Vicki Gabriner Transcript

Vicki Gabriner: So this is going to beep off, when my –-

Judith Rosenbaum: When your laundry's done.

VG: When it's ready for the dryer.

JR: I am just going to give the tape recorder a little introduction. I am sitting here with Vicki Gabriner in her apartment in Brookline, Massachusetts. Today is July 20th of 2000, and the interview is being conducted by Judith Rosenbaum.

VG: Have you interviewed yet – I forget her name – but the woman who is – you can turn it, do it, move it, whatever you want to do. Let's see, the one who was – she's a daughter-in-law of someone that was interviewed for that project, who also did Civil Rights movement [work]?

JR: Judy Wright?

VG: Yeah.

JR: I'm interviewing her next week.

VG: So, are you doing all the interviews?

JR: Yes. There are actually only going to be twelve because I wasn't able to schedule any more than that, but that's a pretty good amount and there are eighteen altogether, so that's going to get done.

VG: And will the voices be on there? Online at all, or?

JR: We haven't really figured out the technical aspects of it yet. Probably not, although it is a possibility. So those sort of questions we're kind of leaving to the end after we see what we have and [inaudible] –

VG: You're going to help put it together? Put the site together? Great. A great project.

JR: Yeah, it's really been so fun, especially –

VG: [inaudible]

JR: I'm so used to doing so much research in the library, so it's been nice to actually get to talk to people –

VG: To humans, yeah.

JR: Yes, it's great, I underestimate how actually seeing people face-to-face and not just reading about them – you get sort of bored in the library sometimes. So maybe we can just begin by you telling me a little bit about your childhood, where you were born, that kind of stuff.

VG: I was born July 5th, 1942, in Brooklyn, New York, where I grew up until I went off to college. My parents were both children of immigrants from Eastern Europe. All my grandparents are from Poland and Russia. My parents were both schoolteachers, public school teachers of foreign languages, although my mother didn't work for the years when I was growing up. I grew up in Flatbush in Brooklyn, in a neighborhood that was kind of half and half Jewish and Italian. So I grew up around a lot of Jews, and I grew up in a home where my parents were politically conscious and politically active. So my parents were never members of the Communist Party, but they were very active in progressive causes, particularly my mother. One of the formative events of my – it's not an event, but happening, sort of ongoing happening of my childhood, was my mother's activism in the PTA, about which I recently wrote. There was an extraordinary group of women who

came together in the elementary school that I attended. So I was in elementary school from 1947 to 1954, which were the years in which Jackie Robinson played for the Dodgers, and the McCarthy period, just to name two pivotal events. And I grew up in a home that was not particularly religious. I mean, my mother was the oldest of four sisters, so by the time my brother was born, he was the first grandchild on my mother's side of the family. The fact that he was a boy was really a great delight. Well, my brother was bar mitzvahed, and there was no choice about that. I mean, he would have been very happy to not have been bar mitzvahed, but that was a given. On the other hand, my mother – both my parents spoke Yiddish fluently. For my father, I think it had actually really been his first tongue. For my mother, it had been kind of her first tongue, but she also spent many years going to a folkshul, a Shalom Aleichem folkshul, to learn Yiddish. And she wanted me to do that, and so I did actually start going to a folkshul and I just – I can't remember the specifics of it, but I remember that I wasn't having a good time, and so I came home and said I wanted to quit, which my brother had done on any number of occasions in terms of his bar mitzvah but was met with no go. I, on the other hand, because I was a girl and because girls weren't being bar mitzvahed at that time, my mother allowed me to drop out. I don't totally regret that because I feel like I've been able to come back to Judaism with kind of a fresh slate and be very involved at this point in a way that I wasn't as a child. My brother, on the other hand, has very, very little connection to Judaism right now.

JR: How did you become more involved in Judaism right now?

VG: Well, I think I always – I grew up in an environment that I think nowadays is a little harder to come by, which is that even though it was not religious, it was very, very, very Jewish-identified, and it was without effort because I grew up in an immigrant family. So I heard Yiddish –

JR: Your grandparents?

VG: My grandparents were all immigrants, yes. My grandparents – we lived in the same house as my mother's parents. And so I was constantly around them. My father's family, which was larger – he had seven brothers and sisters – we used to have gatherings together, "cousins gatherings," we used to call them. So I was constantly around a lot of Yiddish and around a lot of Jewish-focused stories and histories. And when my parents and aunts and uncles talked about their parents they were talking about people who had come from Europe, who in turn had their own history. So I was just around that a lot. So we did the holidays. We'd always have a big Seder, and we did Hanukkah, and of course, in those days, things were much more scaled down. So if I got five dollars from Hanukkah, that was a big deal. And I just never questioned being Jewish. It just was a given; it was there. But I never went to synagogue.

JR: Did your family belong to a synagogue?

VG: My family belonged to a synagogue when my brother was studying for his bar mitzvah. My grandfather, you know, I think, continued to belong to the synagogue even after Will had finished with his bar mitzvah.

JR: What kind of synagogue was it?

VG: It was probably Conservative. So as a child, I remember that in my school, I usually stayed out of the Jewish holidays because there was almost no one in school on the Jewish holidays, teachers and students alike. I do remember once or twice, insisting that I go to school on the Jewish holidays, and it was basically me and all the Italian Catholic kids in school and a few teachers. And sometimes, I don't think that we fasted on Yom Kippur. In fact, I sort of vaguely remember some embarrassing incident where I was babysitting for the rabbi's children, and we were eating on Yom Kippur, and they came to pick the kids up, and it was a little slightly awkward moment. But the Jewish identity was very, very strongly there. And it was combined with – in my nuclear family, at any rate – with political activism, particularly, as I said, on my mother's side. The women with whom

she worked in the PTA were all also women, almost entirely Jewish, secular, and progressiv of some stripe. They were going from people who were members of the Party – although they didn't identify themselves as such publicly at the time because it wasn't something that was done and it was dangerous – to a more sort of liberal progressive kind of position. But they were all women who were very active in fighting McCarthyism, took a stand around that. So I grew up in a home with a consciousness about McCarthyism and a consciousness about people who were fighting that and people whose lives were ruined by McCarthyism. I grew up with a very strong sense of what happened to the Rosenbergs in 1953, fighting against that. So I mean, one of the strong things I grew up with as a kid was some sense of fighting for social justice, and without realizing it, that that was rooted somehow in Jewish tradition. It was never specifically identified to me as such, and I don't even know that that was what was driving people. But as I look back on it now, I know that that was part of that Jewish secular tradition of social justice.

JR: And did your parents identify that it was as well, do you think?

VG: Oh, yeah. Yeah. Particularly my mother. I mean, not so much my father, but my mother – as I said, I don't think consciously she did it necessarily as a Jew – although, for example, with the Rosenberg case, clearly a very strong element of that had to do with antisemitism, Jewish identity. So, yes, I learned a lot of my early politics, standing by my mother and watching or participating with her and what she was doing.

JR: So she sort of would take you along when she was active in things or at least share what she was doing?

VG: Yeah. I mean, I went with her to any number of PTA demonstrations, and my best friend, Susan, who lived across the street from me, her mother was very active and probably even more left than my mother, who would always have gatherings at her house. So I would be there for those gatherings. She had a big fundraising event there

where Paul Robeson?Oral Roberts sang. I don't know if you know who Paul Robeson is. Actually, I talked to Rose about this because we can't remember. My memory was that was for the Rosenbergs. She is not exactly sure if it was the Rosenbergs or the American Labor Party or what, but anyway, it was for something. So that was the kind of thing that I was around. And this is the thing – I started off the piece I wrote on the PTA with, that as a child, my mother was the President of the PTA and then for many years was the editor of the bulletin that they produced. The women would get together every month to put together the bulletin, and I have very strong memories as a child of lying in bed, which was just several feet from where the kitchen was, and hearing these – I don't remember what they were talking about, but I could hear the murmur of their voices and how that was – I was, I think, very quietly being given a model of women being able to get together to do political and intellectual work. So, yeah. So she shared it with me in a variety of ways.

JR: Did your brother also become involved in activism?

VG: My brother and I went in different directions. It's interesting. It's almost like we kind of split out the genes in the family. So I sort of took all the left-wing politics from my family [laughter] and went off with it. And he took other stuff from my family and went off in that direction. So no, he didn't become politically involved as I did.

JR: Was your family involved with Zionist politics at all?

VG: No. You know, I say no quickly, but actually, I think in 1948, when Israel became a state, it was a source of identification for most Jews. I do recall that everybody – I had a gazillion trees planted for me in Israel, and I always had this vision that I could go there and there would be a tree with my name on it. So there was that consciousness. But in terms of being active Zionists, no, they weren't.

JR: How would you say that your relationship to Judaism has changed over time? What is it like now?

VG: My relationship has changed dramatically. I think that I always – I graduated from high school in 1959. I went to Cornell, and I graduated from Cornell in 1963. And then, I spent a year in New York, and then I went to graduate school at the University of Wisconsin. I was at the University of Wisconsin from the fall of 1964 until the spring of 1968, at which point I came to New York. And then, I stayed in New York for several years, did various things including – I was very politically active. I was in Weathermen, which was the last, final incarnation of SDS [Students for a Democratic Society]. And then, I moved to Atlanta. And it was actually – I go through all that to say that it was up until the point where I moved to Atlanta – almost all of my friends were Jewish, and all the political work I did was with Jewish people. So, although I do recall that in 1967, the time of the war, the Yom Kippur War, that that was – I remember some fierce political arguments in the University of Wisconsin around the war. So, I kind of always took my Judaism for granted. I never did much about it. And I'm not exactly sure at what point my interest in becoming more Jewish and having that become more center front in my life came to pass. I think also that as I look back on it, my first sort of major political involvement was doing Civil Rights work. And that project actually at Cornell, if I think about religious identification, which I don't usually think about in those terms, was actually, I think, primarily organized by non-Jewish graduate students. Interestingly. I never thought about that until just this minute. Although I think a lot of people who went down as volunteers were Jewish. But again, it was not something that was ever talked about in that way, ever. So, in part, I think what prompted me was that I then moved to Atlanta, where I lived for eight years in the '70s, and I adore the South. I loved living in Atlanta, but it was the first place where I really met antisemitism. And I think that one of the reasons I left Atlanta and moved back up north was because I felt like I needed to come back to a place where there were more lefties, politically, and there were more Jews, although Atlanta has a very large Jewish community. I was there in the early days

of the lesbian feminist community in Atlanta, and at that time, there were very few Jewish women in the community. Now there are many more Jewish women, and there's a gay and lesbian synagogue. It's a different scene in Atlanta right now than it was when I lived there. But now I've left, and now I'm up here, so. So at some point, I think while I was living in Atlanta – actually, one of the things that happened was that again for reasons that I can't really entirely identify, I became more drawn to thinking about a spiritual life. I remember I worked as a secretary for many years for the Southern Presbyterians, and I worked for a woman minister there. I remember being very interested in who she was and what she was doing. Every time she began talking about Jesus Christ, that was the point when she realized, "Oh, we're really different people." Not that she was – there was no proselytizing, though; we were good friends. But in the course of discussing stuff, she would talk about Jesus Christ because that was part of her belief system. But I found something very appealing about that, and I think also that probably what was also going on that interestingly drew me back to a spiritual life and ultimately to Judaism was that I was dealing with a history of sexual abuse. And I think that unconsciously, something was beginning to unfold inside of me that knew that I needed to go into some very deep place inside of me to sort stuff out. I think that began to open up a place inside of me that needed to look at a spiritual life. And actually, when I left Atlanta and moved to Boston, what I felt like I wanted to do was I wanted to be quiet – I didn't know about meditation, but I wanted to be able to stare at a tree. I mean, that was the image that came to me. As I look back at it now I understand it was just really a desire to be able to come back inside myself. But I never thought about Judaism because I think people are just now really beginning to talk again about the tradition of meditation within Judaism, which does exist. But at the time, it was not something that was out in the open. And I didn't even know about Buddhist meditation, but in fact, when I moved to Boston I started looking around for that because it felt like it was kind of driving me. And I also began to know more consciously that I needed to start dealing with the incest in a way that I'd never been able to. And so, I eventually came upon someone who was doing Buddhist

meditation at a meditation center in central Massachusetts called the Insight Meditation Society. I went there, and I began doing Buddhist meditation, which I did then for – I went to my first retreat in 1980 and did an enormous amount of meditation during the '80s, along with a tremendous amount of work on the incest. And so I did all this – and as I did the Buddhist meditation – Buddhist meditation doesn't require that you convert.

JR: Right.

VG: You don't need to be a "Buddhist," quote-unquote; it's a very different kind of religious identification. So there was never any conflict there, and I did all my Buddhist meditation – I went in totally as a Jew; there was no question about that for me. And, in fact, I had struggles there around stuff like they had a retreat that went over New Year's. It started about December 27th [and] ended January 5th, and they called it the Christmas Retreat, which just, you know, [inaudible] me every time I heard it. And so I actually wrote them a letter that said, "Why don't you call it a Hanukkah retreat, or why don't you call it a New Year's retreat?" They changed the name to a New Year's retreat. I mean, there were various things like that. So I was always very much there as a Jew, but I also was very much there doing very, very deep Buddhist meditation and learned a lot and feel like the Buddhist teaching is incredibly powerful.

JR: Is that something you're still involved in?

VG: I ended up working at the center for about a year and a half, and it turned out – I did two long retreats. I sat for three months in 1983 and 1984 and did lots of two-week retreats and ten-day retreats, and weekend retreats. I worked there for a year and a half at the end of the '80s, and that ended up being an extraordinarily painful and destructive experience. So, what's happened now is that I feel like Buddhism still informs my life in a very, very basic way. And I actually would like to meditate more than I do, but I don't. Even when I was in my most deepest time of intense meditation, I always found it difficult to keep up a daily practice. So I could go and sit for three months, where I was sitting

like eighteen hours a day, but then when I'd come home – I'd keep it up for about three weeks, and then it was gone. I find it very difficult to integrate that kind of life with an active life. It's just very difficult. I think it could be a good thing to do. But I also feel that there were just moments every day where things that I've learned or imbibed – after sitting that much, they really become a part of you, as opposed to just studying it. So I feel like it's very much a part of my life all the time, although I don't know that I'll ever sit formally in a Buddhist institution because that experience there was just too difficult for me. Although I think that for people who haven't had that kind of negative experience that these places are great places to go and sit, think. IMS is a really good place to go and sit. Anyway, when I left the meditation center after having worked there for a year and a half, I felt like I needed something. I didn't know what it was, and I thought, "When the student is ready, the teacher will appear." [Editor's Note: This expression is a Buddhist proverb.] I hoped that was a true statement. And interestingly, several years before that, also in the late '80s, also for reasons I cannot tell you why this happened, I decided that I wanted to get bat mitzvahed in the middle of all this. I thought, "Well, I have to learn Hebrew first." Well, it had never occurred to me, since I knew nothing about synagogue life, that you could learn Hebrew in a synagogue. That just didn't even occur to me. And because I'm a language person and I like languages, I actually signed up for an ulpan. I signed up for an ulpan at Hebrew College, which I started to take, and then my father got sick and died while I was doing it, and I was incapable of thinking of anything except that. So I kind of just put that aside for a while. And then I guess I left the meditation center. I left working there right at the beginning of 1990, and two years later – in the beginning of 1992, I got involved with the woman who's my partner, who – I'm not sure if she's going to want her name to go online. [Laughter] So I won't – well, it's Rochelle, Rochelle Ruthchild, who is also one of the interviewees. But you'll check with me before you identify any names online.

JR: Sure. I have a release form for you to sign afterward, and you can put that under the restrictions.

VG: Okay. Anyway, Rochelle grew up in a home that was very observant and kosher, and when I got together with her, her son was eleven years old. He was in a Conservative synagogue, and she didn't feel like she was really happy there. She also wanted him to be bar mitzvahed in a synagogue where she could be present as a full human being. She actually decided to change – we talked about it – she decided to change to Temple Israel. In the process of doing that, she noticed that they were doing an adult bar and bat mitzvah course, so she sent it to me. And so I joined the synagogue to do that. It was a very similar experience to what happened to me when I did meditation stuff. I went – and I've done this often in my life, where I've kind of entered into something without fully realizing what I was getting myself into, and then once you're in it, it just opens up this whole world. I think, in some ways, maybe it's kind of like having a kid for the first time. You think you know what you're doing – I've watched this with a number of my friends. I don't have kids myself, but you can't possibly imagine how that changes your life. So I always felt that when I went to do a meditation retreat at IMS that when I walked – as I put my foot over the threshold I had no idea what I was opening myself up to except that I knew it was going to be something very intense. After sitting three or four times I finally realized that that was the case. And the same thing happened at Temple Israel. It was like I joined that act of saying I'm going to join the synagogue, which was something – how old was I? I was already like fifty-one or something. And I could probably count on two hands the number of times I had actually been in a synagogue. The act of signing up and walking over the threshold and then joining this class just completely changed my life. It just opened up this other world to me and has totally changed my identification and how I move in the world right now. And my involvement with Judaism has gone off in several different directions, and it's sort of frustrating because I can't find one place that satisfies it all. So I'm very – well, so Temple Israel – I got very actually interested in learning the liturgy and learning, being educated religiously, which is something that I had not had any of – and seeing the places where my secular politics actually was rooted in religious belief systems, which

was really interesting to me to discover that. So that became a very compelling study for me, and I ended up working on the women's Kallah the first year, which is this day of prayer. It's been going on for about ten or eleven years at Temple Israel. And I ran the liturgy committee, so I organized the service. The bat mitzvah itself was an incredibly moving experience. The two years leading up to it were fraught with various kinds of conflicts and things that sort of frustrations and blah, blah, blah. But it was also a very, very powerful experience, and the service itself was probably really a moment where I understood the structure of the liturgy. I mean, I felt it. I felt how you start off, and you build up to the Torah reading, and it all made sense to me internally. So that was a very powerful experience. And because I love languages, I just loved learning Hebrew; I just loved learning what these little squiggles meant on a page and that completely changed my relationship to the service, being able to read the Hebrew. And actually, we did some studying so we knew kind of what it meant. We didn't do word-for-word translation, but it wasn't just that we were sounding things out. We were also learning what it meant. So that was a very powerful stream. At the same time, I'm also very identified and drawn to Yiddish –

JR: [laughter] I gathered from your teacher at the apartment.

VG: – and to my Eastern European roots, which I attribute to something very strong that happened for me as a child with both my mother and my father's families, which is not so true with my brother. It's just interesting how you sort of both grow up in the same physical space and take different things out of an experience. And as luck would have it, or because it was bashert, I don't know, my partner is a Russian historian and also has – I always say that Rochelle is someone who has the soul of someone who died during the Second World War and grew up in a shtetl somewhere in Eastern Europe. She's just got this incredible kind of visceral connection. And she lived in the Soviet Union for two years as an exchange student in 1966-67 and 1978-79 and still has family in what's now Belarus. And so she had been there – she had been to see her family, and she just had

a very strong connection with it, and so I was fascinated by how she talked to me. We ended up taking a trip to Eastern Europe in 1995 and visiting all of [inaudible]our grandparents' shtetls and visiting her family. And that just completely blew my mind, that whole experience. And actually, when I came back from there, I studied Yiddish for two summers at Columbia. They have an intensive language program which is wonderful. So that's been a whole other stream – both the language stream, which for me has not been Hebrew so much as it's been Yiddish – and also that history, that Eastern European history stream. So I ended up kind of in my family being the person who holds that history. It feels like in every family, there's someone who has that job because they want it, so. So that's taken up – it's been since 1992, which was, I guess when I joined Temple Israel because we were bat mitzvahed in 1995. It's just been a very, very central piece of my life. And one of the other things that I found at Temple Israel – which I think is probably true in many reform synagogues, but which I think is particularly true at Temple Israel is that there's – it's a large, progressive, urban, Reform synagogue with a lot of intellectual capital in the congregation. So I have been involved with some really incredible people, whom I wouldn't have met otherwise, in some wonderful work, primarily this, the Women Whose Lives Span the Century, which is something I read about in the Temple Bulletin, and I said, "Oh, Rochelle, let's do this." We went to the training, and that was another thing where I signed up, and I was like [claps hands] – changed my life. And here I am now, as a result of that. So that's been probably – actually, once the bat mitzvah was over, it was more sort of that intellectual piece, although I guess it was both. Over time, it's been more that intellectual piece that I've been left with, activist piece than it has been sort of the religious piece, although that piece is still there for me and is important and perhaps will become more important again in a while. And actually, since last September, I changed my job. I now work as the executive director of Sojourner Feminist Institute, which publishes Sojourner, the women's forum, which is a monthly progressive feminist newspaper in Boston but is a national publication.

JR: I've read it for a long time.

VG: Excellent. So because I do that, I haven't had time to do – that's been a job with a learning curve that's gone straight up. So I haven't had time to do anything. And actually, it's something that pretty much anything else at all for this first year, and it's something I miss. I miss that Jewish – I miss Jewish stuff being more prominent in my life. But I've just had to let go of a lot of things this year so that I could learn what I needed to learn, and it's very painfully difficult keeping alive a progressive feminist journal in this day and age. It's really a job and a half.

JR: Do you want to deal with your laundry?

VG: Yeah.

JR: Okay. [Recording paused.] So maybe you could just tell me a little bit how you first got involved in the Civil Rights Movement, sort of why and how.

VG: Well, I started college in 1959, so by that time, there were already a lot of important events that already happened during the '50s, during my lifetime, that marked the beginning of the modern Civil Rights Movement, including the bus boycott in Montgomery, although I have to say I don't have any memory of that. From the time – the 1954 Supreme Court decision Brown v. the Board of Education, which I do remember – so those things had happened. And so my college years, which were from 1959 to 1963 at Cornell, were marked by a lot of student activism around civil rights. I came in not really an activist and left a fully – not fully, but a blossoming activist. So it really happened during my years at Cornell. I think a lot of my political development happened via a man, which is not a surprising way for it to happen. At that time, I got involved with the man who I later married, Bob Gabriner, whose name I still carry. It's kind of – by this time, it's kind of my name also. And Bob came out of a very progressive background and came in as an activist. I think because he was a man, and had a sense that he could

speak, did so. And also, he's incredibly smart and perceptive, so he had good things to say. So we met. We both worked at the newspaper, the Cornell Daily Sun, and we met there. And actually, through my involvement with Bob – and I'm sure that part of my draw to him was his politics and his sense that he could change the world, and because as a woman, I didn't feel like I could do that, I gravitated toward him and let myself believe that I could do those things under his wing, or under his tutelage. And so I had my first – my first political activities were at Cornell. I have to say they were not all with Bob. I mean, I did a whole bunch of things on my own. I went to my first picket line, which was to support the sit-ins at the Woolworth's counters in the South. I have a recollection of making the decision to go to that, which I guess was either during my junior or my senior year. It was a big deal to allow myself to think that I could go out and make a public statement by carrying a placard and walking on a picket line. Now that routine is very familiar to me. But at the time, even though it wasn't a threat of danger, it was – I guess just psychically being exposed like that, it was something to think about. So, then I was involved both in incipient – well, they weren't really anti-war activities, but there was stuff happening around Cuba. At the time, there was a blockade and the invasion of Cuba, the Bay of Pigs invasion, both happened while I was at Cornell at college. So I was starting to get involved in politics, and by the time of my senior year, I took a trip interestingly with the Cornell United Religious Work, which combined all the Jewish faiths, which was – did I say Jewish faith? It combined all the faiths. And it was my first decision to not go home on a school holiday. And then, my senior year in the spring, we took a trip south, and we went to – I think we were mostly in North Carolina – and we visited with white and Black people who were active in the Civil Rights Movement. And that was a turning point for me. I mean, that was both the statement to my family that I was not coming home and that I was going to do this thing and then also what I learned while I was down there – and that was something I did without Bob, I did on my own. So I think what happened in large part was that there were things that were growing inside of me that I wanted to do that I, in a lot of ways, didn't feel I could do on

my own. So, to some extent, I had to do it in concert with someone else whom I felt sort of gave me permission and protected me and could teach me things, who was Bob. And then that also, I think, enabled me to sort of branch out and do other stuff that I did myself.

JR: Were your parents involved in civil rights?

VG: Not really.

JR: Were they supportive of your involvement?

VG: Well, they were supportive of my involvement until – when I went south to do civil rights work, they were not supportive, only because it was a situation in which I put my life in danger. It's like I kept saying to my mother, "Well, you taught me this stuff." She said, "But I didn't expect you to do this with it." So I took things many steps further than my parents took their own politics and many steps further than they wanted me to take my own. So they were supportive of what I was doing, and the idea of fighting for justice was okay, but if I could only have done it in a safer environment, that would have been a really good thing. Basically, they had pretty straightforward ambitions for me. They wanted me to get married to a middle-class professional Jewish man, to have a career, to have kids, to be relatively liberal, and I did almost none of those things. [laughter] So I did get married, but I got married to a guy who was very radical, and I've never had children, and I've been very political. A little too political. But I must say that I've always had sort of the unrelenting support of my mother. No matter what I did, she has always risen to the occasion. Cannot say that for my father, but I can say that for my mother. You know, so that's – I have a great deal of gratitude for that. [Telephone rings.] My mother – I lost my train –

JR: Your mother was always supportive.

VG: Right, I know I said that, but I lost where I was –

JR: At the end of college, you went down to the south. And then I interrupted you to ask if your parents were supportive because you said that was important that you didn't go home and you went down south.

VG: Okay. So, I guess I was talking about how I got involved, right? Is that the subject? [laughter] So, then I came back from that trip – yeah, so I was saying that it was significant that I decided not to go home for the holiday. And then when I graduated from college – I mean, I graduated in 1963, so I guess it partly is important to place the historical moment, which was at the time Cuba was a big international situation. We already had advisors in Vietnam, but it was not something that people were really talking about yet. But were just beginning to talk about actually. Pot was something that was not happening, and I remember that – as I recall, it was actually the day of graduation, but it may have been a day close by – that I actually heard the word "marijuana" for the first time. I had never really identified with the Beat Generation particularly, although that would have been – that was a generation prior to me, but it was still kind of there to be learned from and seen and attached to by the time I was in college. But that was not my scene. So that was the moment, and there were a lot of very important, exciting things that were going on at the time that I graduated. The Freedom Rides were also going on, and I have a strong recollection of that at Cornell because there were students from Cornell who went on the Freedom Rides. I remember who went to the Willard Straight Hall, which is the student union building. We saw people off. So, that was all happening, and I remember thinking about doing it, but I didn't go on the Freedom Rides. So there was a lot really beginning to happen; the '60s were really beginning to unfold and to explode, and so that energy was very, very present, and it was what drew me. As far as I was concerned, it was a direction in which I wanted to go. And I only realized – I went back to my 25th anniversary of my graduation from Cornell, it was in 1988, and I went back, and it was an extraordinarily meaningful reunion for me to be among all these people who were the same age as I was and who had grown up in the same historical moment as I had, and to realize the things that we had in common but to also see the

ways in which our lives had just diverged tremendously after college. There were very few people who became politically active as I did from that generation. Bob and I always ended up being with people who were at least five years younger than we were because we actually went the boomer track, and we're not boomers. You know, I'm a war baby. I was born during the Second World War. So it was interesting to me. I felt like I was one of the very few people who had become the kind of political activist I had become. Although I think the class of 1968 probably would have had a very different percentage of its population who had identified that way. So when I graduated, I knew I wanted to go off in that direction. Actually, I sort of willed myself to develop in that way. At the time that I graduated, there were major demonstrations going on in Brooklyn to integrate the unions for the construction trades, which were by and large white. So, I went and participated in mass demonstrations – and I went by myself. I did a few things when I graduated from Cornell. I went to the Village. I bought myself a pair of leather sandals, and I had my ears pierced. [laughter] It's probably the equivalent today of getting – you know, probably if I were young now, I would have various and sundry rings and things coming out of my body. But at the time, all you had to do was get two holes in your ears, and you were becoming a hippie. And I went by myself without Bob – I can't even remember if I told him I was going – to these demonstrations, these mass demonstrations, and was arrested two or three times. In fact, in one of the pictures I gave that's in the booklet is – somehow, my picture got snapped as I was being arrested. There I was, in a skirt, my little hair done up and quite properly attired, being carried off by these three policewomen. And, of course, then it was either in the Daily News or the Post, I don't know. Of course, then my parents – that was a whole other story. That was like [laughter] – oh, God. So I did that, and I just threw myself into civil rights activity in Brooklyn and did a lot of stuff on my own. How I got to these meetings now I don't even know because I wasn't driving at the time. But I went to mass meetings with Milton Galamison, who was also doing school integration stuff in Brooklyn and in Black churches. So I just did it. And I was joined, I think, by both [Recording paused] –

JR: Maybe just repeat that last sentence.

VG: But I was drawn by believing in social justice and wanting to fight for that and believing in what I had learned, in the principles that I had learned from my parents, and also because it was – there was an energy and a life force involved in these movements that really stood it apart or made it stand apart from the regular stream of life that was going on, that didn't have that kind of pull for me. I am someone who loves intensity, I think always have been. So I was drawn to it and became involved for many reasons. And then what happened was that Bob and I, in the year that we graduated from Cornell, went back a few times, and people with whom – particularly Bob but also that I had known at Cornell organized – well, actually, they organized a civil rights project for Fayette County, Tennessee, last slavery trade county in Tennessee, to go down in the summer of 1964, which was the Mississippi Freedom Summer. Prior to that, perhaps it was the summer before, I don't really know, people had gone down to Fayette County to help support Tent City. And Tent City was actually tents that were put up on the land of a Black landowner in Fayette County so that sharecroppers and tenant farmers, Black sharecroppers and tenant farmers who had registered to vote and who were then thrown off their land by the white landowners, would have a place to live. And it was a big political movement; there was a lot of support from the North, from northern groups, food and – I don't even know the full extent of it. But there was a tremendous amount of support down there. And some of the people from Cornell had gone down there. And when they came back they talked about doing a civil rights project in Fayette County the following summer. And so we knew about that. We went up to an initial meeting where people were talking about it, and the meeting wasn't even probably half over when I turned to Bob and said, "We're going," and he said to me, "We're going." There was no discussion about it even; it was clear that that was where our hearts and our minds were leading us. And so I was in New York for that year, and actually, during that year, we both – Bob and I worked in the welfare department as welfare – let's see, what was our title? We were caseworkers in the welfare department. We worked up in East Harlem in

New York, and we also worked on rent strikes in New York with Jesse Gray, and that was the year actually that I think Muhammad Ali, i.e., Cassius Clay, won his first fight. I remember sitting in some rent strike office in Harlem, listening to the fight. So that's what I was doing that year. That was the year Bob and I got married. That's a whole other story which I won't go into. [laughter] I had my first abortion. Many things were going on. This is a whole other story which goes on along here, which is "Vicki as a woman becomes an independent person who can stand on her own two feet." So we decided to go. Now, by the time we went down in June of 1964 – we were married – actually, Bob and I were married in June of 1964. We had actually been married once before. We had sort of eloped in January, got married. Then we had a family wedding in June of 1964. By the time – can't remember – my brother got married [at] the same time also. I don't remember if it was at his wedding, or – I think it was my brother's wedding. By that time, Mickey Schwerner – Goodman, Chaney, and Schwerner were missing already. And actually, Schwerner had been a student at Cornell; he had been a year ahead of me, so I had sort of known him. It was pretty clear by that time that they were dead, although their bodies hadn't been found yet. So you can imagine that our wedding was a pretty tense affair. Not so much for us. We weren't that scared, but my parents were just beside themselves, I have to say, understandably. It was a very scary time. It was Mississippi Freedom Summer, so there were thousands – actually, I don't know how many students went down, but hundreds at least of northern, primarily white but also some Black students had gone down to work in Mississippi. We were not affiliated with Mississippi Freedom Summer, kind of were independently organized to work in Fayette County. Fayette County is in west Tennessee, and its southern border is Mississippi, and its western border – actually, the western border of the county is Shelby County, which is where Memphis is. So we're pretty much right in the corner of southwest Tennessee. And Fayette County might as well have been Mississippi, for what the county was like. The only way you could tell when you were riding a dirt road or riding a road, and you would get to Mississippi if you're driving south, would be that the quality of

the road would get significantly worse once you got to Mississippi. So if it was a tar road, it would become dirt, and if it was a gravel road it would become total dirt. Then you'd know we're in Mississippi. So my parents were very, very concerned. But we went down – we ended up working at Fayette County for three summers, 1964, '65, and '66. And during that time, basically what we did was we went down – it was a group of twenty-five. I'm just guessing; I don't remember exactly how many, but it was sort of in a not-insignificant number of people who were mostly students from Cornell who were all placed with families throughout the county. So Bob and I lived the first summer with an older couple who owned their own land. Pretty much we tried to stay with people who owned their own land so there would be less chance of them being penalized in some way by a white landowner. And we paid X amount of money per week for food. We ate our meals with the family, and we did our political work. The first summer that we were down there we worked on an election for sheriff and tax assessor.

JR: So then, were you doing voter registration stuff?

VG: We were doing voter registration and actually the election itself, as I recall. One thing I've discovered is that my memory has suffered quite a bit [laughter] as I've gotten older and as I've gotten post-menopausal. So there are details – actually Bob remembers – I know would remember these details a lot better, and someday perhaps I'll interview him on what we did in Fayette County, and I'll remember it all. But basically, what we did was – yeah, we were working on voter registration. We would do a variety of things. We were attempting to help build networks in the community. We helped to organize mass meetings which would always be held in churches, and we would learn to relate very significantly to the Black churches because that's – all the networks for anything came out of Black churches. So we would go to church every Sunday, every Sunday morning, and the churches would be like the first and third Sundays, X and Y churches would meet, and then the second and fourth Sundays, other churches would meet. So we would go from one service to the other, so we'd hit all the services. And it

was a very strange situation and kind of embarrassing in some way. We would get introduced – here we were, we were like twenty-one, twenty-two years old, these pishers from up north who, on top of being very young and being white, all of us were from the city. So it was this tremendous adjustment to learn how to live in the rural South and in the rural Black South, which is a very different environment. Because we lived completely within the Black community. For the most part, our contacts with the white community were hostile encounters or, either outrightly hostile where people got beaten up or hostile just in the sense that none of the white people – they all knew who we were, we looked different, we dressed differently, and they just knew – it's a small town. People knew who each other were, and they knew that we were not people who lived there.

JR: What was your relationship like with the local Black population?

VG: Well, I think it was – so I was saying what would happen in the church is that we'd be introduced as sort of God's gift to – there was kind of the florid language that would happen in the churches anyway, but here we were, we were just these – I don't know, these people who had come down, who actually thought – I think in my mind I thought, "Well, we'll go there for one summer, and it will be like everything will get taken care of." On my part anyway – oh, I think that was shared by a lot of people, just unbelievable naïveté, unbelievable naïveté. And I think naïveté and also optimism. So the relationship with the Black community, I think in a lot of ways, was very, very tight and very, very positive. We formed bonds with people. I think a lot of it was because we actually – we went down there, we lived with people, and we shared risks with people even though we got to leave at the end of the summer. So clearly, it's not the same thing. But for the period of time that we were there, people saw that we were willing to get our hands dirty and that we were willing to take risks, which I think made a difference. I think it's also kind of like when you're with – if a man isn't totally sexist and doesn't try to rape you, whatever and ever, you sort of feel like you should thank them for

that consciousness. I think it's the same thing – because we were probably the first white people that almost all the Black folks in Fayette County had met who were willing to – who dealt on an equal basis, that we got more credit for it than we deserved because we were sort of the first of a kind. It was the first time that they had had that kind of experience, and it was the first time that most of us had really had the experience of interacting with Black folks the way that we were. So it was a tremendous learning experience on all sides. I think that the relationships were very tight and good in a lot of ways. I think that we made all the mistakes – additionally, all the mistakes that white folks made who went to work in the South, which is that we came in with a certain kind of privilege of which we were not even aware and didn't always deal with it in as self-conscious a way as we should have. So it was a mixed bag. In fact, when we decided not to continue the project, which in large part had to do with what was going on nationally in terms of the Civil Rights Movement, which was becoming much more at that point a Black power movement, the northern cities had exploded. There was just a whole national context that was happening. I don't know that we actually sat down with the people in Fayette County and said, "This is what we're thinking, what are you thinking" – I think it was more a decision that was made by primarily the white folks who were running the project out of – it sort of became less and less precisely being attached with Cornell.

JR: Were you affiliated with other groups?

VG: Well, we were affiliated sort of with SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee]. Our heart flew with SNCC. And so we had some organizational ties, and we had some ties with SNCC projects that were working in Northern Mississippi. So, in the 8mm movies that I have of Fayette County, it shows us at a demonstration in front of the courthouse and maybe Brownsville. I can't remember exactly what county seat it was, but there's a guy named Hardy Frye who was a fieldworker for SNCC in northern Mississippi, and we worked with him on that, and he came up, and he spoke. So, that was where the ties were. But as I said, we were not part of Mississippi Freedom

Summer; we were not part of SNCC or part of CORE [Congress of Racial Equality]. So we spoke at churches. We did political theater with folks at mass meetings. We did voter registration. Pretty much the first summer was really focused on that election. And the election, interestingly – and this is a story that has not been written which I actually feel some urge to go back and write, and actually, Bob's son – Bob and I are still friends, and his middle son, who is at Northeastern this year, is actually very interested in Bob's – because the part of it that I did with Bob – political history and sort of is interested also, which is just a wonderful and exciting thing to be able to share that with the next generation, interested in pursuing this also possibly. But that summer, we worked on an election where there was a white guy running for sheriff, L.T. Redfearn, and there was a Black guy, a Black minister, June Dowdy, who was running for tax assessor. As I think back, I think I just took it for what it was at the time. It was 1964; it was the Johnson-Goldwater national election. That was the other odd thing, was like, did I care – I was mostly detached from the electoral process myself in terms of that. But here we were, kind of putting our lives on the line for an electoral process in Fayette County. But I think it meant something different in Fayette County than it meant nationally. Actually, now as I look back on it, I probably even now might relate differently to the national election than I did. I can't even remember if I voted that year. Because in my mind at that time, I thought, "Well, they're both the same." I think I would look at it differently, even though, goodness knows, I would have a lot to say about Johnson that wouldn't be particularly favorable. Let me see, where was I floating off to? Oh, yeah. So I think I just took it at face value. But now I think back, and I think, "Here's this white guy, who is he? What's his story? What was his connection to the Black community, and how did he have the guts in 1964 to run for sheriff with a Black man? And June Dowdy, how did he have the guts to put himself out there publicly, and what was his story? Why was it he who ran, as opposed to anyone else, and how did he have the foresight or whatever at that time to see himself as being able to do that kind of thing?" I just don't know. And as I look back on it, I think it's actually a lot more amazing than I gave it credit for at the time. Because I

didn't have a whole lot of contact with either Dowdy or Redfearn. We were just kind of down there, mostly working with the people. We were in District 10; we got separated – it's divided up by districts, so we were in District 10. Do I remember that? Yeah. So we were actually right on the Mississippi border in District 10.

JR: And what happened in the election?

VG: Oh, they lost. I mean, they lost. There was no question about that. So the second summer that we went down, the focus of our work changed some. There wasn't an election that summer, so we did a lot of demonstrations actually to integrate the public facilities. And again, when I think about putting our life on the line so that Black people and white people could pee in the same bathroom – of course, obviously, it represents something much larger than that, so that's not – but we focused a lot of our attention on that, and we did actually – again, which I'm sure Bob will remember details of this much better than I did – a big march from somewhere to somewhere. We ended up in front of the county seat of – it was either Somerville, which is the county seat of Fayette County, or Brownsville. I don't remember. But part of the movies that I have just show people marching along the side of the road, incredibly hot weather, people sweating bullets, carrying umbrellas to keep the sun off their heads. And we also did freedom schools in various other – all over the county. So the second summer was less focused on one thing than the first one was. The third summer that we went down, we worked on several elections, and we spread out, and we were working in various – in a few counties around Fayette County. But the work was similar on some level all three summers, and it was extraordinary work. It was work that involved – I know this is one of the things that we're looking for when they put together the Women Whose Lives Span the Century, like work that actually involved physical risk. This work – I personally never was physically harmed when I was in the South, but I certainly was constantly aware of it. And there were people on our project who were beaten up – nobody that we worked with was killed, fortunately, but there were people who were beaten up. And we all observed

tremendous care and security in how we moved around. So we were very aware that if we were ever in a car where there were Black and white people in the car together, particularly if there was a white woman driving a Black man, that was something that put us at risk, and we just were very careful about how we moved. And to this day, I still – if I'm driving down a dark road, and it's another car coming, and the headlights go out, I get very suspicious. Because that was sort of one of the most fearsome thoughts was that you could be driving, a headlight would go out, who was it? You could get killed. So that was very much a fact, very, very much a fact of life. And because we were in the rural South and people have guns – they just carry guns, every single pickup, of which there were many – either driven by a white person or a Black person, would often have a rifle, a shotgun, across the back of the cab. You would just see it. And people carried handguns. It was just a way of life. And people shot animals and – it's different than – certainly different than it was for me growing up in Brooklyn. So that was very much a part of life. And it was during that – I can't remember if it was the first or second summer that my mother actually, with a group of parents – my parents, who were like, completely so worried the entire time that I was down there, who actually got together a delegation of parents and went to the Justice Department and saw John Doar, who at the time was – the head of what? Was he the head of the Department of Justice or head of Civil Rights? One or the other. About getting protection. And of course our parents being white could get heard, have a voice, whereas Black parents going down there for their kids wouldn't have the same kind of impact.

JR: Were all of the volunteers in your program white?

VG: Not all. I think there were a few Black people, but it was mostly white.

JR: And what about the gender?

VG: Gender was, I think, pretty – there were a lot of young women on it. And I think that was also – that was a situation that we talked about, but I don't know that it was ever

totally dealt with, which is both the great gender and race question, which was that I never – I was married the whole time that I was down there, so I never had this problem because I was not a single female. But there were a lot of young women down there who were single. In fact, most of the women down there were single, and I think there were just a lot of issues around relationships, relating between the white women and the Black men particularly, and then also between white women and the Black women. All those issues and potential conflicts and conflicts got played out, and I think that we certainly were not conscious enough about gender stuff. That was almost nonexistent and not really clear enough, as I still think we're not about the complexity of race relationships. So that was definitely something that was at play. And in terms of the leadership within the organization also upon the white people – well, among the civil rights workers who were down there who were, as I said, primarily white, a few Black people, that it was – the men were the people who were in charge. But those were the days when – I remember at the University of Wisconsin – what happened was that we did civil rights work. I worked for a year with Bob in New York, and then he wanted to go back to graduate school. I never wanted to see the inside of a university again, but who was I to say where we were going to go? So we ended up going to the University of Wisconsin. He entered a Ph.D. program in American History, and because I didn't want to be a "graduate wife," quote-unquote, although I did it for probably about seventy-five percent of my identity, [I] got a master's in education. And let me collect my thoughts. Oh, yeah, so our life actually while we were in Fayette County was – the first time we went down in 1964 was the end of our year in New York, and then we went to the University of Wisconsin, and then we went south, then we came back to the university. So that was how we did it. So it was kind of this split thing – we were doing the summers. We were doing very, very intense civil rights work, and during the year we were doing kind of academic work and mostly anti-war work that was going on at the campus because the war in Vietnam had heated up by that time. And I remember, at the huge student sit-ins that we had at the University of Wisconsin during anti-war demonstrations, that literally, if

you were a woman in those meetings, you would just not get heard. The only way to get heard – there were a few ways. One is that you would either turn to your husband or your boyfriend if you had one and say something and then they would say it. Then that would get women heard because a woman could say something that would be completely passed over if she were lucky enough to be called on or if she had the guts to get up and say something, and then fifteen minutes later, some guy would get up and say the exact same thing. It would be hailed as though it were the most brilliant idea that had ever been suggested. So you'd either pass it on or you became like this "hysterical bitch," quote-unquote, because it was the only way to get heard. Or you would be identified that way because you were trying to get yourself heard, and nobody would listen to you. So that was the movement environment then, and that was the way the project ran. The men were the people who had power in terms of running things.

JR: Is that something that was an active frustration throughout the time or something that looking back, you recognize as being something –

VG: I think it was both. It was both. I think the thing that happens also is that as a woman, you have to learn that you can do things. I mean, I feel like I'm still learning that. I'm of that generation that is still finding that. On some level, I think maybe that's true for everybody. But women, we're so socialized to believe that we can't do certain things that when you're in an environment that doesn't support you taking risks and moving out and doing stuff, you don't even believe that you can do it, so in part, you kind of willingly cede power because you don't believe inside that you can do something. So I think that there was a lot of that still going on for me. In part, I didn't seek to have the kind of leadership that Bob had or that other guys had. And then there was also a part of me that was beginning to understand that this was not – there was something wrong with the picture. I remember sitting one summer and saying to Bob, "It's really strange that we go out to fight to change the world, and I have to have dinner on the table at 6 o'clock at night," which was the case.

JR: What did he say?

VG: Well, I think that Bob and I entered the feminist struggle at the same time, and so I think that we were both kind of in process. Half the time, it was [inaudible] on it. He was just sort of beginning to learn that he had to grapple with it, as I was, and I think that he's grappled with it significantly and is a different person now than he was when we were together, as am I. But at the time, no, I don't think – at the time, was a source of knocking heads which was one of the main reasons that we eventually separated. And I mean, interestingly, some people say to me, "So how can you still have his last name?" And the fact was that when we separated, which was in 1968, which was just at the beginning of the feminist movement, I didn't believe that I could make it on my own even though I knew I had to because the marriage was no longer tenable. I felt like if people didn't know me as Bob's wife, they would know me as Bob's ex-wife. And also, I felt like I had sort of become a somewhat different person because I had become politically active, so I was sort of more identified with the Gabriner name than with the Levins name, which is what my maiden name was. And I think that for me also, on some level, there was also some desire – it had something sort of unspoken at the time and unconscious at the time, which I think must have been at work, which had to do with the sexual abuse, which is sort of in some way kind of saying, "No, I don't want that identification." So as the years have passed, Bob and I have had numbers of conversations about that period of time. It was exciting, it was incredible, and it was very rough. [laughter]. It was very rough.

JR: Did you identify openly as a Jew while you were in the South?

VG: Yeah. I didn't not identify as a Jew. I never thought, "Oh, are there Jewish people living in Fayette County? Is there a synagogue, or where do people go, or should I check out the synagogue in Memphis?" You know, no. On that level, no. As I said, that didn't really happen to me until I joined the synagogue here. And so I never went really

identifying as a Jew. I mean, that was sort of not the identity with which I went, and actually, I was pretty unconscious about those Jewish leaders who did go as Jews – I'm going to forget his name now. He's dead now, the –

JR: (Cowan?)?

VG: No, the rabbi from New York whose daughter is now – he's written many books. Wrote a book about the Sabbath. Anyway.

JR: Oh, Abraham Joshua Heschel?

VG: Yeah, Heschel, who marched with King and who went as a Jewish leader, and there were probably other people. Somehow I never paid attention to that, and in fact, I was sort of much more drawn to – there was a lot more Christian leadership, people identifying as Christians, and I paid a lot more attention to that – not because I wanted to be Christian. I never wanted to be Christian. But they were a powerful presence. The ministers were a powerful presence. And Bob and I had two wedding ceremonies. The first wedding ceremony we had when we eloped was with a friend of ours who was a minister who was active in the Civil Rights Movement. Second one we had was a Jewish ceremony. So, yeah, I did, and I didn't. That was not the motivating identity which I moved into civil rights work at all.

JR: What were the greatest challenges for you in doing this kind of work?

VG: [laughter] I hesitate because there was such – I was so impelled and compelled to do this work. The drive was so strong, and it was a drive that came from inside of me. It wasn't like someone said, "Oh, you should do this." It wasn't about Bob saying, "Oh, we have to do this," and being man ahead about it. That is in some ways so different from how I feel about almost anything today that, in a way, on some level, there was nothing difficult about it. Because I felt held in some way in a national – and around civil rights stuff in sort of a national energy, a national movement of which I felt a part, which just

made all the work in every difficult moment possible. I don't think I'm romanticizing it as I look back on it. I remember there were just the most extraordinary moments in that work. I remember times being at a mass meeting inside a church and singing "We Shall Overcome" and knowing that there were white people outside in their cars, in their trucks, probably with guns, and feeling as though the roof was just going to lift off the church because the energy of the people with whom we were working was so intense. You know, the struggle – they were so involved in the struggle that it was palpable. It was palpable. I think that the things that were difficult – it was very scary to know that I could get killed, which I think was a real possibility every day that we were down there. It was scary to think that our presence there was, on the one hand, helping and, on the other hand, was putting the Black people we were working with at more risk than they were already at. I think that as a woman – it's things that I've touched on – as a woman, it was difficult to sort of figure out what was going on there and why things didn't feel quite right and sort of being able to feel my own worth as an organizer. Conflict with my family was very painful, very painful. And I think what was also difficult was also sort of integrating the reality of what we saw in the rural South into my life, into the gestalt, into what I understood this country to be about. It's quite one thing to read about stuff – and you don't even read about – it's like I think the way I can say the story, the anecdote that most clearly represents this for me is – well, I learned about the rural schools for Black people. It's unbelievable, and the Black kids went to school in wooden, one-room schoolhouses for the most part, that seemed kind of quaint if you talk about the colonial days. Not so quaint when you talk about the rural South. They used books from the white school system that – a totally segregated school system, obviously – they used books from white schools that were years old, torn pages, written in, and of course, had all the names of white kids in it who had had them ten years before that. And they went to school on the rhythm of the cotton season. So they would be out to chop cotton, then they'd be back in for a month, then they'd be out to pick cotton. Whereas the white kids went on the traditional, you're off for the summer, and you have a continuous school

year. So I was completely shocked. There I was a graduate student in the school of education. And I remember I'd go back to Wisconsin, and it would take me like a month to get used to being back – it was kind of like coming back from a foreign country. I remember talking to some of my professors there and describing these schools. They had no clue – clueless about it. And I thought, "How can these people be teaching education and not know about this?" But it's hidden. It's a hidden fact. I have a friend now who just – someone I work with – who went to a family reunion with – she's white, her roommate is Black, and her family comes from Tuscaloosa, Alabama, and they just had a family reunion – and she came back and was saying the exact same thing to me that I said thirty-five years ago. Because she went into the deep rural South, and it's a culture that doesn't hit the mainstream. So I think seeing that, really getting a picture and understanding something about what racism really meant in people's lives, and poverty, what that meant in people's lives, and then trying to integrate that into how I was going to live my life and what that means – how do I do that – was very, very difficult. And I think that ultimately that question propelled me into joining Weathermen, which I think was – that's a whole other story that I won't get into, but I don't look at anything and say it was a mistake in my life because it all just was what it was. But Weathermen was probably one of the most problematic and troubling things I'd ever done in my life. I understand the impulse behind it, and I wouldn't give an inch on the terms of the drive for social justice that was pushing on people. But in the name of doing that, there were things that were done in the organization that were just inexcusable. But I think that by the time I joined Weathermen, which was in 1969, I had been through three years of doing civil rights work and from this naïve person who thought we'll go down for one summer and everything will change over those three years I learned that was not going to be the case. I felt like this requires drastic action.

JR: Right.

VG: So, at that point, that was how I integrated that reality into my life. But I think I'd do something different with it today. That question is still present and is a constant struggle to figure out.

JR: What were the most rewarding aspects to you?

VG: I probably said them along with what was most difficult. I think that sort of [laughter] learning – moving into this whole other culture, really, and making contact. There's one person from Fayette County with whom I'm still friends, a woman who is – and that's how I went to Chattanooga, said Bob and I, Bob and I, Bob and I, Bob and I. [laughter] Like it was one person. When we went down there, one of the families with which we were very active, a family in Somerville, which is the county seat – their oldest daughter – no, not their oldest daughter – Sadie was very active as a high school student. We were about twenty-one and twenty-two, and she was about seventeen. At the time, that four years is a tremendous difference. It no longer is. But she had been to demonstrations and had acid poured on her, was a great singer, blah, blah, blah. She and I have remained friends, and she still lives in Fayette County. Somehow – that was one of the most incredible things, was that the kind of work that we did together that summer enabled us – we never would have met under any other circumstances. We were able to meet as equals, right? Now she (Sadie Puckett Harris 1946-2016) runs a nail salon. So I didn't meet her as someone who does my nails or whatever. I met her as an equal and know her as an equal, and we have maintained this history. And, of course, we have a very strong bond together because we both put our lives on the line together. So that's been an extraordinary gift. And then, doing the work itself – I think the work ultimately was good work. There were a lot of mistakes made, but the work was good work. I know that it's sort of figuring out what was good about it and what wasn't good about it, or figuring out the picture in its whole complexity is very, very difficult. When I went back to Fayette County – I lived in Atlanta for nine years, so I went back to Fayette County a few times while I was in Atlanta, and I remember sitting down and talking to this couple with whom

we had worked very closely, who were older than we by, I don't know, maybe five, seven, eight, nine years. I don't know how old they were. Had a lot of kids, a bunch of kids, owned their land, and it was the time when Black power was at its zenith that I went down there, and I was very much kind of in the mode of thinking, "Oh, it had been more bad than good because we were white people, we had white privilege, we sort of took over things." I was focusing on all the negatives, which I think were all there, but to the exclusion of what had been good about it. And I remember this guy said to me – we were sitting there and I don't think he was saying it to me just because I was there, but he was saying, "You and Bob took us on roads in the county where we had never been." And I think that was a metaphor for opening up his consciousness – as he opened up ours – but opening up his consciousness to a larger world than he had been aware of before. And I remember I had to force myself at the time to not say, "Oh, we didn't do anything." I had to say, "I have to listen to this person." [laughter] This person is telling me something, this is his experience of what happened. So I'm going to tell him that it's not his experience? That he needs to have some sort of other kind of interpretation? No, that was his experience. That was part of what his experience was. And so that was all – all that was very satisfying, and just being part of a large movement for social justice was – there's nothing to be [inaudible].

JR: So what happened after your last summer in Tennessee?

VG: [inaudible] I haven't been doing the stuff.

JR: Did you remain involved in civil rights stuff, or did your activism kind of shift to other causes?

VG: Oh, after I left Fayette County? We were still in graduate school. The summer after we left – we worked there '64, '65, and '66. Summer of 1967, when we knew we were not going to go back – actually, this was Bob's idea, and I thought it was actually quite a brilliant idea – was that we should return South and collect – because he's a historian –

was to collect primary sources from projects, from grassroots projects in the deep South, so that when the history of the movement was written it would not simply reflect the history, the national records from CORE or NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] or even SNCC. SNCC was primarily a grassroots organization. So, we were at the University of Wisconsin, and he made this proposal to the library, the Historical Society at the University –

JR: He's why all that stuff is in Wisconsin?

VG: No, he's not why all the stuff is in Wisconsin. They have a social action collection, which is why we went to them. But he said, "We want to go South. We want to go here, there, and everywhere, and we want to collect these papers." And so we were funded. And the summer of 1967, we traveled through the deep South to Mississippi and Alabama and Arkansas and Tennessee, and we gathered names from civil rights workers, and we went to both white and Black folks in the deep South, and it was a most extraordinary experience. Actually, as I recall, it was the first time I ate grits. I don't think I had grits when I was living in Fayette County. I can't believe that, but I don't have any recollection of eating grits. Also, the first time I ate okra; that was an interesting experience. So we did that and had some painful experiences, but we would get somewhere, and somebody would say, "Oh, I just burned my records yesterday," and we'd go out and sort of go through the cinders and find little scraps of paper. And other times when we got to people, and they had stuff, they said, "Oh, I was wondering what I was going to do with this." So we built that little collection at the University of Wisconsin. And then after that, that was in '67, and then by the spring of 1968, Bob and I had separated, and the spring of '68 was sort of all hell broke loose, nationally and internationally. I came to New York. I taught for a year in one of the decentralized school districts in the –

[END OF FILE 1]

JR: Okay, so you were saying you –

VG: Yeah, so actually, I taught – there were three decentralized school districts in New York. One was actually in Brownsville, which is really the known district. There was Two Bridges, which is where I worked, Brooklyn and Manhattan Bridge, which had a primarily Chinese and Puerto Rican population. And then there was – I forget the name of this, but there was another district up in Harlem. And so there was a big teachers' strike that year, and that's a whole other story which we won't go into either. And it was interesting because my parents were both schoolteachers. Needless to say, it was an interesting experience. So I taught for that year, and then Bob and I separated in the spring of '68, came to New York, worked for a year. And then, in the fall I was about to go back to teach for a second year in the fall of 1969. I said to the guy that I was living with at the time – were we living together? The guy I was with at the time said, "Oh, let's go out to this SDS convention," because I had never been to an SDS convention. So we went to an SDS convention over Labor Day weekend of 1969 in Cleveland, Ohio, which turned out to be the founding convention of the Weathermen. I didn't realize it, and that was the beginning of – it's a whole other story. So I did Weathermen for about eight or nine months while the organization was above ground.

JR: And what kind of stuff were you doing?

VG: You know, running in the streets. There was a lot of anti-war stuff going on then, so we participated in major anti-war demonstrations in Washington. Weathermen organized something called the Days of Rage in Chicago, which was billed to be a mass demonstration but ended up being very small, about 300. It was basically Weathermen that were there. It's too complicated –

JR: Had you been involved with SDS before?

VG: Actually, no, I'd never been a member of SDS before. I had been sort of independent. I had been always very active at the University of Wisconsin in anti-war stuff, but I never joined an organization. Wasn't really necessary. And that's also the way that SDS ran. SDS was very, very decentralized. But I never even joined the Madison chapter. That was why the meeting that I went to in September of 1969 was the first SDS convention that I'd ever been to. So we did that and then – Weathermen was a very difficult experience, and I actually ended up being sent to Cuba on the Second Venceremos Brigade in 1970, so there was like reeducation for Vicki because I wasn't getting it [laughter] the way the Weather Bureau, which is what the leadership called themselves, thought I should be getting it. So, it was, "Oh, don't throw me into the briar patch," but I was quite happy I went. So I went to Cuba on the Second Venceremos Brigade, which really saved my life in a lot of different ways. And when I came back, I hung around. While I was in Cuba, the townhouse exploded in New York. Three people from Weathermen were killed there, all of whom I knew, and I was in Cuba at the time that happened. So by the time I came back – that was a very devastating experience – by the time I came back to New York, the people who left the Weathermen had pretty much gone underground, and there were a bunch of us kind of floating around trying to figure out what to do. That was also another extraordinarily difficult time for my parents because I had come home and said I was going to Cuba, but we weren't communicating very much. I went to Cuba, and then, of course, when the townhouse exploded, they didn't know if I really was in Cuba or not because the people's bodies were not identified for some time. I think actually the last body, Terry Robbins' body, wasn't identified until after I came home from Cuba. So I hung around New York for a while, and then I decided that I would go on a trip across the country, which is a thing many people did in those days quite frequently. You don't know what to do, pack a bag and go on a trip. And while I was in Cuba – because I had been sort of sent to Cuba at the last minute –

JR: How long were you there for?

VG: I was there for two months, which is how long the brigades lasted. Doesn't that bird sing a lot? [laughter] I'm watching him for a neighbor of mine who's off for a month. I hope he doesn't mess up the tape. [laughter] But while I was in Cuba – because I didn't go down with the New York group, or I actually was in Chicago at the time, but I was stuck on [inaudible], so I ended up being in a small subgroup with people from Atlanta, with whom I got very, very close. And while I was there, I was beginning to surface out of Weathermen. So the first place I wanted to go to was Atlanta, and I also – I came out of the Civil Rights Movement really having a very deep and abiding friendship for the South. And I think that also got symbolized for me in a moment where – I spent two weeks in Fayette County while I was at the University of Wisconsin during the regular school year. I was doing a project for my degree where I was actually giving these IQ tests that are purely visual to people in Fayette County because I was wanting to see how they came out on it. And they came out terribly on it, although these were people whom I knew to be very intelligent. I had one guy who I knew who could open the hood of his truck and look at the design for the engine and, with spit and rubber bands, sort of translate from the diagram to a three-dimensional engine and keep this truck running when any other person in a shop would have given up a long time before that. So I knew that these people were very intelligent. I knew they were semi-literate, most of them, but I also knew they could relate to pictures. And I found the IQ tests to be completely inadequate; they just didn't reflect anything about what these people could do, which I kind of thought was going to happen. While I was down there, I lived with this family, and it was very different because I wasn't doing organizing, so I was much more a part of the daily rhythm of life, and they owned a little bit of land; they had their own cotton. I remember I picked cotton for the first time, and I understood what they meant when they call it back-breaking work; it truly is. But I remember standing out there on the land with the oldest daughter, and she just kind of looked out over the horizon. I remember she just spoke about how much she loved the land. And I remember thinking, "Wow, that is really strange." I thought, "How could this be?" and then I realized you could make the

separation. You could love the land – loving the land also is a concept that is foreign to me because I come from concrete. But you could love land and you could love land where people were really mean to you and where your life was really hard, but you could make that separation. You could love a place and hate what was happening to you, which I think in some ways was probably a lot of the ways my grandparents felt when they left Eastern Europe. I think they probably loved the land on which they lived and hated their lives there, which is why they left. Thank God. So I think it was kind of a defining moment for me when I realized, “I can love the South. I can love this place.” Because I did. There’s something – the South is an incredible place, and I’ve had untold numbers of arguments with people up North since I came back who just – I think there’s a tremendous amount of anti-Southern bias, some of which I think is justified and some of which I think is not, by people who have never been there, have no clue about what’s down there, but people who will think nothing of imitating a Southern accent, which is actually a very demeaning act. But it’s like Southerners are the Other. I think perhaps it’s a little less so in terms of the Southern economy having changed if you look at Southern cities. But I think certainly, in terms of the rural South, that prejudice is still there. So I think I always had a desire to go back South, and I was curious to see how white people lived in the South because my only contact with them had been unpleasant. So I actually drove south, and I stayed with these friends in Atlanta, and I never left. I mean, that’s what happened. I stayed there for eight or nine years. I came out in Atlanta as a lesbian, and I helped to start the Atlanta Lesbian Feminist Alliance, which was both an organization and a community.

JR: Were you already involved in the women’s movement when you went down to Atlanta?

VG: I had started to be, yeah. I mean, I had gone to some early consciousness-raising groups in New York. But let’s see, actually, I did the first – 1969, when I was actually living in New York, June of ’69, that was Stonewall. I lived in the Village. I have no

memory of it. [laughter]

JR: A lot of people say that.

VG: I'm not sure why. But it was a massive event; I have no memory of it. I guess it just was not on my radar screen. So that was June in 1969. June of 1970, which was several months after I returned from Cuba, was the first march, the first gay pride march. I went to that, but I thought, "I'm going to go and give support to these people," even though I was already experimenting sexually with women, but I sort of wasn't thinking about myself as being a lesbian yet. So by that time, I had, yes. And also, even within Weathermen, although Weathermen had a very problematic relationship to the women's movement, as such within Weathermen there was a very strong women's community. And that was also one of the things that drew me to it. And again, that's another seventeen-hour conversation but it's a very mixed story. Nevertheless, there had been definite growth in that direction. And then, in Cuba, I saw a lot of really strong women, although that's another problem area. I was there during International Women's Day, March 8th, and they had a male speaker as their featured speaker. Hmm, what's wrong with this picture? Why couldn't they have a woman? So, yes, I definitely – in fact, I remember it was in June of 1970 that I woke up one morning and realized I was a feminist. You know, I remember saying it to someone. She said, "[Gasp] You're not a feminist, are you?" [laughter] I said, "Yes, I think I am."

JR: Was there a particular spur to that moment, or just kind of it came to you?

VG: Well, I mean, there was a moment when it came to me, but it built all up –

JR: It wasn't a reaction to one particular turning point or event?

VG: Oh, I don't think so. I think it was sort of a lifetime of stuff, and then I think that picked up enormous speed from about 1968. I mean, when I was at the University of Wisconsin already before I left there, women were starting to organize. There were

women – for example, there was the draft movement and women really trying to figure out how to relate to that. And there were some early meetings of women talking to each other. I mean, at that point, I was still too scared to really do much of anything, so I listened to stuff but didn't say very much. I was married. I was still very much kind of struggling with how to be in that relationship and what to do about it. The idea of leaving it just terrified me – terrified me. And I mean, I finally left, and it just – it was this point at which there was no other choice but to leave. So, yeah, there were a variety of things that were going on that I was moving in that direction. And probably what began to really cap it was that early CR experience in the consciousness-raising group. It's hard to communicate what that felt like to people who are coming of age now because I think women can say they're not feminists because they don't have to because there's been a culture created. And for as many gains as we haven't made, it has changed the whole conversation to something that it actually was not in those days. So you cannot imagine the explosion of energy that would occur when you'd have ten women sitting in a room together who would begin to share experiences that, up to that point, had been identified purely as personal problems or as personal shortcomings. And then you'd see nine heads nodding. I get goosebumps talking about it because it was such an incredible transformative experience that was happening to thousands of women at the same time. I think that probably it was the CR context that probably really began to push me to a realization. And I mean, it's hard to describe that. I call it the world was on a tilt; it's kind of like playing those pinball games. No one plays them anymore, but when the whole machine goes on tilt and sort of stops functioning. The war was happening. 1968 and '69 were such unbelievable years in terms of stuff that was going on. It was a time period that's kind of a little hard to describe because I think it's something about an energy level that it's hard to put words to it. I know I had something else to say. But once again, it has flown out like a parakeet out of my mind. Oh. I wonder if I listen to what I'm saying, I'd remember what it was.

JR: You were talking about how you came to the women's movement.

VG: Maybe I was just going to say that the consciousness – oh, I know, I was going to say the incident. One day I was walking down the street. I was walking on Broadway, and I remember I looked up and I saw this huge sign for some rock band, the name of which I don't remember now. I have it written down somewhere, but I don't remember right now. It was boys, of course, and it was one of these huge signs in Times Square. And I just looked up, and I saw these four white boys, [laughter] and I thought – something just clicked inside of me about the patriarchy and men and running things. But a lot had been leading up. So I think that was one of those apocryphal moments, one of those kind of moments that you have when you're tripping. And then it was like one morning I woke up and sort of everything – I thought, "Oh, I'm a feminist." [laughter] But it wasn't like I had been thinking about it a whole lot before. So then, I was a feminist, so that totally changed my life. So I traveled to Atlanta as a feminist who was already experimenting sexually with women. I actually had my last major heterosexual fling in Cuba, which was – I always like to say it was a fabulous farewell to heterosexuality. It was an extraordinary romance. And then I had a few more relationships with men, and then I came out, and I had my first experience of actually falling in love with a woman, as opposed to just kind of having some kind of sexual experience with her. It's because I had my first crush on a woman, and then I really fell in love with a woman, and this was like a – what do they call it? A sea change. It felt now it's growing inside of me. So then I helped to start the Atlanta Lesbian Feminist Alliance. I lived in Atlanta – oh, I went through that already. We don't have to go through that again. But you were asking me – the question to which I was responding was what?

JR: Right, because I was asking whether you had been –

VG: Oh, a feminist before I had been – yes.

JR: You were talking about having [inaudible] at that time.

VG: Yeah, so yes, I was. I mean, I was a developing feminist.

JR: And then, had your political involvements been primarily in the lesbian feminist community or other?

VG: It's been a mixture; it's really been a mixture. I left Atlanta in part because I was arrested in 1973 when I was in Atlanta, based on an action that stemmed from my Weathermen days where I'd actually helped someone get a passport in a false name. And it happened here in Boston. And the passport had never been issued, but it's a bizarre story of how they finally found our names in the files, the Justice Department. But through arresting someone else in an anti-war demonstration in Boston in 1971 and then going to his house with a search warrant, they actually found the birth certificate that we had used and realized it was a birth certificate that didn't belong to this guy. I assume they ran a search on it, and they ended up finding this passport application which they said – the passport had never been issued, never been used. And they had a grand jury in Boston and – I had signed the affidavit as a witness saying that I knew this person to be this other person, and I had used my own ID, so my identity was clear on there. His identity – he was there as this other person, but they were able to identify him because he was well-known to the police here, and he spent eight months in a state prison on anti-war charges. So on May 15, 1973, seven FBI agents came to my house in Atlanta and arrested me. I then got involved – that was in 1973. I didn't go to trial until 1977, was convicted, and then appealed it and won my appeal in 1978. So actually, while I was in Atlanta, I was dealing with this case, and that was a very interesting situation of trying to be within the lesbian feminist community, deal with something from my past that happened in an organization about which I had really a complex set of feelings, but also being clear – I was arrested right during Watergate. So I was clear that if it came down to Weathermen versus Nixon, I knew what side I was going to be on. But that didn't mean that I – I guess I didn't really look at it as Weathermen versus Nixon. I looked at it as sort of the things we were fighting for versus the things he was fighting for, and it was clear to me I knew where I was situated. There wasn't any question about that to me. But it was a real challenge to figure out how within the lesbian feminist community to talk

about this issue with people who, even at that point, already didn't have that history. They didn't have the civil rights history; they didn't have the anti-war history. It was a major challenge, and it was incredibly difficult for a lot of different reasons. I ended up doing a lot of political work. I had a bunch of people in Atlanta who worked very closely with me and people in Boston. So that was an interesting attempt to try to figure out how to integrate those things together. Integration, I find to be a major problem, you know, pulling lots of things together. [inaudible]. [laughter] It's like it's so intense. And then what happened was when I left Atlanta, I actually – as a lesbian feminist, I was much less involved with race politics than I had been before. And that's another whole story to look at, how that happened. The lesbian feminist community – as the women's movement is nationally what was largely a white, middle-class movement, there were some Black women in the community, and there were things that we did to support and work with Black movements, Black political prisoners, et cetera. There was stuff that went on. But it was not the majority of what happened. And when I left Atlanta to come to Boston, I knew by that time that I needed to – it was like I won my appeal on February 15th, Susan B. Anthony's birthday, 1978, and it was almost like – and then my systems crashed after that. And I knew that there was this internal work that I had to do, and so I would say that from 1979 to 1990 – so what is that? That's ten years. I was primarily doing internal work in a variety of ways that had to be done. And then, in the '90s, I stayed not that politically active. I was a politically identified person, but not that politically active. And now, since September, I have leaped with my full body back into a totally political environment, and it's been an interesting – it's been an interesting experience to move back into that world. And I think that's –

JR: Is it something you were looking to do, or it just sort of happened?

VG: No, I wasn't actually looking to do it, it just kind of – I was looking to change the job that I was doing because I figured out –

JR: What were you doing?

VG: I was working as a civil rights investigator. I was actually working with a private company (Delaney, Segal, Zorn) that investigated civil rights employment complaints filed by federal employees. And so we were a private company who contracted with the federal government. I traveled around a lot. I was a fact-finder. I didn't make the decision in the cases. But when I turned fifty I realized that "Oh, I probably have to work for the rest of my life because I didn't have a pension, didn't have much savings." I thought, "Oh, this is why people have jobs where they have pensions." [laughter] So I began to realize that I needed to think about work that I could do for a long period of time, and what I was doing was not anything – was not that. So I was looking for something else. I didn't know exactly what it would be. And I'm not sure that this is – I still think there are things missing from what I'm doing now. But I'm not judging anything right now because I think the first year of a new job, there's so much learning that goes on that it's kind of hard to figure out where you want to go with it.

JR: Have you had any role models?

VG: My mother.

JR: So many people I've interviewed have said that; it's really interesting.

VG: Yeah. Well, I think she – as a childhood image, she really taught me by her doing. I don't think she ever really sat down and said it to me, but she taught me that I could be my own person. She also taught me a lot of other messages which I still struggle with and which I think she still struggles with. My mother will be eighty-nine this summer, knock wood – there's no wood around here. My head. Ah, yeah, thank you. And is both, I think, still the image of this very incredibly strong, intellectually vibrant woman who also has certain – what I see as limitations. And I see if I were to judge myself, I think objectively the same is true for me. There are a lot of ways in which I am incredibly

strong and powerful and blah, blah, blah, and have learned that I can do things and make things happen, and at the same time, I still struggle with issues around “Can I do it, am I worth it, am I okay?” If people really knew who I was then they would see that I was just nobody, nothing, believing the worst things, letting the doubts be bigger than – yeah. So role models – right now, at the end of the interview, my mind is tired. I can’t think of another – she looms absolutely as the largest person. I think that along the way, there clearly have been political women, many other women and men whose work I have looked at or whose lives I have looked at and admired and wanted to model myself after in some way. And I think there’s probably a parade of them. I mean, historically, I am particularly fond of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. And even to the point of identifying with the places – their really weak places around the race issue and the whole question of women’s suffrage. But I think that’s still clearly an issue that we’re grappling with, both suffrage and Black women and white women and Black folks and white folks being able to work together. It’s nothing that anyone has figured out yet, as far as I can see. So the other person in terms of civil rights work is Fannie Lou Hamer, who rises to mind, who said, “I’m sick and tired of being sick and tired.” Who was an extraordinary – whom I never knew but was a very extraordinary person in the Civil Rights movement. I mean, there are – if I sat and thought about it, there were lots of – I’m trying to think if there’s a Jewish person except for my mother. Can you turn that off for a second? I need to get a drink of water.

JR: Sure.

VG: Now I’m stuck there. I think I’m just going to have to leave it at my mother.

JR: Okay, well, that’s fine.

VG: As my Jewish role model. [laughter]

JR: There are a million other things I'd love to ask you about, but is there anything we haven't covered that you'd like to tell me about?

VG: Ver veyst, as they say in Yiddish, who knows? I can't think of anything right now.

JR: OKay.

VG: Often in interviews, this is where you get your most interesting information, this last question, but not today.

JR: Well, I also find that as soon as I turn off the tape recorder, people all of a sudden –

VG: Yeah, right, right, right.

JR: – just start saying all this stuff, I'm like, "Hold on, wait a second!" Okay, great.

[END OF INTERVIEW]