AN ORAL HISTORY

with

KARIN KUNSTLER-GOLDMAN

This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi, North Mississippi Oral History and Archives Program. The interview is with Karin Kunstler-Goldman and is taking place on September 19, 2003 in Holly Springs, MS. The interviewer is Gloria Clark.

Clark: It's September 19, 2003. I'm in Holly Springs with Karin Kunstler-Goldman, and she's going to talk to us about herself. And the first couple of things I want to know is always on the tape: your name, your address, your phone number, and your date of birth. That would help to start us off, and then tell us a little bit about your, where you grew up, and how you grew up, and some of your early racially-conscious experiences.

Kunstler-Goldman: My name is Karin Kunstler-Goldman, K-U-N-S-T-L-E-R. My address is (the address of the interviewee has not been included in this transcript in order to protect her privacy). And I was actually born in the South! I was born in Tennessee because my father was stationed in the service, and my mother was with him. And when I was ten months old, he was sent to the Pacific, and then we went to New York, which is where they both had lived.

I lived there in Manhattan with my grandparents until after my father came home. I think we continued to live with my grandparents for a while. Then we moved to Queens, and then we moved to Port Chester, New York, where basically I grew up. And Port Chester is a—it was at the time a working-class town, a lot of factories (inaudible) bolt company, Arnold Bread, a big lifesaver company, manufacturers there, and there were a lot of working-class people. In my high school there were only between 20 and 25 percent of us who went on to college. And a lot of the people were pretty conservative. And I was raised by, as you know, very liberal parents, who exposed me to everything and everyone. And because even early on in the [19]50s my father and mother were active in civil rights issues, we were pegged as radicals, as Communists, et cetera.

Clark: How did that affect you?

Kunstler-Goldman: Well, I'll tell you a few things. We lived in a housing development, and our yard backed on the yard of another family that had two girls with whom my sister Jane and I played. And when my sister Jane was five—so I was ten—we had a little girl from the Fresh Air Fund come spend a couple weeks with us. I remember she was adorable. Her name was Edith, and she was black. And she just did everything that we did, except we were no longer permitted to play with those kids. And it's interesting that the father of that family was on the town council. So

here he was, and I even remember thinking at the age of ten, you know, "He's on the town council, of all the people in this town, and he's made it pretty clear that he doesn't even want to associate with some of these people in the town." And my father was livid, and I think he wrote a letter to the editor of the local paper, which wasn't published, but there was really nothing we could—we weren't going to burn the house down or anything, so there was nothing we could do. That ended the relationship totally, and we lived back-to-back for many years after that.

There are a lot of memories I have. But another memory that I have is that once were, I guess, in high school, but maybe in junior high. The girls were forced to take cooking and sewing, and the boys got shop. Well, I loved to make things and build things, and I was really pissed that I had to take cooking and sewing. And the teacher, who was a horrible teacher, just really annoyed me, and I guess I annoyed her. And one day I was chewing gum, and she told me to spit it out, and I'm sure she was correct in that I made a face at her. And she said, "Karin, do you make faces at all teachers who aren't Jewish?" And I said, "No, just at you, Miss Webster." So there's racism, anti-Semitism.

I remember also in junior high there was a dance, and Mr. Blankato(?) the science teacher asked me if I had a date. I told him that I did, and he asked me if my date was, and he used the N-word, which my mother forbid me to use, and I still can't use it. So there were a lot of things like that, but my parents were very strong people, and we had a very rich environment full of books, full of music, full of other people. And rather than feeling that I was wrong, I had, I knew that the other people were wrong. So it wasn't that I felt bad, that I had done something bad or felt ostracized. And I did have my little circle of friends, so I actually had a basically very pleasant upbringing in Port Chester.

Just to give you another sense of what it was like, I was reading a book in sophomore year. My sophomore year homeroom teacher was the president of the local John Birch Society. So that sort of sets the scene. And I'm sitting in homeroom one day, reading this book, *Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?* And on the cover is, this was Jayne Mansfield, who was in the movie. And there was a picture of her with a lot of cleavage. So then she walks up to me, and she grabbed the book out of my hand, and she said, "I'm sending this to the principal, and then I'm sending you to the principal." So I went to the principal. I mean, I knew that I was not in trouble. I was in trouble in school, but I wasn't in trouble at home. So the principal said, "I want you to come here tomorrow morning at eight o'clock and bring your parents with you." So the next morning at eight o'clock I arrived there with my father, and the principal starts to open his mouth. And my father cuts him off and says, "I understand you took a book away from my daughter. I want you to give it back to her right now. It's not my first choice of a book for her to read. I'd prefer that she read the great books, but if that's what she picked, she can read it." And the principal, he should have known because by then my father had a reputation in the community. But the principal had this shocked look on his face, gave me back the book, and off I went back to my homeroom, and that was the end of it. So that kind of—

Clark: Isn't it nice to have supportive parents like that?

Kunstler-Goldman: You know, Andi said to me today that she always remembered when she met my parents how unusual it was to have parents who, against whom you didn't have to rebel, and who you really like as people.

Clark: And you adopted their position and their views, and were quite compatible with them.

Kunstler-Goldman: Yeah. I guess one of the things I never had to do, really, was rebel. I mean, there was very little that wasn't talked out or worked out. I don't think I realized how different they were until I was much older.

Clark: In the community of Port Chester, was it a predominantly white community?

Kunstler-Goldman: It was predominantly white, though there was a black section, and it was—there were a lot of—I guess the largest group probably was Italian.

Clark: That's white, isn't it?

Kunstler-Goldman: Yeah. But I mean in terms of background.

Clark: I'm just kidding.

Kunstler-Goldman: Olive skin like mine. There were terms for Jews, and I did, you know, hear anti-Semitic remarks. There was small percentage that was Jewish. We didn't live in a—I don't know if there was a Jewish neighborhood, but it certainly wasn't ours. I remember when the first black child came into my elementary school. My elementary school, we were in a new community that had no local schools, so we were, I guess our community was divided in half, and half was bussed to one elementary school and half to the other. And the one I went to was, when I started, all white. And, but I remember the first black kids came in. There was about, I think there were some kids in my class who had never even spoken to a black person, and I think he was treated poorly by some of the kids. And these were little kids. These were kids who shouldn't have known about racism. And I remember my parents being concerned about that, and reaching out to them. But then the high school, the junior high and high school were fairly well representative in terms of blacks. There weren't any, yet, Hispanics. But now Port Chester has a very large Hispanic and other immigrant population.

Clark: Yes, a lot of places have changed, I think. The city I grew up in was predominantly white, as well. It's not that anymore. So I think there was a big sea change, actually, after we grew up. Where did you go to college?

Kunstler-Goldman: I went to Connecticut College in New London, Connecticut, which was not the best choice for me. It was my first choice. I don't know why. It was all women, not politically active. People left on the weekends, so because they left on the weekends, there were no activities, organizations that would last from between Friday afternoon and Monday morning. And I was pretty unhappy there, so I decided that I—and I heard my father talk about Tougaloo because he had been down there. And I'd also heard him talk a lot about Mississippi, and though I didn't think he was lying, I didn't quite believe him. I didn't really believe that there could be a water fountain that said "white only" or "colored." I didn't believe that people walking down, people walking outside would have to move aside when they saw a white person.

Clark: And these are things your father told you.

Kunstler-Goldman: Yeah. So I decided I would like to see that for myself. And when he told me about Tougaloo, I thought maybe I should go there for a while. So this was before there were any exchanges between southern colleges and northern colleges. So Connecticut College made me withdraw, drop out. And I went off to Tougaloo for my first semester in my sophomore year. And at the time my father had been, he had already been working on cases in Mississippi. And he knew a lawyer named Jack Young, this black lawyer in Jackson, and he asked Jack to pick me up at the airport, which Jack agreed to do. And I don't think either one of us was sensitive to what was being asked of Jack. But he did pick me up, and he did drive me to Tougaloo, where I was warmly welcomed and had a wonderful semester; had some horrible experiences.

Clark: Were you the only white?

Kunstler-Goldman: No. There were three or four. But it was the next year or the year after was when Tougaloo started having regular exchange programs with Oberlin and some other colleges. But the three or four were just people like me who wanted to come.

Clark: What year was this?

Kunstler-Goldman: This was fall of [19]62, '62/'63. And Tougaloo is about eight or nine miles outside of Jackson, and I think it was on Saturdays they had a bus that would take students in to go shopping in Jackson, and then pick us up and take us back. So one Saturday I went in on the bus, and I was with a black male student and another white student. And we wanted to go to the *Mississippi Free Press* office because we were doing some work with them. And we got off; we made a mistake, and we started walking in a residential neighborhood. And within minutes we were surrounded by seven or eight police cars. And I think this was my initiation. They questioned us. This guy was named McArthur Cotton; they questioned Mac. They looked at his driver's license, and they—guilt by association. They said that he had gotten his driver's license in the town that James Meredith was from. And so that

made him evil, I guess, and they started beating him up, and then they threw him in a police car and took him away. Carol, the other girl, was from Pennsylvania; I'm from New York. We didn't know where the hell we were. We finally, after asking a lot of people, we made our way to the *Free Press* office, and the people there started calling all around. And I think it was nighttime by the time they found the police station they had taken him to.

Clark: The *Free Press* office?

Kunstler-Goldman: The people at the *Mississippi Free Press* office made all the calls because they knew who to call. We didn't. We'd only been there—

Clark: How long had you been there?

Kunstler-Goldman: I think I had been there two weeks. I didn't know anybody or anything. And finally, he was let go. He was not charged with anything. I don't think there was anything to charge him with. But that was a really scary experience. And I learned, then—I think that was my, you know, trial by fire. The campus was an oasis. I mean, it was just amazing. I think everybody felt comfortable. And there was a professor there, a little, roly-poly German refugee named Ernst Borinski. And he ran the Sociology Department. And he was always doing things to get under the skin of white society. And he said to me, "They don't know what to do with me. I have this heavy accent. I'm this little, bald guy." I don't think he was taller than five [feet], four [inches], you know, almost as wide as he was high. And so he would have, make arrangements with people from Millsaps College to come over. And he did things like he, October 24, I think it is, U.N. [United Nations] Day, he said he wanted to be the only place in Mississippi where U.N. Day was celebrated. And he'd do all these wild things and get speakers in. And he made the campus alive and exposed the students to so much more than they otherwise would have been exposed to. And it was just a wonderful experience for me.

And I spent a semester there, and then I went back to Connecticut College. I don't know why. I should have just transferred. But I realized that I needed to be politically active, and I was not going survive there if I wasn't. So I'd been writing columns back for the Connecticut College newspaper, and they actually published them, my experiences in Mississippi. And so I went to speak to the dean, and I said, "There's so much going on there. I didn't know anything about it before I went, and I think the students at this school should know about it." And I asked whether we could have an intercollegiate civil rights conference. And there hadn't been one yet. And I was given permission to run it. And so I spent, I guess, the next year preparing for it. Of course I had access to a lot of people through my father. We had Bayard Rustin and Andy Young and then Peter Countryman from the northern student movement, and of course my father, and we had student panels. And it was really, it was a whole weekend, and it was terrific for me. It gave me something to do that I felt was important. And I got a lot of support from the college, which was interesting to me. So that kept me active.

And then came the Mississippi Summer, and a lot of the people whom I'd met through the conference were going, and I decided I was going to go. And as I said this morning, I said, "I want to go," and my parents said, "OK." You know, whereas many of my friends who ultimately did go really had to struggle to get permission. And I went to Oxford, and my father for some reason was doing something either in Oxford or nearby, so he came down during the orientation.

Clark: That's pretty unusual.

Kunstler-Goldman: He was there, and I guess he spoke to everybody. I think he came for twenty-four hours.

Clark: Did he speak to the group in training?

Kunstler-Goldman: Yeah. It wasn't a scheduled thing, but he was, he had some business on a Monday morning, so he came Saturday night and left Sunday night, something like that.

Clark: Maybe for people reading and listening to this we should talk a little bit about your father and his name, and who he was, and what he was doing, and how he came to be there.

Kunstler-Goldman: My father—I hate to say "was" because he still is to me—William Kunstler, who for most of his career as a lawyer was a civil rights and civil liberties lawyer. He started out, actually he started out way before the civil rights movement. My parents were active in the local NAACP, and they did a lot of work in Port Chester on housing. My mother acted as a shill in trying to find apartments. They would send a black couple; they would be told there's no apartments. Then my mother and a white male would go, and they would say, "Oh, yes! We have an apartment. Would you like to see it?" She did a lot of that. They just did a lot of stuff locally. And he got more and more involved in the issues. I think he was a self-motivated person. He certainly wasn't brought up in a very liberal household. One thing, my grandparents had a black maid, and she had a big apartment that had a maid's room and a maid's toilet. And I will never forget that she always told my cousins and me that we shouldn't use that particular bathroom because that was the maid's bathroom. And I think she thought that our bottoms would turn black if we used that toilet. But of course, as little kids, when she said we couldn't use that toilet, that was the only toilet we wanted to use. So we went to the maid's toilet, and lo and behold! Our bottoms didn't turn black! So that was the kind of household that my father was brought up in. Though I must say that my grandparents were incredibly proud of my father, proud of his work, loved reading every article about him in the newspaper. They died in [19]66 and '67, so that he had already done a lot of political work. And also, though my grandmother was kind of racist in the abstract, if I came home with one of my black friends, she would end up loving that person; everything was fine. So he developed his interest in civil rights long before the civil rights

movement. But I think what really got him into it was the freedom rides in 1960. He got called by someone in the ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union]—I'm not sure who—to go down to one of the southern states. He went all over in that period. I can't remember where he started. But that was the beginning.

Then he was involved in cases here in Mississippi. He represented Dory Ladner when there was a case involving integration of a swimming pool. He was all over the South, and also to a large extent was involved in the appellate practice. So he became known as a civil rights lawyer. He did some work for Martin Luther King. Then he did less and less traditional commercial law that he had done with his brother, and more and more civil rights law. And some of the cases brought him to Jackson and Tougaloo, and that's how I found out about Tougaloo. And that's what led me to come down again in the Freedom Summer.

Clark: You know I did meet your father in Holly Springs, but it was, I think, after you left; it was in the fall.

Kunstler-Goldman: He was never in Holly Springs when I was in Holly Springs. But he was in Oxford, Ohio, for an unscheduled visit, and he spoke to all of us. But also I think it must have been the Sunday-Monday scenario because we were—I think it was a weekend, and we were swimming in the pool there. And he actually used to—he was on the swim team at Yale and was a very good swimmer, but not quite as good a diver. And he dove, and he hit his head on the side of the pool, and so he spent a good part of that day in the local hospital, getting sewn up. But he was fine. So then I left—

Clark: How did the training in Oxford impact you?

Kunstler-Goldman: I think I was both: it scared me a little, but I was really excited. What impacted me most—and I think the training was important, and I'm sure I remembered what I was told, but what I really remember is the camaraderie, the closeness, the feeling that we were working together, that we had a common goal. And I remember the—someone mentioned—I guess we saw it in the movie the other day, this discussion of the incident when some of the black workers walked out because there was laughing by the white, some of the northern white kids, something that really was not funny to the black kids. And I remember working out those issues, very serious, intense discussions. And I remember the feeling of doubt on the part of some of the SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] people as to whether, you know, these northern white students could live up to the task. So there was some tension. But there were also really emotional times of closeness, especially there was one of singing and with that freedom singing to me, anyway, brings people together, and it's very moving.

Clark: It's a great release, too.

Kunstler-Goldman: Very energizing and yeah. So I have good memories of the training. And then I remember I was assigned to Holly Springs, and I said, "Oh, but I really wanted to be in Jackson," because I knew Jackson. They said, "No. You're assigned to Holly Springs." So off I went, and you know in retrospect, I think it was much better being in a small community and being part of a smaller group. And I came here with—you know, a lot of people were saying at this reunion that Andi Barker and I are twins, but we did room together in the dorms, and we became good friends, and we did a lot of the work that we did together. And then her parents were, I think, among the, they were the only very few who asked her to come home, which she did. And as an aside, I saw her maybe two or three times, but never after 1968 or '69 until yesterday in the airport in Memphis. And it's sort of as if we've never been apart, which gives you some indication about the kinds of relationships that we had. And I felt that with a lot of people here. I've only been here a little over twenty-four hours, and it's like, you know, there was no time in between.

Clark: We are at the Holly Springs celebration of civil rights. And it's a reunion weekend, and that's what Karin is referring to. So when you got to Holly Springs, did you know what you were going to do?

Kunstler-Goldman: Yeah. Well, I knew that I was going to do voter registration. I didn't know exactly what I was going to do. I had never done voter registration before. I didn't know exactly what was entailed. And I'm pretty sure I didn't know, but I knew a little bit what kind of risks people were taking to do this because of my experience in Tougaloo. But I don't think I knew the extent of it.

Clark: How did you get from Oxford, Ohio, to Holly Springs?

Kunstler-Goldman: There were buses that were chartered. So we all came down filling a bus. And they let off I don't know how many of us—

Clark: You let off first, probably.

Kunstler-Goldman: Holly Springs, and then they went on to the next stop. And we were very warmly greeted by the people who were here at Rust. And I think what happened was—you know I'm going to be sixty in three weeks, so my mind isn't what it used to be, but—

Clark: Whose is?

Kunstler-Goldman: The women stayed in the dorm at Rust, and the guys stayed at the Freedom House on Rust Avenue. So we settled into the dormitory, but spent our days at the Freedom House. And I guess Andi and I started doing some of the food stuff, buying the food, getting stuff ready. There was talk earlier today about peanut butter sandwiches. I think we ate a hell of a lot of peanut butter sandwiches. And then, I remember spending a lot of evenings sitting around the living room office, just talking about how we were going to go about doing what we planned to do. How we

were going to pair up experienced people with inexperienced, have racially mixed groups.

And we did role playing, and at some point we started going out into communities. And the first thing we would do would be to go to a local church or other center and talk to people. We would invite them to come to have a general discussion of voting rights and what they mean and the procedure for registering to vote. And then we would make arrangements to visit them and talk individually with the families.

Clark: How did they respond to you?

Kunstler-Goldman: Well, I remember there were always some people who were, you know, leaders and who were very enthusiastic, and who seemed not to be worried. But a lot of people expressed fear. And a lot of people said that they would do it, but they heard that someone else had registered, and there were repercussions. And some, it was a matter of—I don't think talking to a white kid from New York was very convincing, even though we tried to be. But sometimes it would take several discussions with them and I felt that high pressure tactics would not be a good idea. And I think that was the feeling of everybody. So we talked to the people and then set a time to go register. And some of the people who had committed to it would be there, and some wouldn't. And I remember it was a very slow, painful process because we'd go to the—I guess the registration clerk was in the courthouse; I think.

Clark: Yes.

Kunstler-Goldman: Yeah.

Clark: It was. You would have known. Did you participate in organizing people for the freedom days when groups of people went to the courthouse together?

Kunstler-Goldman: Yeah. Sometimes there would be a very small group, and it would—they would always make us wait a long time, and it was very hot. And then they would give people a hard time. And then they would tell them whatever identification they had brought, it wasn't the right identification.

Clark: You would actually go into the courthouse with people?

Kunstler-Goldman: I did a few times, though most of the times I didn't.

Clark: Right.

Kunstler-Goldman: And I remember being—again, I said this morning, and I'll tell that story in a minute. I remember people just looking at me and with looks that, as the old saying goes, "If looks could kill." And I think most of the time whoever was with the person was turned away. But I do remember going inside, and I can't

remember why, maybe one or two times; was the exception. But I do remember going in. And then I remember, anytime I was in the main square, if any of the people who were clerks or whatever in the courthouse saw me, they would look at me, or if they were with someone else, they would say "Oh, there's that"—

Clark: What did they call you?

Kunstler-Goldman: Well, they called me "that northern Jew." I don't know how they knew that because I was also raised with no religion, but I heard it. I am Jewish. But I always felt self-conscious and nervous and scared when I went into the town square in Holly Springs. And even yesterday when I met up with Andi Barker and Ivanhoe Donaldson when we went to have lunch, I had that same feeling in the pit of my stomach, like I was scared. I was scared that something was going to happen.

Clark: What restaurant did you go to?

Kunstler-Goldman: We went to the City Café.

Clark: Oh! You should be scared in there!

Kunstler-Goldman: Why?

Clark: That's not a place I'd recommend.

Kunstler-Goldman: We were fine. And Frank Smith was in there later, and a whole bunch of people. But the reason I felt scared down there was because we were supported by contributions from various people. I don't remember the details, but often our money would come by Western Union wire. And I was the one in charge of going to get the money. And I guess because the office was in the back of a white-owned, sort of white-only store, they decided that it would be good to have a white woman—well, back then I was a white girl—go pick up the money. And this store was a housewares store where they sold china and silverware and tablecloths and glasses and all of that stuff. And they maintained a bride registry so that if a woman was getting married she would go in there and select what she wanted and give people an opportunity to send her a plate or a fork or whatever. And for each bride they had a table set up with the silverware and the plates that she had picked and the glasses and all.

And I remember, my memory is that it was full of these tables. There probably were maybe eight or ten. And they were all in the front of the store. And their stock was sort of the back half of the store, and I'd have to walk through the whole store to this little, tiny office of Western Union in the back. And when the customers were there, there were all these lovely, young, southern belles picking out their silverware pattern, and their mothers, and then all the clerks who were southern, white women. And they would look at me with daggers coming out of their eyes. And I just—I'd be

wearing my jeans and my jean jacket and my SNCC button, and they of course were all dolled up in, you know, pink and lime green and whatever, frilly things.

And I'd get the money, and then I'd have to walk the whole length of the store again, with the same looks. And then I also realized—nothing ever happened—I realized that, "These people know that I have money in my pocket, and they know how much I have." I was always a little scared that someone was going to mug me. But it never happened.

Clark: I guess I could add my 2003 Western Union story of today, just so anybody reading or listening to this will see the contrast between then and now. Now, the Western Union store is kind of almost, it's in a little store with some other things. I walked into it. It's in like a strip mall, in a sense. I walked into it, and there's an African-American male behind one counter selling little electronic goods, and there's an African-American woman behind the glass in the Western Union office. And that's what it's like today, Karin.

Kunstler-Goldman: Where was she when I needed her?

Clark: Though without you, she couldn't be there.

Kunstler-Goldman: So I, because of that, or because of the people I had encountered in the clerk's office, the county clerk, I was always a little nervous walking around the town. I remember a few incidents when we had meetings out in the countryside in churches or various communities. And one of them that always—only the people who were involved with them would know about them, but sometimes either we were followed or somehow the information got out. And I remember one night we were at a meeting at a church, and we left, and I think Ivanhoe was driving, and there were a couple of other people, and there were three or four cars just waiting for us, and they followed us. They tried to force us off the road. We must have been going a hundred and some miles an hour. And we finally got back into Holly Springs. But that was really terrifying.

Clark: Did you ever get arrested while you were here?

Kunstler-Goldman: I didn't get formally arrested. I mean there were no charges brought. But I was picked up a couple of times here. I was arrested in, when I was at Tougaloo for, I guess for riding the bus with black people from Tougaloo College, for nothing. But I was never convicted of anything. I think it disappointed my father, but when my—I have a sister who's five years younger than I am. She's also the child of my mother and father, and then my father, after my parents were divorced, they remarried. He remarried and had two other children who were—now I'm sixty; my other sister is fifty-five, and then we have twenty-six- and twenty-seven-year-old younger sisters. And when the youngest was arrested my father thought it was one of the happiest days of his life because he could now say that all four of his daughters had been arrested because my sister Jane and my sister Sarah had already been

arrested, and my sister Emily who's the youngest was arrested in New York on a demonstration.

The one distinct memory I have about being questioned by several police officers, I'm pretty sure this was in Jackson and not in Holly Springs, but they had me in a room. I don't know how big, a small room, like six-by-eight, little office with a desk and a few chairs. And there were three or four of them. And all they wanted me to talk about, which I declined to do, was the size of black men's genitals. And they said, "Come on. You know. You can tell us." And I just refused to answer any of their questions. And they got pretty angry, and I got pretty scared, but finally I guess they just gave up and let me leave. And that was one of the more upsetting and scary experiences.

Clark: How long did you stay in Holly Springs?

Kunstler-Goldman: Stayed in Holly Springs, I think we got here maybe the last week of June. The guys, Mickey Schwerner, James Chaney, and Andrew Goodman disappeared the twenty-something.

Clark: Twenty-first of June. While you were in Oxford.

Kunstler-Goldman: And I think we left maybe two or three days later.

Clark: Right.

Kunstler-Goldman: So the last week of June. And I believe we went home the last week of August. Maybe a little bit later.

Clark: Did you do any other kind of work with the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party or teach in freedom schools at all?

Kunstler-Goldman: I didn't teach in the freedom schools. I did go to the convention and demonstrate at the convention. And then the summer of [19]65 I worked in Jackson for about maybe a month with the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, doing clerical work. I only had a month. I had just graduated from college and then was getting married in September, so I wanted to, I wanted to work here, but I really didn't have lots of time, so I came for a short time.

Clark: Did you come back to Holly Springs at that time at all?

Kunstler-Goldman: No. I went to Jackson.

Clark: Just Jackson.

Kunstler-Goldman: Well, I had asked, "Where could I—is there any place I could make a contribution in just a month?" "Yeah, come to the office."

Clark: Because the Holly Springs project was still going.

Kunstler-Goldman: Yeah.

Clark: Yeah. What kinds of things was the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party doing in 1965?

Kunstler-Goldman: There were—what I did was—I mean, I did pure clerical stuff. They were doing voter registration. They were doing public education. I did a lot of envelope stuffing and stuff like that. They were also going out to community groups to meetings.

Clark: Were there a lot of people?

Kunstler-Goldman: A lot of northern people working?

Clark: No. Were there just a lot of people still in the MFDP active?

Kunstler-Goldman: No, not really. There was, I guess maybe it wasn't exactly—(end of tape one, side one; beginning of tape one, side two)—sort of a continuation of voter registration. But it was in the offices that they had. So I did that.

Clark: Karin Kunstler Goldman.

Kunstler-Goldman: I had some thought in my mind before we changed the tape over.

Clark: Yeah. You were in Jackson in 1965.

Kunstler-Goldman: Oh, and then I was going to say that the next time I came to Mississippi after that [19]65 month was this year in May. I was invited to speak at a conference for journalists who cover not-for-profit corporations. And it was held at the journalism school at Ole Miss. And as I said earlier, when I was at Tougaloo, I was there at the exact moment that James Meredith was entering Ole Miss, and I had—this is many years later, I still had the memories of learning about the National Guard and the shootings and actually a killing of a French reporter. I had this, again, a similar experience to yesterday. I had this feeling of being a little scared to go on the campus. You know, "What's going to happen to me?" Even though intellectually I knew that it's a different time. So I went to the conference. The head of the journalism school is an African-American who went to Ole Miss; he graduated, I think, in [19]68 or '69. Many of the faculty of the journalism school are African-American. Many of the students are, and they have monuments to various events in the civil rights movement. And you know I felt completely safe, but it was a little bit of an adjustment.

But what I noticed about Ole Miss was that, I looked through the yearbook and I saw that there weren't very many black faces. I looked through several yearbooks that were in some kind of reception area, and I thought, "Well, you know, maybe not that much has changed. There are hardly any blacks in this school." But today I was talking with Ivanhoe and Cleve Sellers about my reaction. And their take was that there are more African-Americans there than one would think by looking at the yearbook. But they think that many of the African-American students opt out of being included in the yearbook, which is—

Clark: Oh, not that they don't graduate.

Kunstler-Goldman: Right. That they just—

Clark: But they opt out of being in the yearbook.

Kunstler-Goldman: They just don't want to be in the yearbook. I haven't done any research on that, but as a person who always thought yearbooks were silly and only express the viewpoint of the ten people who do them, maybe it's not such a bad idea to opt out. But it was a very good experience being in Mississippi last May, and that's why I was really so excited about coming back again now because I knew that if that was a good experience, and I didn't even know any of the people, what was this going to be like?

So after I left, after I left Jackson in 1965, I got married, and I spent the '65-'66 school year in law school. And my husband and I were just married and couldn't save any money. I was not so happy being in school again, so we decided—and we had applied to the Peace Corps before I started the academic year. We decided to reactivate our Peace Corps applications and do that for two years. After my first year at law school we were accepted into the Peace Corps to Honduras. And we called up and said we really want to go into the Peace Corps, but we had said in our application that we really wanted to go to Africa. And a couple of hours later they called back and they said in Africa you've got two choices: Nigeria in a farming program or Senegal in a public health program. And Neal made the decision on the spot. He said he grew up where there were sidewalks; he didn't know anything about farming. And public health/social welfare would be better for us, and also Senegal is a French-speaking country, and he thought it would be a good opportunity for us to speak French. So that's what we did.

We went into the Peace Corps. We were in Senegal for two years. I think my experience in Mississippi, working with people who really did not have all of the luxuries that I have, did not have the opportunities, who clearly were the subject of discrimination, I think that experience helped me in Senegal, where there were many similarities with people who had been—who only recently had gotten independence from the French, whose lives were really controlled by the French. When we were there, girls, young girls were just beginning to go to school. The adult women had not

been educated because, probably because of tradition, but also because the French didn't offer that to them.

There's a French schoolbook that's used; I don't know if it's still used, but it was used in France, a history book, the history of France. And of course this is a French colony; they had all the French books, and we were particularly shocked by the book that these young African kids were using, the first sentence of which is, "Nos ancetres les Gaulois" ("Our ancestors the Gauls"), and here were these little black children being, having these totally inappropriate books. And we talked; we talked a lot to teachers, even though that wasn't part of our job, to see what they were doing to counter the misinformation in the book. And some of them were into that, and some weren't. But we went back some years later, and they no longer used that book, but for years and years and years they were, much as our books here in Mississippi and in the North ignored the African-American history and the African-American contribution to our culture; the same thing was being done to the Senegalese children.

But our experience in Senegal was extraordinary. It was a formative experience for us. Not just personally in terms of our relationship; I mean, we shared such an amazing experience. And also in terms of broadening us, exposing us to a lot of people obviously we'd never encounter, to a different way of life, to Islam, which in today's world with September 11 I realize that what I learned about Islam from people I lived with in Senegal had nothing in it about creating war in the name of Allah. And so it makes me even more upset that all Muslims are being painted with the same brush of terror and that the rights that we fought for in the civil rights movement are being taken away by our federal government. They're just rounding up dark-skinned people, who look like they might be Arabs, just the way black people were rounded up just because they were black.

So I mean, the theme doesn't change. It makes me see how little progress we're making. We've made a lot of progress, but there's still so much more to do in this country. So I finished the Peace Corps, decided not to go back to law school, but got a master's to teach. I taught history in high school for four years. Along the way I had my children, who are the biggest joy of my life: twins who are now thirty-two.

Clark: And so are my twins.

Kunstler-Goldman: Thirty-two?

Clark: My twins are thirty-two.

Kunstler-Goldman: Maybe there's something in the water here in Holly Springs.

Clark: Well, they weren't conceived here.

Kunstler-Goldman: No, but it could last.

Clark: That's interesting.

Kunstler-Goldman: And my son got married in May; my daughter's getting married next June. Anyway, so I had them. And then I decided when they were two I should really finish this law school business, which I did. And for six years I worked in a federal legal services program representing most, for the most part, battered women in their own cases, and then worked on a class action lawsuit against the courts, the family courts, and the police for their failure to respond properly to claims of battered women. And after six years in the legal services program, I went on to the attorney general's office, which is where I've been ever since. And I work in the charities fraud division, investigating and suing fraudulent charities, working on public education to help people understand what they should look for before making a contribution to charity, drafting legislation to regulate charities. We worked a lot on the September 11 charities, organizing them, getting them to cooperate so that all the needs are met rather than some of the needs being met and duplicated, and other people not getting the assistance that they need. So I've done that for, done the charities regulation since 1982, and in addition, my extra-curricular activity, my husband and I are involved in a program run by returned Peace Corps volunteers, in which we send inner-city New York City kids out to Navajo schools. Navajos, because they live not in villages but spread apart, have boarding schools. So our New York City kids go out for a week, and they spend a week with the Navajo kids, just experiencing what they experience. And then we arrange for them to talk to a code talker and a medicine man, to get them exposed to some of the culture of the people who are hosting them. And then we bring Native American kids to New York City and give them an experience of the big city; take them to museums. Each morning they spend a few hours in a school where the school kids give presentations to them. We focus on schools that provide training, vocational training. We take them to the automotive high school, to the music high school, to the culinary high school. And then we also take them to schools in Chinatown, where they see how another culture is sort of integrated into American culture while also maintaining some of its distinctive activities, distinctive qualities. In the classroom some of the—their classes in Chinese dance and other Chinese traditions—and I think my interest in working in that kind of program can be traced back to Mississippi and to the Peace Corps because they're both experiences that allowed me to get exposure to another culture and to another way of life, and other experiences. I mean, there was some of that in both the Peace Corps and Mississippi, and giving that kind of experience, even though it's just a short one-week experience, to New York City kids and to Navajo kids, I think gives them a sense of, you know, that there are other people out there who are different from themselves, that they can learn from them, that they—I especially see that the New York City kids, who typically have much more in the way of material things, come away realizing that the Navajo kids have a very rich culture, rich life, close families, traditions that are really sacred and passed down from generation to generation. Even though they don't have the material stuff that the New York City kids think is so important. And I think that's something that you get from living with other people and learning about what in their lives is—makes it—what the quality, the good quality

things that people have, and what they see as the best aspects of their lives, and that they might not be the same thing that we value, but are just as important nevertheless.

So I think that's sort of been a theme throughout my life, that sharing, helping, and just expanding my own experience and group of people that I communicate with, that I feel comfortable with, and hoping that they feel comfortable with me and communicate with me. So I think that's sort of a summary of both my Mississippi experience, my life experience in general, and what brings me back here today to Holly Springs. And I think coming here forty years later and seeing people I haven't seen for so many years and giving them a hug and having the years in between just sort of melt away with that hug, and here we are; we've got gray hair. We're older; some of us are grandparents. Some of us have finished our working career and already are retired. But we're still the same people we were, and we still have that same connection. And when you go through something as significant as this, such a life-changing experience as this, it almost doesn't matter that we haven't seen each other since 1964 or '65. We're picking up where we left off, and it's just wonderful. And one thing I do have to say on this tape is that without Gloria and Larry, we wouldn't be there. And this is just a fantastic accomplishment, and I thank you.

Clark: OK. I'm glad you're here. Thanks very much, Karin.

(end of interview)

Interview of Karin Kunstler Goldman in Holly Springs, 9/19/2003
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