talk to a man about buying a car. I was stupid. I went down and talked to this man and asked him about selling me a car. And he said, "Well, I don't mind selling you a car. You're working." He said, "You have to have a co-signer." I just looked at him and said, "You mean to tell me if I have to buy a car from you, got to have a co-signer?" He said, "Yes, everybody has to have a co-signer." I said, "What's gonna happen if I'm not able to pay for this car?" He said, "Well, I'm gonna take it back." I said, "Well, then why can't you co-sign it?" [chuckles] He said, "If you've got the nerve to ask me to co-sign it, then I will." And he did. He co-signed it. [chuckles]

RW-N: So you bought the car and that gave you more freedom?

VF: Gave me more freedom. Because I did not have to wait until he was not using the car, or something, to go where I wanted to go or do what I wanted to do.

RW-N: Because your husband, for the most part, didn't go to Washington with you?

VF: No, he didn't. (RW-N: He had other kinds of interests.) He was interested in athletics and I never was interested in athletics.

AB: Did you ever feel uh, timid, I mean, you seem sort of adventurous, like going to Washington, and driving a taxi. Did, uh, those things ever frighten you? Were you ever afraid to take on any of these things that you've done?

VF: No, I didn't think about it at the time. I just did it. Well, I was with my sister-in-law, and she had to have a way to get back and forth to work. And I was staying over with her. And uh, so, I started off first-, I didn't start off with the idea of doing that. I started off taking her to work. And then QD say, "I think it's time for you to come home." So, then I enrolled in school at George Washington University. And by being in school, I had to stay. See, you think of ways to get around. [chuckle] So when I had to stay over there because I was in school, then she said we'll get a few other people who's got to go back and forth to work and what not, and you can take them, too. And that's how I started the taxi business.

AB: Where were your boys at that point?

VF: With their father or with my mother.

RW-N: I'm confused. Were you, did you go to Washington University?

VF: I just went over there for summer sessions. Mmm-hmm.

AB: More than one year?

VF: Oh, yeah. Each year if I decided that, uh, I had to move or do something, I'd go over there and take classes. I didn't go to draw it to a conclusion for a degree or anything.

RW-N: You were taking college classes?

VF: Graduate classes. (RW-N: Graduate classes)

AB: And these were just things that interested you?

VF: Those were just things that interested me.

AB: Not math courses uh. . .

VF: No, I just took different classes that interested me. Whatever happened to interest me, that's what I took. But I had to be active; I couldn't just sit here.

END TAPE 3 – SIDE 2

BEGIN TAPE 4 – SIDE 1

RW-N: . .I'm gonna ask you some big questions, okay? (VF: Go ahead) Uh, when we talk with people, what we often ask them, as they look back on their life, how they see that life. Let me give you some examples of what people-, how people describe that. Some of them say that the road's been pretty smooth and it's gotten better, and some say it's been pretty smooth but it's gone downhill. And some people talk about traveling on a road that's been really been quite bumpy for them; it has lots of ups and downs. Some people say that they think of their life as almost like chapters in a book, right, where one part of their life was here, then another, and of course they tie them all together but they're really quite different segments. As you think of your life, how would you describe it?

VF: I think for the most part, that I have been fortunate. That my life has been rather smooth, just like a straight road. Just, you know, maybe I might have detoured in some things that I

wanted to do, and I did not do. But I have been fortunate enough not to have lots of problems. If I had a problem, maybe I was too stupid really to realize that it was a big problem. But I've just gone along and uh, most of the people who I've come in contact with. . . Well, the first thing, my parents smoothed the road until I left home. Then after I married, my husband's not a type of person to create any type of friction or bumps. I would get angry or say something. But he would walk on get his hat and get in the car and go on away and come back, say, "You feel better now?" (RW-N: uh-huh) But he wouldn't even answer. I tried so hard; different people have told me about the arguments they have had in the home. So I decided I would try to get an argument. [all chuckling] But I was never lucky enough or successful in getting it. He would say, "There's no point in two fools living together." But uh, so I say for that reason, that we have been-, I always have been very fortunate. We decided first that we were gonna save and build a home. Then we sat down and discussed it. And decided that why build a house; all you're gonna do is live in it anyway. As long as you have the comforts in a house, you don't need a home. And that uh, we would spend the money traveling. And we did. We spent quite a bit of money traveling, South America, three countries-, a lot-, none of the trips have been small trips. We went to South America, stayed 41 days. We went to Germany and stayed a month. We've been to, we went to England. He would let me trick him. [chuckle] Because he could have stopped me. But we went to England and in changing planes to go to France—we went to England, France, Switzerland—I told him that I saw some great brandy in the airport. And I didn't want to take it with me, and take it as long as I would be gone. So we made another trip back to England for me to find that great brandy, which I couldn't find. [laughter] And they told me that grapes were the basis for all brandy. Well, he, he didn't always go out with me when I went to these

places. We spent three weeks looking for great brandy. But it was doing things that I wanted to. He wasn't always interested in what I did but he never would, your know, hamper me or stop me. Until finally, he says, "Time to go home," or something. He always called me Gypsy. And well, we went to Australia the same way. And he didn't go around with me in Australia. I'd leave him in the hotel or some place and get up and go, and go on these different tours. So, that's why I say, for the most part, that uh, things have been rather smooth. He wasn't interested in traveling that much, but he would travel with me because I was the person interested. You read books and you read books that have all this different backgrounds, and you like to see what it's like in person. They, they write it in a book, but you've never seen it. So, you want to see it. So, this is the thing that interested me. Gone to Hawaii about three times. I went to Alaska with him. And then, we decided that we would drive and cover the 48 states. We had been Hawaii, we had been to Alaska, that was two out of it. So, we would take time. I would just go and drive. I retired for that reason. And we'd go up the east coast, we go west. We drove to California, stopping along the way, and coming back, stopping along the way, with no particular place in mind. You'd take a travel guide, and then you decide about how far you were gonna travel. You call ahead and make reservations, and stay 3 or 4 days, or a week, if it interests you. And come back. It took us 6 weeks to drive to California. And almost 6 weeks to come back.

RW-N: So, you've done a lot of traveling?

VF: A lot of traveling.

RW-N: A lot of traveling. And you've done a lot of traveling together with your husband?

VF: With my husband. This is the first-, these years here lately are the only ones that I traveled without him.

RW-N: Uh-huh. What year again, did you lose him?

VF: March of '94. And I knew then that something was wrong. Because I went to Las Vegas the first of March, and he did not go. He told me to find somebody to go with me and they could use his tickets and everything. So, we found an ex-daughter-in-law who was willing to take the time off from work, and she went with me. And that was the first trip that I'd been on, really, without him.

RW-N: Mm-hmm. Now, did you retired at age 65?

VF: No, I retired at age 62.

RW-N: Uh-huh, and your husband?

VF: He retired, let's see, he retired in '77. But he retired for physical reasons. He had been sick for some time. He had had three small operations: a hip replacement, heart operation, and everything else. But he retired because of physical condition. Then I decided that the best thing to do when I turned 62 was to retire, so that I could be home with him. (RW-N: Mmm-hmm) And that maybe we'd have time to enjoy a few things together.

RW-N: Which you did do?

VF: Which I did, mmm-hmm.

RW-N: Yes. How do you-, how would you describe yourself? Kind of switching gears here on you.

VF: [chuckles] I don't know. I think that I'm pretty easy-going so far as-, to a certain degree. By that I usually, I can go along and I get along with most people. And I find if something doesn't suit me, or a person's personality clashes with mine, then I avoid 'em. I don't bother that person. Because I'm not a fussy type person. I'm not a person to disagree and create arguments

with people. And I'm not a person to let someone tell me what I should do and what I should not-, to make plans for me. They don't make my plans, I make my own. [AB chuckling}

RW-N: Would you say that, that you've been a woman who has been quite self-confident?

VF: To a certain degree, yes. If I think that I can do it- I guess maybe I'll say independent type person. And if I don't think that I can do it, then I don't expect-, for myself, I don't expect anybody to do anything for myself that I'm not willing to do for somebody else. And that has been my feeling. Even with this illness, I don't expect people to come in and do things for me, if I cannot do-, that I would not do for them. For that reason, that's why I stay in the house by myself. And I cannot do a lot of cleaning and all like I once did. I would once have all this furniture out and the floors polished and everything. I cannot do it. I decided I could live with it, (RW-N: uh-huh) and not worry about it. And not worry people about coming in and doing these things. Now, when my boys come, and they decide—have time to come, and they move the things and do different things for me, I accept it. But just so far as having people come in, I don't have them to. For several reasons. I have a house full of antiques (RW-N: mm-hmm) and things that's been in the family over the years, that I don't throw away. And I keep things that the children have made (RW-N: yes) that I don't throw away. Some of them I know where they are, and some of them I don't know where they are. But I do know they're in the house. And there's a friend I have-, every time somebody come and clean or something for her, she's constantly telling me that, "You know somebody picked up this," or "somebody stole that." Well, I said, "I don't have that problem" I said, "because if they moved or took something of mine, I could tell it, because the dust around it would let me know." [laughter]

RW-N: So you have, you've been-, you have had the sense that you're pretty independent for a

long time.

VF: For a long time.

RW-N: As you look back over your life, do you-, how do, how do you see yourself as having changed as a person, as you developed? Is there anything that's obvious to you, in what you've became, how you've changed?

VF: When I was younger, I was very fastidious about-, you know, everything had to be exact. (RW-N: Uh-huh) Well, I have changed very much from that. I'm not that way any more, not by any means. I have learned to accept things as they are. My older grandson's [inaudible word] to me is, "Nana, those things that you cannot change, you don't worry about. You only worry about the things that you can change. And if you can change, get busy and change them." But that's what he tells me all the time, whenever he calls me, that's one of the first things he says. And I had him most of his life.

AB: This is the grandson who's the doctor?

VF: Uh-huh. I took him. He was a early child. And he was, [inaudible] a handicap. First thing, he had an open pelvis. And I had the bone—his mother and his grandmother did not agree with me. So I promised his mother, if she interfered with my having him corrected, I would kill her. [AB chuckling] So, she never bothered me. So, I had that bone corrected. His foot turned out, and I had that turned around. He could not talk because, uh, he couldn't hear. They didn't know it and I didn't know it for a while. So, when I found out that that was why he wasn't half talking—he would make sounds but he wasn't forming the words—I had that corrected. She-, his mother came up—I had it corrected over here in Winchester—his mother came up when he was operated on and stayed and went back. And uh, then I took him to speech therapy, over in

Leesburg; I took him twice a week until he had begun to talk. He's a quiet type person anyway. Til he'd begun to talk. Then after he got on his feet and begin to do well, then his mother demanded him back. You know, as long as he was a handicapped kid, she didn't worry too much about it. But when he got sick, she [inaudible] I had him in kindergarten here. Uh, then she decided that he had to come back. Well, she married again. And I went down one year. And I didn't like her husband; he drank. So, I took the kids. She never calls me, because I always would threaten her. [chuckles] And I took the kids and I brought 'em back, and I kept 'em two years. He was fourth and fifth grade, and his sister was third and fourth grade. There's just a year apart. And then she said they had to come home. So, I let 'em go. And they stayed. Well, when the girl was 11th grade, she called and said that she could not control Vivian—she's my namesake—so her father got her, and she went to school over here in uh, Reston. She graduated over there, South Lake High School. And the boy stayed with his mother. But he decided that he was not going to college. And we decided that he was going. So we sent him a ticket and told him to get the plane and come up. Well, he didn't get the first plane. So his grandfather told him that, "If you're not on this second plane, when it returns, I'll be on it. And I'm gonna kick you all the way to West Virginia." So, he came to West Virginia. And school was starting. Betty Byers, she taught at Shepherd College, she was from Mount Hope; she's white. We couldn't get him in school at first and so she went to bat for him, because she knew Dan, as they all did. So, she got him in school, in school at Shepherd. The first semester he wasn't making the grades that we felt like he had the ability to make. So, I called him aside and told him how I felt. And he was justifying his poor grades. So, I told him that there was no such thing as justifying his poor grades. He said, "Nana, I can't shit rocks." [chuckle] I said, "Well, bricks." I said, "What?"

He said, "I can't shit bricks." I said, "Well, I'll tell you what. You can put out a few rocks." [laughing] And so, he started from that. And he became an honor student. And he graduated from Shepherd. Although he was not-, he claimed he was not going to college. See, I've had this, as I've said, I've had this problem with children for a long time. I would take them everywhere. I took those kids to New York to their first stage show, Broadway show. Went up and stayed a week; stayed in a hotel. And uh, I'd always go and I'd stay in hotels and things like that, because uh, I didn't want to cramp other people. So, I just take 'em and we'd stay in a hotel and go to different plays. And I wanted to be well-rounded. They had children plays here on Thursday morning. And a lunch, kind of like a, you know, a dinner club, but it would be lunch for children. I took them to Washington and over in Maryland, to the children's play once a week, all summer, every summer. So see, I've been really busy. [chuckle]

RW-N: So you have really had a lot of influence on your grandchildren.

VF: Oh, yes, because, well, for one thing, my son married, they married too young and I felt like—the older one. And I felt like, uh, her mother was an elderly person. In fact, well, her father was uncle to Sidney Poitier. (AB: Hmm, mm-hmm) And uh, they had these old island beliefs that the way God made you, that was the way you were supposed to be. And I had the belief that he, that the Lord gave you enough sense that you're supposed to help change those things that were not right. And that was why I fought them so about changing this boy. And his-, well, she taught school. She taught math in Atlanta. That grandmother did. But she was an older person. She was about as old as my mother. But her beliefs were different from mine. So, I have really been with 'em. And when he left here, he went to grad school, he went to medical school. First he was going-, he was going to work and do more-or-less experimentation, that type thing, with

medicine. He went to, went over here to the University of Maryland, but he only stayed a semester. That was when he graduated from-, after he graduated from college. And he wasn't happy. So I said, "You go on and do something that's gonna make you happy, because if you don't, you'll spend a miserable life. Do these things and find something that's gonna make you happy while you got somebody willing to make the different sacrifices and help you. Because if you don't, life can be so long and so hard, if you're not happy doing whatever you're doing." So that's when he went on back and went on to medical school.

AB: Where'd he go to medical school?

VF: He went to, uh, the medical school in Lewisburg. (AB: the Osteopathic School) Mmm-hmm. And then he went from there over to Ohio U. That's why he's still in Ohio. He graduated from the one, the osteopathic school. And then he went over to Ohio. And he's been in school a year over at the University of Ohio and things, over there. But as I say, life can be very happy, if you are happy doing what you want to do, or what you have to do. But it can be miserable if you're spending your life doing something that you are not happy with. (RW-N: Mmm-hmm) And that's what I tell this one. Do and get into something you're gonna be happy doing. And then, once you're happy doing that, then life can be a happy thing.

RW-N: Would you say your life has been happy?

VF: I think it has. Because I have pretty much done what I wanted to do. [chuckle]

RW-N: Mmm-hmm. And right now, you, you're battling leukemia, (VF: Mmm-hmm) right, and you have been battling that for how long now?

VF: Since uh, I was diagnosed with leukemia March of 1994.

AB: So, it was just about the time you lost your husband?

VF: It happened right after that. And the doctors told me then-, of course, they made a case study out of it and taken it to their medical conventions. Because they say that I was their miracle patient, that he really thinks that I'm totally a person where your nerves can control you. He said they think that, uh, his passing so suddenly is the thing that tripped it off, he says, because your nerves just were shot to pieces.

RW-N: So you have had in the last couple of years, the last few years, you've had to uh, battle being without a husband of many years, and then this illness. And right now, you're doing pretty well, though, right? (VF: I am) You've kind of won this battle with leukemia.

VF: Well, when I was in the hospital and of course they never expected me to come out—they tried to put me in a nursing home, which I would not go into. And this grandson, who's visiting me now, he was in school at the time; it was his first year down there. He came home after school was out and stayed with me. And he said, "Now, if you're not able to stay there, I'll stay the school year with you." He said, "You took me when I was little. And I'll stay with you." I said, "Well, I'm able to…on my own." (RW-N: mm-hmm) I went back into the hospital a couple of times, during that winter, and I tried to keep him from knowing it. But every time he found out that I was back in the hospital, he was here. And when I was in the hospital, that boy came to the hospital every day but one. Every day he came in dutifully. And there was a couch-, everybody had a private room, and there was a couch, you know, in the room. So much so to the nurses and the nurse-aides would have this folded blanket over there on there when he come in, in the afternoon. And they would give him a coke, have a soft drink or something for him to drink. And he laid there on that couch and go to sleep, but he would still stay there with me until it was time to come home.

RW-N: Well, he seems like a fine boy.

VF: Well, I always say that [inaudible] because-, and he has stuck with me.

RW-N: Yes. And he's going to. He said you could live in his attic, right; that's what he told us before. [laughing]

VF: But he has really-, he's stuck with me. And he's chauffeured for me every place. And that's why—and I could not drive. See, I have an Oldsmobile, but I couldn't control it. I had sense enough to know that I could not control that car because it has too much power for me.

RW-N: Since you've been ill, you mean? (VF: Mmm-hmm) Yes, mmm-hmm.

VF: I had bought it brand new just before I got ill. Because we had to go to the different graduations, you know, the granddaughter graduated from college or grandson graduating from medical school, and a grandson getting married in Augusta, Georgia. And I drove down there. I drove everywhere. So, uh, and I drove QD's Suburu. I could drive; I could handle that. But while I was sick, it was wrecked. And they had it fixed; they didn't want to tell me. But you can always tell if something's happened, you know, with a car. And they had it painted and they painted it—it was blue—and they painted it blue, but not the same blue. And I could look at it and tell it wasn't the. . . .so, I traded it in. [chuckle] And William started driving for me, taking me different places. This is why I decided that if he could drive—and of course nephews and what not don't agree with me—that if he could take me wherever I wanted to go, now that I'm back to the Oldsmobile, that he could drive that car. I said, "Now, he could drive that car and take me wherever I want to go, and whatever I wanted to do. Now, he can drive it for himself, and take himself where he wants to do-, go." And I told him I'd call it in if I thought he wasn't doing right. [laughing]

RW-N: Mrs. Fleming, we want to thank you for spending all this time with us and telling us about things. Is there anything that we should have asked you about that we didn't, that we forgot somehow, anything that we've left out, that you really. . . .

VF: would like to add. No, (RW-N: would like to add) I don't have anything particular that I'd like to add.

RW-N: Okay. So shall we stop, then?

VF: Well, yes, fine.

END OF INTERVIEWS