

Transcript: MINNIE KENNEDY

Interviewer: BETSY NEWMAN

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Location: Minnie Kennedy's Home, Georgetown, South Carolina

Length: 1 Hour, 55 Minutes

Betsy Newman: Do you go by Minnie Kennedy? Like when we put your name underneath, is that how you would like it to be?

MK: What would you do generally?

BN: I would always ask somebody how they would like it to be.

MK: Well then that's- you never got married?! I say my name is Minnie Kennedy PERIOD. (Laughs)

BN: I want you to tell me a lot about your life, but I'd like you to start with your earliest memories at Hobcaw. Can you describe what life was like?

MK: I know a piece of my story that was told and people recognized it when I was coming out of the womb. Black people could not be born in hospitals. I'm 93 years old, so that was quite a while ago. So you had to have midwife to help the mother birth the baby at home. So my mother tells me the story: I popped out of her womb, and got a hold of the midwife's apron and wouldn't let go. Now a baby's fingers? She couldn't pry my fingers apart, the midwife couldn't, so my mother called my father in the room. "William come here, I think I got a witch!" So when she told me the story, I said, "Mom you didn't have a witch, you had a rebel. I was telling you something, but you didn't know what I was saying. I was telling you 'put me back where I was. I don't want to be out here. It's too dangerous out here.'" And

that's how I grew up: The rebel of the family, the rebel of the community. When you read that book that somebody wrote about me, you'll see a chapter called "You Da Smart One," and you know the Gullah language, because that's how everyone used English. Because the Africans had to put what they knew all put together and make a new language so they could understand each other, so it got the name Gullah. So everybody spoke that, and parents did, especially my mother and father sometimes. I didn't understand them. But anyway when I was old enough my mother told me the story of my birth, so I told her what I thought I said when I was popping out of her womb. So she said, "You're still popping out! You say things that nobody else would say. You do things that...", because I was sort of like the...I don't know, the judge of people...they made you read the Bible.

BN: Tell me more about your parents. Now where did they grow up?

MK: They were children of slaves. That great big plantation I was telling you about - they were born before Baruch bought a piece of it.

BN: Back up, now that we're recording, and tell me about that big plantation.

MK: Let me tell you this way, and you stop me and ask questions, feel free. There was this big plantation. The whole thing, Baruch only bought a piece of it, but when my father and mother were born, they were born to slaves because the family who owned the whole thing were slave-owners. So, my mother was twelve years old and my dad was fourteen years old when my dad made my mother pregnant, and the whole black community say you cannot have a baby - and these were slaves - you can't have a baby without being married to each other. So they got married. The next year, my brother was born, in 1909. And I just hear that a couple of years ago, the story about my parent's age, when they got married, because it was written nowhere.

BN: So your parents were the children of slaves?

MK: Yeah, so my grandparents were slaves. Right. I knew my mother's father, but I didn't know my mother's mother. She died before all of this happened. I knew my father's mother, but I didn't know his father, because he was sold to another plantation. They didn't sell families, they sold individuals, so I didn't know him, but my father used to tell us stories about his childhood. We didn't know his father so he told us that his father...and we used to laugh, because this is how he said it. His father would tell him and his brothers and sisters that he came from a place called "Chiiiiirrrraaaa," and we would laugh. "What kind of a place is called Chiraw?" But in the upper part of South Carolina there is a county, Cheraw County. So we just figured that that big slave plantation where they all grew up, his father was sold to slave owners in Cheraw County, and that's why we didn't know him, because he wasn't with his family even when my dad got married to my mother at the age of fourteen and twelve his father didn't know because he was sold, you know, to another plantation.

BN: It's very moving, very touching, to talk with you, to think that our history in this country is so short, that you and I can sit here and you knew someone who was born into slavery. That's pretty amazing.

MK: Yeah, because you know, I'm ninety-three. I was living in the Southern part of America from birth. And the communities and the owners of property and the people who were not sold out of the Southern part of America were still in a kind of relationship that hadn't changed. Because I mean I have white friends, women, we go to the same church. They pick me up to go shopping because I don't have my own car. I'm sitting in the back seat. These two people who moved from some of the northern states, white people, they're in the front seat, and they're talking about

what it is like for them now that they have moved to a different kind of a climate. "You know my girl cleaned, my girl cooked." I said, "Vivian I didn't know you had a daughter". But who were they talking about? The black woman who cleaned the house, my "girl." And the black man who rakes the yard, my yard-boy. So things have just moved a little in terms of communication, but in terms of attitude, I don't think it's moved that much.

BN: And I imagine that when the Baruch's were there, even though they paid your parents- but describe what that was like, not that different from being...

MK: Oh God, it was worse than slave payment or whatever. Slaves never got money for no wages. But Baruch came and he was born in the South, you know, he was born in Camden. So he was part Southern and moved to New York with his family when he was like sixteen years old I think the story goes. But anyhow my father worked, had thirteen children he and my mother. His salary grew and grew and grew. By the time he died, his salary was forty dollars a month. A month! Forty dollars! All these years, and he was getting raises! (Laughs) And my mother was the cook. Baruch and his family and his friends and all, they only wanted a winter resort so they could come and shoot ducks and that sort of thing for sports and all.

When school was out for the summer, I don't even remember at what age because we were young kids, you could hardly hold a rake, or the hoe in your hand, but we would work in Baruch's compound planting flowers and all that stuff. With the rake, rake up all the leaves, and stuff. And the hoe, to dig grounds and plant more flowers and stuff. Fifty-cents a day. From eight in the morning to five in the early evening, with an hour for lunch. As soon as you could hold a rake in your hand, you went to work. So on weekends, on Fridays, the children would come home, with two dollars and fifty cents. Work all week. At the end of the month, my father comes home with forty dollars, his pay for the whole month. I think my mother was spending hers by the day, because she had to buy food for her family. It

wasn't easy. Sometimes for me to acknowledge that they're different kinds of people all over the world, especially in America and particularly in the Southern part of America, it's not our fault. So we have to not think that we are slaves or that somebody owns you, you have to realize God would never create a situation like we went through, whites and blacks. So who did it? Must have been mankind that did it, that changed what God's creation was. I know if I was creating something, I'd create the best. And if it was people, they better get along, because I would send... I don't know if God even created Satan. Satan must have just come out and said, "I'm gonna be boss of these people." (Laughs)

BN: I know that your house was right outside the gate. Can you describe what your house was like?

MK: You know, we were born in the next village, Strawberry Village, but Baruch wanted a family close to him so that anytime day or night he could reach you, doesn't have to walk those miles to come to meet his needs. So they built that house for my family to move in and I guess they couldn't build it otherwise. They had two stories, two bedrooms upstairs, a living room, a dining room, a kitchen, and a bedroom downstairs. In the time that they built the house, they couldn't have done anything. And see, they called the house where we were born, and where all the other people were born, called them "cabins". You don't hear them talk about a slave "house". A slave cabin was what it was.

But the house they built for my parents, it was built during the years when they couldn't build a cabin. And then too, we were the only black family on the whole plantation, all the years that we all grew up, the only black family who had a telephone. And you know why? Because whenever it rang, Baruch needed something, or some member of his family needed something. Because when we were young, learning to read, I would be so proud, my dad sitting with me on the couch in the living room, and I'm stumbling reading, because my dad couldn't read

any better than I could, and I'm stumbling reading, and the phone rings and Baruch needs something. And I, "Daddy, can't you tell him you don't have to come?" "Look, you don't have to worry about this. I have to go. I have to make money to feed the family." Forty dollars a month? (Laughs)

BN: You must have seen so many people come through there. Can you talk about some of the folks who came through there while you were living there?

MK: We saw those people. President Roosevelt came to visit, to shoot ducks and whatever. My dad was close to them, because he took them to where the thing they want to kill, where they are, you know, to the creeks. So my dad was closer to them. We were never close, nobody ever introduced us to any of those people, but we saw them. They would come right through that gate and we would run out, to open the gate, and if it's people coming to visit from other plantations or whatever or to visit with Baruch, we would run and open the gate, and then they would throw us nickels and dimes to open the gates for the cars to go. We didn't have to do it, but it was a way of earning a nickel or a dime or something, you know?

And my mother had made us all make a can, after you open the can and use what it was, they just made a hole in the can because nobody had can openers, not in our community. So you'd take a hammer and nail and you make holes so you can get what's in the can, and if you make a whole row of holes, you can lift, you know? So that's how we used to open cans. And my mother would tell us, "Open it carefully, because I want you to save it for a bank." So we had to put pennies, nickels, dimes to save money. That's how we learned to save money, and I tell you, my mother did a good job, in her crude ways, because all of my sisters and brothers knew you spend some and you save some. And it's from putting holes in that can, and putting your nickels and your dimes and your pennies in there. And everybody had one. A can.

BN: I know that from where you lived, I think, you could see the little playhouse...

MK: The dollhouse for Belle, her sister, and brother...

BN: Tell me about that. How did that feel?

MK: Belle and Renee, the youngest sister, they would tell us stories, because we would see them going in there, and then there was one of the black women, maybe from the plantation, would be the one who clean it. So we all didn't get into that house. They called it the dollhouse. Grown people could live in there. They had a real kitchen, a real dining room, two bedrooms, and they call it the dollhouse. It was a house built for Baruch's children to play in. And Belle was in charge; she was the eldest of the three children, so she was in charge of the dollhouse. And she would make supper, and invite her mom and dad to come and eat, you know? They would be her guests, and they'd all sit around and eat what Belle cooked, I can't imagine what it is she might have cooked, but anyhow...But they had a REAL house, a REAL place. They could sleep in there if they wanted to. And they called it the dollhouse. I don't think Belle and Renee even had a doll, because real people were used, for what other people used a doll for. (Laughs)

BN: What do you mean?

MK: I mean, you know, you practice with a doll, but they didn't have to practice with a doll, they practiced with real people.

BN: I think it says a lot that their dollhouse was in some ways a better house than people in Friendfield Village had.

MK: If you think in terms of what the need was, you need two bedrooms, if you're a black family with six kids, you know...So from that point of view, their dollhouse was better, because they had what people might put in a house that they're building even without needing it for themselves. They need it for what's called a "doll", but they didn't, you know, if they wanted to take a nap and didn't want their mother to put them in the big house to go to bed, they could've said, "Mom I'm gonna take my rest in the dollhouse." Because the beds were real, the kitchen was real, and it was for playing. And what we, who were slaves, and whatever on the plantation, some people didn't even have a kitchen. And we never, until we moved to Georgetown, never even had an indoor bathroom.

So you heard about outhouses, right? That's where you had to go in the middle of the night, you wake up and you got to go to the bathroom, you got to go outside, in a little cabin-like place, to go to the bathroom. And to take a bath, they had this tub, like an aluminum tub, I don't know if you ever saw one, which was the bathtub. And then in my house, the oldest child bathed first. In the same water, you go down by age. So nobody changed the water until everybody's done with taking a bath, and then you throw out the water for the next bath time. And Saturday night was bath time.

BN: Tell me, I know you mentioned it before, but tell me again about how you were asked to dance for the guests.

MK: Oh yeah. They had European friends and people from all over. Some of them were big-time politicians in America, or whatever, come to visit with Baruch's family, and when we saw, because we lived right out the gate, when we saw on Saturday morning, them taking all of the cars out of the garage, and Baruch had like seven or eight cars in a big garage with a cement floor, and when we saw them Saturday mornings taking all the cars out of the garage, and they're hosing the cement floors down, we knew that all the black people, from all those other villages,

had to come up there Saturday night, and dance for Baruch and his friends, and Belle and her friends.

And then they would throw nickels and dimes and pennies, and then laugh at which black kid got the most off the floor, and Belle especially. So anyhow, I, from a little girl, I think I might have been five and six years old at the time, I was sitting next to my mother, and I tell you, I swear it's the truth, I never danced one time, because something was wrong with it. And I never picked up one cent off that floor. And I sat next to my mother, because they didn't ask the grownups to do all that craziness, so Belle saw that I wasn't dancing, so she came down, because they had tiers of benches, like in a baseball field or something, and there were sitting up like that, and they would throw the nickels and dimes and pennies onto the cement floor, at the black people. And we grew up laughing at one particular black young girl, because she did it like God sent her down here to dance and she just did, and with a big smile and everything.

So anyway Belle came down from up where she was sitting and told my mother, "Daisy, make that girl dance!" So my mother, I guess she was afraid something would happen if she didn't make me dance, she said, "Minnie, I guess you better get up there and do something." So I'd get up, wiggle my behind, and sit right down. I never, and I wouldn't lie to you, I never picked up one cent, and I was little, I didn't know anything about good manners or bad manners. I just thought "That's wrong". How could you make a human being scramble, you know, to pick up money off the floor? Why don't you just hand people money in their hands. That's what I probably was thinking. But everybody sorta knew me, you know, that Daisy daughter...And the black people didn't like me any more than the whites because they thought I was making life hard for them. Disobeying all the rules and everything.

BN: So did your mother cook for Belle too?

MK: Yeah, because as children moved to Georgetown to go to school my parents were still working and living on the plantation. And Belle bought pieces of the whole plantation piece by piece. By the time she died, she had the whole plantation. So her father transferred my mother from being his cook, to Belle's cook. By that time, Belle and my mother, because they would borrow my mother like you'd borrow a book or something to cook for them, so they got to know each other, but then she became Belle's cook, and the two of them knew each other so well, that they talked to each other like I would talk to one of my friends out there.

For instance, one little incident, when I was graduating from high school, no from college, South Carolina State College, I sent to Belle Baruch in the mail, a copy of my graduation program, that I was graduating from college, and her name in the mail, to Belle Baruch. And she came, my mother was her cook, so she came in the kitchen with this invitation to my graduation that I sent to Belle, so she goes, "Daisy, I got this thing here from Minnie. What is it? What does she want?" My mother, "Ms. Belle, when children are graduating from school," and this is how my mother thought she better explain it, with that catchy word stuff, "When children are graduating from school, they send you an invitation, because they want a present!" That's how my mother said she put it. Because they were like pals. They would turn up their backside at each other and laugh. It wasn't like a boss and thing, each one talked to the other one anyway they liked.

BN: Tell me that story about, you mentioned going to college, about Baruch's promise to you, to pay for your college.

MK: Well he told my parents, I don't know if these words spread across the whole plantation, or whether he intended it or what, but when he talked about things like that, we'd listen. So he told my father, "When any of the children finish high school, if any of them want to go to college I will take the expenses, I'll pay the expenses." He told my dad, when we were in that little one-room schoolhouse. And

that schoolhouse went to fourth grade, when you got to fifth grade, you had to come into Georgetown to go to school. Anyhow, so I had four sisters: Nettie, Dorothy, Frances, Ida. When Dorothy was a teenager and we were going to school in town, she didn't like my father's way of raising children because he didn't want you to even talk to a boy, much less to go out with one, so she said, "Well I finished school and I'm not staying here. I'm going to get myself trained as a nurse and go make my own living." And she did. She went to Columbia, and she never came back to Georgetown. She married a guy and they moved to Tennessee, and she never came back to Georgetown, because of my dad, not Baruch.

So anyway, my other three sisters they loved babies. When they saw a mother on the street with a baby, they go "Goo goo goo," over the carriage with the baby. I thought to myself, "I'm not goo goo goo'ing over some baby. I'm going to college." And I was the only one who did. So Baruch forgot. I give him that credit, because I know he didn't forget, he just thought we forgot. Especially me. So anyhow, I went to South Carolina State College after I finished high school here, and I reminded my father of Baruch's promise, because there was tuition by semester. Thirty dollars a semester. Room and board, twelve dollars a month. When I tell kids that, they say, "We pay more than that for books." Baruch never sent one cent all my four years. I kept reminding my father, what with forty dollars a month, he was sending me money to pay my college, undergraduate. He paid the whole thing, my dad, with his forty dollars a month paycheck. So anyhow, when I was graduating, I told my dad, "Why don't you let me send all the bills and stuff to Baruch? He promised!" Because I figured if you remind him, he'd put, you know, he's a man, he'd stick up with his promise. But my dad, "Leave the man alone!" He was a real slave-minded individual. "If the man forgot, he forgot. Leave the man alone."

I didn't say another word. I sat down, wrote a letter to Baruch, because I knew his address in New York, and I put all the bills, I had receipts, and by that time I could add my class ring, because I was graduating and I had already bought my ring. It was less than six hundred dollars for the whole four years. So I mailed

Baruch. I didn't tell my dad, mail it to Baruch. He sent my dad a check for the whole thing, then he wrote, he wrote on the bottom of the note to my father, "That Minnie sure is rude." I said, "He is the one who is rude, he promised! I was the receiver and I didn't get it." But anyway he did it, I just reminded him. I didn't ask anything, he already said he would do it. So he paid my whole four years, I think it was six hundred, it wasn't even seven hundred dollars. With my father... they were good people, you know, Baruch and his family, because my dad was so docile. They didn't have any problem with my dad, they had a problem with me, with "that Minnie."

BN: What about Belle? What was Belle like?

MK: She was...I think if there's a word I could use, she was "natural". She was who she wanted to be. She wasn't mean, but if she doesn't like you, she'd just act like it. She wasn't a hypocrite. She was what she was. But you know one thing she did, and I think if you go to Hobcaw Barony, or Hobcaw Plantation, and look in her house, you would probably see her with black kids. She loved children. She would go on her horse during a school day, and if she saw a black kid, who was not in school, she'd take that child and bring them to that one room schoolhouse, because that's where you're supposed to be. The kids could not hide from Belle, because she thought everybody should take advantage of what could lift them. But she didn't care, black, white, whoever you are, because she knew she was the boss whether you're going to school or not going to school, or whether you had money or you didn't. She was already the boss, and she wasn't giving that up.

So she would get on that horse and find those black kids who were absent, and drag them out there and put them in school. That's one thing she did, that was very nice. Because some of those kids, see when they got to be old enough where they could go to work, like eleven, twelve years old or something, the parents put them to work because they could come home on Friday with two dollars and a half that they'd earned all week, with the raking and the hoeing and planting and all that

stuff. So I guess Belle and her schizophrenic personality believed both of those things. Some people you need to work for you, and some people they need to get higher and higher so they can go, you know?

BN: What do you mean by that “schizophrenic personality”?

MK: I think it's like sometimes you're not what people think you are. It's like you have two different personalities that you use for different people. I think most people, I know I am, because with certain people I don't express what I would say to some other people. And I think that's what I mean by schizophrenic, because she was this person who if she wants to be mean, she'll be mean, because she thinks there's a purpose and it's appropriate. And if she wanted to be friendly and warm, she could be that because the situation at the moment let her be that kind of person. So it wasn't permanent either way.

BN: I heard she was pretty tough on poachers.

MK: Oh yeah. She was a protector of natural environment and stuff. It's amazing. It's like she had so many different personalities. Some were good and some were just mean. But anyway, she was, and people like her because whoever could agree with what mood she was in, they had a friend for that day, and whoever needed her in another way, they had a friend whenever she was that kind of person. And in a way we never even thought she was mean. We just, “Ugh. There goes that Belle.” This is what she's like today. She had her own airplane, her own horses. She had a stable when she built her part of the plantation for her horses. I never ever saw her in a dress. When we'd go to her house in the plantation there, all the shoes in the closet were boots. Riding boots, that's all she ever had. And then she had her car, or trucks whenever she needed a truck, whatever. She owned a big piece, and she bought the whole plantation piece by piece. By the time she died, she owned the

whole thing, from Pawley's Island to the bridges that lead into Georgetown. So she was a real go-getter. And she was the kind of personality that she used whenever she needed it, you know? "Daisy, make that girl dance!" The next time she might take you by the hand, "I think you better go with me." We thought she was schizophrenic or something.

BN: I wonder if being very wealthy sort of-

MK: Made her safe, and feel comfortable being what she wants to be. Right. Because who could change her? Nobody. Her friends didn't want to, I'm sure. If she had friends, they liked something about her, and the people who didn't like her, were people who work for her. So you might not get paid or something. So she knew exactly which day she could be this way, she knew, and she was not a hypocrite, that's for sure. She was who she thought she needed to be on any given day.

BN: Did you ever see her – I heard she buzzed poachers in her plane – did you ever hear that or see her swoop down on poachers?

MK: Yeah, she didn't like people over there killing animals. People used to get paid, and some federal person would come and explore these plantations to see if people were doing... They didn't need to come to Hobcaw to do that, because Belle would get in her plane, she flies over the whole thing, and she'd see people coming from Georgetown in that little rowboat, coming to fish on Baruch's plantation. Nobody should eat fish. Nobody should come to catch fish. Nope, she didn't go kill animals. But her father and his friends did. Because she was a person who protected. See she could be mean to human beings, but she was never mean to animals. And she got on her horse and she rode all through the pieces of plantation to see who's killing animals and who's whatever. And she'd come to Georgetown

and get the policeman to arrest people who come over there. They had a name, "poachers" or something they used to call people who kill animals on other people's plantation.

BN: Miss Kennedy, did you know the Massey's? Did you know Lois Massey?

MK: Yeah, Lois Massey was one of Belle's friends, but she had a dual purpose with her relationship with Belle. She was a, I wouldn't say a slave, but an office person. She was like a worker under Belle, with Belle's instruction, and then she was a friend. So the two of them together I guess, Massey, would probably like to be on any given day what Belle would like her to be that day. Because we always used to say, "She ain't got no nerve. She's always doing what Belle wants." But they were friends, but she did work, like office work and stuff for Belle.

BN: And her father was a grounds man?

MK: She was a white family, she had her father, her mother, and her young sister. That was a white family. Lois was like Belle's "come when I need you" type of person. Lois's father was the, like an electrician, and whatever got wrong the electricity. The mother was a stay-at-home mother. And they had a younger sister, Lois, named Dorothy. She was our age. Growing up we played together, and all that stuff, she was growing up with us in our age. That was one. Lois had an uncle, Jim Powell, who was her mother's brother, and he was the supervisor of the whole plantation. And he, with the black women- I had a first cousin who was Jim Powell's daughter. (Laughs) There was nothing anybody could do; it was just...because it was all over the place. So Belle, Lottie Belle they named her, her grandfather was my...no her grandmother was my father's cousin. They were first cousins, they had the same thing. She was named Lottie Belle. And then Lois, she took care of her,

bought her clothes to go to school. They owned it, but they didn't associate, you know, and I don't think it went beyond the plantation who she was.

BN: She grew up in the black community?

MK: Where was she gonna go? (Laughs) They were younger than me, the whole group, my sister was there, and there was a group of those kids. Lottie Belle's mother was my father's niece. Her grandmother was my father's sister. And Powell would come through the road in his car and he would blow his horn – and Geneva was my cousin's name who had the daughter for Powell – take the black women in the car, go up to the hill, where they had the electric building to take care of all the electricity and all. Powell had his apartment upstairs over that building, right down the little road from Baruch's house. He would take those black women, whoever agreed with him, with whatever he wanted, up there, and have his fun. That's where Lottie Belle was conceived.

I mean there was no problem with any of that. It was a way of life. The people who, you can't even say the words "taken advantage of," because they'd accepted it as their life. What could you do? The policeman was arresting anybody who raped black women. Any black person who say they raped a white woman got hung from the trees. So there was no way to change anything. So people who were able to accept it, and went on their way, and people who couldn't just moved out of the way. And you know what, I'm not saying this because you're here today collecting stories, but everybody knows me. In that book I gave you, you'll see how I went to the white dentist. I'm a black woman, he anesthetized to the point where I didn't know from anything, and I'm sitting, and before I knew it he was under my skirt, having his fun. Where would I go?

Nobody like that got arrested. But a twelve year old black boy, his mother had moved to New York somewhere, and when he got to be twelve years old, he came to visit his grandparents in Georgetown. He saw a young white girl on the

street, he whistled at her. He got lynched. So there was the justice system was... Where you going? It was by color, you know? It was quite a life. I had three classmates who had the same white father. And they knew they were sisters. Nobody could do a thing, the father's sitting in the living room, and the man'd go have his fun with the wife in the bedroom. You can't call it no justice, it was just...nothing. So everybody knew, you know, it was nothing. It was like two states.

BN: Well, you got out of here, right?

MK: Because I told you, I think, somehow or another, from the time I was little...Because we went to church from morning till night. As soon as you came out of the womb! There was God and religion, and this and that, and they say it in that building, these were all black people. They would say it whenever they'd go into that building, they called it "The House of God," but as soon as they walk out of that front door, they were different people. They'd kill each other, they'd fight each other, and you know, whatever. So from a little girl I couldn't understand the difference, and especially Sunday school with all those commandments. I thought you were supposed to obey them. I told you my story about how I didn't know what the word "adultery" means?

Well, in Sunday school you learn the Ten Commandments, and one of them is "Thou shall not commit adultery," but nobody's telling you the meaning of those words. So I thought, in my little mind, it must be men, whatever it is, it must be men doing it. I don't know why I put it on the men. So when my dad would go out the door, I would sneak behind him, in the country roads, you know, behind trees, I'd sneak behind trees and bushes, so I can see if I could catch my dad committing adultery, but I wouldn't know what it is he would be doing. So one day, I snuck out the door behind him, hid behind trees and bushes, and I saw him on the country road, big sun-shining day, talking to a woman. I went running home, "Mom, daddy's committing adultery!" (Laughs) My mother didn't know what the word meant

either, and my sisters were there, they were older than me, she thought maybe somebody in this house would know what that is. So she asked, "What is that girl talking about?" All my sisters, "Who knows?" Nobody knew, but somehow or another, learning the Ten Commandments in Sunday school, and they let you know, this is what God wants you to do. But where is the God when they walk out of that building? Who is out there to tell God they didn't do it. I was crazy when I was young growing up. You just had to be right, or I thought you were wrong. There was no in between. And my mother used to tell me, "Just because you were born on Christmas, doesn't make you Christ!" Because I was such a judgmental person. So I said, "But I'm getting closer." She said, "As close as you get, you'll never reach God, so you might as well stop it!" But I was terrible.

BN: So you left, I know you went to South Carolina State, and was it after that you went to New York?

MK: No, I came back home because the principal...everything was separated by race, so I taught in the so-called "black school". Before I graduated, see I used to come home from South Carolina State, every time they had a day off I'd come to Georgetown because my parents had moved to the house by then. So, everybody knew me, and the principal promised that he would give me a job teaching when I get back home after I graduated. So when I graduated, he gave me a job teaching seventh graders. I had just left here, four years before that. All those seventh grade people knew me, and the girls were bigger than me.

My first day teaching, these seventh grade kids, some bigger than I was, who knew me, because we lived around the corner from each other, and all that, you know, I was in high school, they were like kindergarten, or whatever, so I would hear them, if you want you can cut this piece out or something, "If she doesn't do what we want her to do, we gonna beat her. She better do what we want!" And they say it so I can hear it. And I tell you, that's the first year I was teaching.

So when school is out, I make myself very busy putting my room together, I didn't have to, but I was staying, giving myself enough time for those kids to get home, so they couldn't beat me up in the street. Because that would be awful, for the kids to beat up the teacher in the street, so I would wait till they all probably got at least away from the school, and I would come home. And then the next year, the principal gave me a job to teach subject areas: math and history. It was eighth grade, one of the boys...By that time, Georgetown had a paper mill come in, to turn trees into paper, and the boys in eighth grade, they were bigger than me, they made more money than I did, because they could work in the paper mill. So one of the boys, eighth grade, I think it was my history class, but they come into both my classes anyway, history and math, so he came every morning this eighth grader, beating drums with these two sticks, and then it got close to the closing of school, and he's beating, "I bet Ms. Minnie Kennedy doesn't know what this school means, I bet she thinks she's gonna keep me back in the eighth grade, but I bet that she doesn't know that I was in the eighth grade for the two years and this would be three years that they kept me back, and she doesn't know that the state doesn't allow teachers to keep a child back three years in a row."

And he's beating drums, and then, I didn't say a word, because they were bigger than me anyhow, so I just used my quiet authority. So comes time to write the promotion card, to promote him from eighth grade to ninth grade. I wrote, "I, Minnie Kennedy, promote Louie Harold Lawrence, from eighth grade into eighth grade." I said, I don't care what they say, because I'm not listening to that. So anyway, the end of that school year, that was my third year. But in that school year I thought, fifty dollars a month? I was just making ten dollars more than my dad, who was working for slave labor.

So one of my high school classmates had already moved to New York. We used to write to each other, so I told my parents I'd pack a little bag, I'm going to go spend a couple of weeks with Lydia in New York. That's after my third year of teaching here. So I went, but I went determined, if I found a job, I'm not going back

for no fifty dollars a month and for Louie Harold. Years later, I was walking through Harlem, 125th Street in New York, and I hear somebody calling me from across the street in Harlem, on 125th Street in New York, "Ms. Minnie! Ms. Minnie! Ms. Minnie!" There was Louie Harold! He came across the street, he shook my hand, he said, "I thank you for keeping me back that year, because I dropped out of school and joined the Navy. Then I realized how limited my education was." So he came home from the Navy, went to school, finished through at least graduation year. He didn't need but three more years or something. Became a preacher, went to college or something, and they say he had one of the best churches; humanistic kind of preaching, and with young people and stuff.

So there he was in New York. Saw me on the street in New York, said when he came back from the Navy, he "unretarded," whatever that word is, and came back home and finished what he had to do. And he thought Ms. Kennedy, when she taught me, she had something to do, but I didn't accept it, with his knowing, he said, because then he realized how limited his education was when he was in the Navy. So he came out of Navy, came back home, finished up two years. That's all he needed. Went to ministerial school or something, came home, and they say he was one of the best preachers, and his relationship with young people at his church, the whole thing. And he saw me in New York, "Thank you," he told me, "for keeping me back that year, because if you didn't, I would have floated through school and got tired." Because he said that the state wouldn't let you keep me back three years, beating his drums, I thought, "The hell with the state, he didn't do anything."

BN: I wanted to ask you, I know at one point, or over a period of years, black people started to leave Hobcaw, and you mentioned the paper mill, I mean, how did opportunity grow so they could leave?

MK: The parents couldn't help you, because they were so uneducated. They grew up in slavery, so they couldn't help. It took parents who had a sense, or had

something in them who said, "My kids are going to go higher than what I went." Because everybody put in, in terms of the opportunity, whether you took advantage, and then they knew, there's a period of history in America where even if you do the best you could, it was limited because you were in a slave state. It wasn't that you had the freedom to go, that's how Louie Harold said, the state wouldn't let you. It wasn't parents that could put you...But my father probably had about maybe a fifth grade learning. My mother couldn't even write her name. Every time one of the children finished high school, we would teach my mother, teach my mother. By the time my mother died, she could read the Bible. All those hard words, everything, because we just help her to get through, because my dad even used to tease her, "I don't know how you can even talk to your mother, she doesn't even know what you're saying," and brag because he could do a little better. So but we got our mother to the point where she could write her own letters, the whole thing.

There's a chapter in there they call me "that smart one." When my mother died, in New York, I brought her body back home. Belle Baruch had said, "Anybody who moves away from the plantation can't bring dead people back there anymore." So my family's so split up, some are in Hobcaw graveyard, some are in Emerson. Arcadia owner said, "All the people who were on Hobcaw, if you can't bring your people back there, you can bring them here." So half of my family are in Arcadia graveyard, half are in the plantation graveyard.

Anyway, so when I brought my mother's body back, I went to visit, because I had to bury her on Arcadia, went to see one of the old ladies, a black woman. They were all friends. They used to visit each other on Saturday night, have parties and stuff at different homes. So I went to open her door, on Arcadia she lived, went in, she was on the cot in the living room. Her grandchildren had left a bowl a food for her next to her bed there, and the television on – she was the grandmother of the children – so I came in the door. She knew me when I was a little girl. I said, "Hi cousin Pigeon." Because we call everybody cousin or whatever. She said, "Ohh God, looka Minnie." I said, "How did you...?" She knew me when I was a little girl. I said,

“You remember me?” This is, of course, the Gullah I’m talking about now. “Course I know you! You Daisy daughter, you da smart one!” Because I used to write letters for people, read letters for people, you know, on the plantation. “Go get that Daisy daughter let her write letters to your son.”

So they were so limited, but lucky for me, I guess, even though my dad and mother were so limited in the formal education, they had something about their personalities, and all that Bible stuff, that they tried hard to be the best they could be, whether it was parent or whatever. So they sort of pushed us. That’s why I used to be so mad at Bernard Baruch, when I’m reading a story to my dad, so he can see how I’m improving in school. And he’s got his arm, can you imagine, his arm around you while you’re reading in like first grade, second grade, and then the phone rings, and he gotta go. I used to be so mad at Baruch. It’d feel so nice and tender, you know, because your parents don’t even have time to do that, because they’re out working or something.

It was quite a life, but you know what I think it made, whoever we are, it was made in that lifestyle. Some of us had to struggle to get out of it, and some of us used it to the best we could, and that’s how it was. One of the things they did, was like the black people knew growing up in the South, they knew that they didn’t have the rights that white people had, and many black people just gave up. My dad was one of those people, “That’s the way it is! Stop bothering people!”

The black people knew. When I think I was about twelve, and my sister one of them, Frances, was thirteen, because my mother...I told you my parents had thirteen children? So Frances and I were close with each other more than any other of the siblings. And my mother sent us from the house we live in here, cross town, to somebody for some reason, I don’t remember what it was. On the way back, we must have been, I don’t even think we were twelve years old yet, and walking back home, we saw on the lawn, this nice big flowing lawn coming down from these antebellum type buildings, with a white family lived there, and they were out on their lawn, playing with their dog. And they were tossing a stick away, and the dog

would go pick up the stick and bring it back to them. And Frances and I were so amazed. How could the dog do that – the dog go pick up the stick and bring it back to the kids. So when the little white kids, they were like our age, I don't think we were thirteen or fourteen, we must have been ten, eleven, or something, when they saw us on the sidewalk, and the dog pick up the stick, and didn't bother us and brought it back to them. I guess they thought they better have some fun, you know, so they tossed the stick closer to us, the kids did. And before the dog could come to pick up the stick, my sister picked up a little stick, like a little pencil size, she picked up a little stick, so she could hit the dog if the dog came near us. I mean that stick wouldn't even hurt an ant it was so little.

So anyhow, the dog came back and they didn't bother us, and we were walking home. The policeman car came. The kids had gone into the house, called the police, that we hit the dog, and I swear to God we didn't hit the dog. So they were gonna have as much fun as they could. So the police put us in the car. Have you ever been on Front Street here with the big clock? Up there, used to be what they called a "lock up," a temporary jail, was in that building where the clock is down there. So the policeman took us down there, to this little jail, put my little – because they asked the kids, "Which one hit the dog?" They said my sister did, they didn't say it was me. So the policeman jailed my sister, in that little jail, and I went running home to tell my dad, because I know my dad will go get my sister out, because she didn't hit the dog.

So I came home, told my dad, my dad put money in his pocket, because he knew that was the only thing that was gonna get my sister out of the jail, there was no right, wrong, or whatever. So he went, paid twenty-five dollars to get my sister out of jail. I lost such respect for my dad, it took me months, or a few years to get back, I thought, "How could he be so powerless?" You know, I didn't know those words, but he was my father. He let his daughter be put in jail, and he had to go pay? He couldn't go and tell those people they were wrong? It took time for me to get over that one. And the policeman believed the kids, because they were all white.

That's why I said that men were raping black women without any kind of a fear or nothing. There was nowhere to go, there was no justice. And I already told you how I didn't say, "...Liberty...Justice..." until Obama. (Laughs) So many of those incidents, but you know what? They made me who I am.

BN: Would you tell me that story again about liberty and justice? Because we talked about that before we were recording you.

MK: About what?

BN: About how you couldn't say the last six words?

MK: Oh oh, yeah. From a little, must be first/second grade, because in school every morning you had to say the pledge, and I knew the white kids got on buses every morning, and on the ferry boat, came to Georgetown to go to school, and we went to that one-room school house. Every black kid on the plantation went to that little room. And we had one teacher, one black teacher. And she called you up to her table one by one, and when you got to fifth grade, you could come into Georgetown to go to school, because the school over there only went to fourth, so we could not understand how she knew what grade you were in, because she just taught whoever was there. "Minnie, it's your turn, come up." But anyway, she was good, she gave you what you needed, but we didn't know by grade, because she didn't tell us what grade you were in, she just did what she thought this child need, and that child needed. So we came to school. My dad put his mother in the house that was here, two-story house, and we came every Monday morning on the ferry boat, go to school, live with my grandmother. On Friday after school, we took the ferryboat and went back to the country to my mother and father. We did that until my parents gave up on the plantation, so they moved to Georgetown when we were all maybe eighth or ninth grade.

BN: Now, why did they move at that time?

MK: Over the years, you can't stay dumb and stupid forever. So over the years, people, and then children start coming to Georgetown, and even Georgetown was different than the plantation. In Georgetown, the black kids, they had a system like white people had, black people had with each other. If you're light skinned, you're better than the ones who are dark skinned. And if you don't straighten your hair with that hot comb, you'd have nappy hair. So the kids in the black community had this separation. "Look at that dress. Her mother had to make her that dress. They can't even go buy a dress." And all the negative, the black people had their own lifestyle, to put down who they could put down.

When I was graduating from high school here, I had two classmates whose father was white, in my class. Our grades were so similar, I don't know how. I was just a person who didn't let too much go by. So I was dark-skinned, nappy hair, all the negative they called me, and my grade was valedictorian. They didn't want to give it to me because I was dark, nappy hair. And there was Albert, whose father was white, the white man who had those children, there were two sisters and a brother, all by the same white man, and the white man gave them his last name. We thought, "That's decent." He acknowledged and then, there was no black people named "Poinsett." They grew up with their white father's last name. He allowed it. So Albert, and me, and another girl, whose father was white, the three of us grades were close together, but mine was a couple of whatever higher.

I had the hardest time, because my parents weren't educated enough to fight with a principal of a school. So there was a black man living in this community, who was like a community leader, and his daughter went to school, we went to school together, with a black family. And they all sort of liked me because "you dat smart one" even came with me into Georgetown. He helped me fight with the principal to give me what was my due. I was a couple of decimals higher than all the kids, so I

deserved to be the valedictorian. And Albert or Golden, the other girl, we were closer, either one of them could be salutatorian, because of all of our grades, but mine was a couple of decimals higher.

So this black man in the community, he went in and fought for me and I got to be valedictorian of my class. When I went to South Carolina State, it was different, because students came from all over. It wasn't a limited community, so people were fairer with each other, so I came up fifth, but it was fair, because I know. I couldn't compete with all these kids who came from better schools and all that, so I came out fifth and graduated from South Carolina State College. The principal told me, after he had to give me my due to be valedictorian. After I got finished with making my speech and all, and I would go through the principal to check to see how well I was doing writing the speech, so he told me, "One thing Minnie, something about you," he said, "You think you gotta be the best all the time." I thought that was a bad thing to say to somebody. They should say, "Oh how well you took steps that you needed and got to where you wanted to be," to sort of help you feel like you did the right thing. He made it look like I was fighting my way to the top. And then even in high school, my history teacher, and then we had a course in German – those two weren't Georgetownian, they had to come and teach from other places – they would assign me to keep the class when they're absent. Everybody knew, like the people on the plantation, "I know you, you dat smart one". There was something about me that, I was, I don't know, brash? I knew you couldn't take everything people put on you, you got to let some things go.

BN: I just appreciate so much your telling us so many great stories, and important things, and I wonder if you could tell me a little bit about your work with the civil rights movement, and how you got involved with that?

MK: It was easy for me because I was feeling so different even in my own family. People would take, in my family, my sisters, my brothers, "Oh stop, you don't

let people bother you all the time!" I fought my way, and I don't mean viciously, I would say, "You can't speak to me that way," even when I was little. One thing they made a mistake with me on that plantation, is to let me learn. That was a big mistake, because what I was learning, was to move, to grow. You couldn't stay a baby forever. And you couldn't stay uneducated forever. You had to know grits from rice, you know? You had to know things, without being called anything. You had to know rice was different than grits, something as stupid as that. You had to know it, you had to learn it.

I remember how, when my dad would...there was no such thing as chicken for dinner, bacon for breakfast...you ate whatever your mommy cooked. My dad, we would be sitting out on the steps in the early morning, my dad comes catch a chicken, wring the chicken's neck, and we all go, "Ahhhhh, dad is killing the chicken!" We thought that was mean to do that to a chicken. My mother, "Stop with the nonsense, when I cook it you're going to eat it!" How can you eat it if it's too wrong to kill it? You can't eat a live chicken." You know? So they're all these basic things was real, for us. We went through it; we had to correct things as we lived it. We didn't have to read history from books, we were making history, and we already knew black people history different from white people history. Mothers different from fathers, some of them can tolerate you and some of them can't. So we had to learn those things from living it.

BN: Do you want to tell us some about civil rights?

MK: All I knew, when I was young growing up, is that there's some things that's right, and some things that's wrong. Otherwise those two words wouldn't even be in our vocabulary. Some things are wrong and some things are right, and somehow or another, I lean to understanding those, even in my family. Because there were plenty of things I thought, "Mothers don't do that," or, "Fathers don't do

that.” I knew that certain things were just not right, and certain things were wrong. So I think the whole black community, when you live in that kind of situation – it wasn’t just my family – black people had to figure out a whole lot things to survive. When slaves were sold, they weren’t sold as a family so you could have a united group till you get grown up. People were sold as individuals. That’s why we didn’t know our grandfather. So we got this basic, solid kind of right from wrong stuff for our salvation, you know?

Because in the family you had it, between sisters, brothers, some are right and some are wrong, and especially when your mother wants you to do something you didn’t want to do, she was wrong. And then, if this is wrong, what’s right? So it was that kind of realistic learning that we all had to do. A couple of things it did, I think, was it helped people, to accept and to understand weakness from strength, and goodness from not good, and it applied to all the people we grew up with and knew. There were certain kids we said, “Well why don’t she learn how to do something.” And we knew right behavior, because they keep you in that Bible. One thing I never could understand, “How in the hell can they read that Bible and not obey it?” My mother said, “My God, you come out the womb judging people.”
(Laughs)

BN: I know you were a rebel, and so I’m thinking, were you living in New York when you...when you got involved?

MK: When I felt safe to do something about it, I was living in New York. Because we had two judicial systems around here, one for blacks, one for whites. I mean you just didn’t get any kind of solution to whatever you might have spiritually that you think is wrong or whatever. Then in New York you got to know that the person who was your congressman, you knew them as a person. Here, you just hear a name. So I got right at Paul Robeson. You’ve probably heard of him, I got him in that cabinet right there, his book, and people like that. And I was a person who liked

to read, so I would read about Paul Robeson, and this one and that one, and then I took with me also, right and wrong. I wasn't right all the time, but I knew there's something that's right and something that's wrong.

And then, I don't know if I told you, that I had some kind of vision. I don't know where or how, but somewhere in my life, I had this vision, it wasn't a dream, I don't know what it was, but it was like what I saw was God's creation was like a patchwork quilt. Beautiful silk patches that represented all of God's creation, was like a patchwork quilt. And that was God's creation. It represented God's creation. Black people went to that quilt, and took a patch out, and called it civil rights. God did not create any need for people to need civil rights. What he created was so-called perfect. White people went to that beautiful quilt of God's creation, and pull a patch out, and call it white supremacy. God didn't create any such thing.

So I was telling people, especially ministers, this vision I had. I don't know where it came from, or whatever it was, but there was something that I could believe, because you start talking about God's creation, why would you create your enemy? Why would God create Satan? I think God created and put on this Earth what he felt- like if you wanted to make the best doll. You wouldn't make a doll that hurt people. The personality you would give your creation, it would be perfect. And I think that's what God did. And anyway, so I keep telling people about this vision, I don't know how I got it or whatever it was. And then I was already thinking so much in my life about right and wrong, but there was such that people could hardly do anything about it, and then here come Paul Robeson in my life, and he was talking about human relations, and Malcolm X and all of those people. I was living in New York, and then they had clubs that meet together and talk, and whatever they can make change, because I went on a march, the first time I went on a march, some kind of civil rights march, was with Adam Clayton Powell, who was my congressman. He lived in Harlem, and he was the senator- or congressman, I think, from the Harlem area.

So every time he'd come back home to speak or something, I'm right there listening, because I thought, "Maybe it's a political solution that we need." And I just kept that up, and kept that up, and every time that somebody come into view who did something, like maybe a baseball pitcher organized some of the black kids – "Instead of fighting, let's play ball." So those kinds of things I thought made sense, to make changes without having to shoot and kill. I also was moving toward, not out there marching there with words or whatever, but living it, and Dr. King was the one who made that clear for me. So he talks about human relations. It has no color, you have no riches, it's just people acknowledging that so are other people. You're sitting there as a person, she's sitting there, she's a person. It's not that you are something and she's a different...you know, I don't mean behavior or anything, I mean what God created.

So I begin to move, and Malcolm X also, he was living in New York, and I used to go to all these meetings when congressmen come to New York. I'd go to hear what they say, because I had a feeling that in the government it must be better than out here. They can't be governor and stuff and do wrong things like we're doing out here when we're not governor or anything else. So I paid attention to all these relationships. I went to Kennedy's inauguration. Did I tell you the story about going to Mrs. Roosevelt's home? I was brave as can be, but I only got braver when I went to New York. I was working as a counselor in summer camp, and one of the camps I worked in was all white. The kids pay like seven or eight hundred dollars a week for two weeks; they had rich parents and all that.

And I was a counselor, and right across the highway, was Mrs. Roosevelt's home, in Hyde Park. So I got the nerve to get on the phone and call Mrs. Roosevelt, on her phone, ask her – and these were all white kids, there wasn't a black kind in that camp because they couldn't pay that kind of money anyhow – so I called Mrs. Roosevelt and said, "I'm a counselor in the camp right across the road from you, and I was wondering if you'd let us come with the kids to visit with you sometime, just to see where you live." "Oh yes, yes, come any time." So I took all these eleven, all

white kids. When she was so pleasant to say, "Yes come," I told them, "Let's take our sleeping bags and we can sleep on her lawn." So we did, and took advantage of Mrs. Roosevelt.

Mrs. Roosevelt got up the next morning, set up a broiler on her lawn, set up a chair on her lawn for each kid, there was about thirteen of us. She made the breakfast, you know hot dog, people eat for lunch, she made for the kid's breakfast. She went up to each kid, "What would you like? Would you like a soda or would you like milk?" And she went to each kid, and whatever they said they want, she provided. She had her cooler with the ice and all in it, and went around to each kid and gave it what it was. And when we finished, she took us to see her husband's grave, because he was buried on their lawn. And then, we were canvassing in Manhattan, she and I, we didn't know each other then when we were canvassing for John F. Kennedy when he was running for president. So they had this long reception line in Manhattan, Mrs. Roosevelt sitting there at the head of the line, and we're all in a line to meet her. So that was before the whole Hyde Park thing, I think it was, or after. I think it was after that.

Anyhow, when it was my turn, she had her secretary sitting next to her, and she'd introduce everybody to Mrs. Roosevelt. "Ms. Roosevelt, meet Ms. Minnie Kennedy." So, "What? What did you say her name was?" Because Kennedy was running for office. So anyhow, she shook my hand, and then she said, "Well, you certainly have the right name." And then, at Kennedy's inauguration, we found ourselves at one of the balls. Roosevelt and I were in the same, because they had so many people they had to have like five different places. So in the ball, she said, "Oh, I see you again. Here you are again." (Laughs) She was so funny. Anyhow, so I was teaching in a private school, predominately white, in mid-Manhattan, and the kids heard that I was going to Kennedy's inauguration. This was an all-white school; the kids who were not white were on scholarship, a few blacks. I was teaching three-year-olds in that school. The kids in seventh, eighth grade, they heard, "Minnie Kennedy's going to John F. Kennedy's inauguration?" So the kids in the

seventh grade, they come up because I'm teaching three-year-olds, right? "We heard that you were going to John F. Kennedy's inauguration." I say, "Yes I am." So one say to the other, "She's lying. She isn't going to John F. Kennedy's inauguration." So one of the white girls, they were all white, any out of the school and the camp, so one of the girls, she stood up with arms akimbo, "She is not lying, because she used to be my counselor!" So I thought, "Oh wow you just have to be the counselor and you've gained their respect."

It was so funny. I went to the inauguration, danced with, and I have a picture of myself with my councilman that at that time was a white guy because I had moved to another area that Powell wasn't senator. But what a life I tell ya. They said, "We heard that you were going to John F. Kennedy's inauguration." So I was teasing, because I could have had an uncle or somebody named John Kennedy. So that's what I was using so they couldn't call me liar. My name was already Kennedy. So that little girl she stood for me with arms akimbo, "She's not lying, because she used to be my counselor!" That's all you have to be.

BN: Did you ever come South during the civil rights movement?

MK: Yeah, but there was no such movement in this part of the South. It was, you know, it was where the composition of the citizens was bigger. See this part was, until the Puerto Ricans and Mexicans start coming in, was just black and white. But there were other parts, and I think it was those parts of the South where there were a number of different Mexican this that or the other, and then people were coming in from the Virgin Islands and Haiti and all those places. So you got a little more mix up, but it didn't get here. I didn't tell you I got charge of Head Start.

When Johnson set up the Head Start program, I was a principal of a school in Westchester. And NYU people used to come because I would use some of their students in the classes so they could learn how to get greater skills for teaching. And their supervisor had to come from NYU to see if we were giving the students

what they should be getting. So they saw the school was an old garage, the principal in the school I was teaching, kindergarten, he took me out of the classroom, gave me that old garage, to make into a school so they could get a Head Start grant, a New York state grant for young children, three, four, five year olds, and made me the principal. I had to get a contract to turn that garage into a school. Seven rooms I had it made. And hire teachers and all interview, whatever.

And by that time, I had known of civil rights, and had participated to a limited extent, but what I did was, I thought, "I have to put this whole project into a human relations setting." It's not going to be teachers who say they're dumb, they're stupid, I'm not hiring such a teacher. So if I hired a white teacher, I had seven classrooms, if I hired a white teacher, I hired her a black assistant. If I hired a black teacher, put in her classroom, for her partner, I put a white and a black together. And I also hired men to teach young children, because a lot of young kids think only mommies teach little kids, and I didn't want that. So set up the school, and my office was next to one of the classrooms, which was a white teacher, and a black assistant in that class. I could hear them teaching all day long. So the black assistant teacher came after a couple months working, "Can I have a conference with you?" So I say, "Yeah, what is it about?" This was the black assistant out of that room.

She said, "The teacher I'm working with, all she wants me to do is wipe tables and mop floors." So I said, "Sit down." I said, "When you heard that we were organizing a school for children, you heard what I said? For children. A school for children. When we did that, and we knew that we wanted to have a teacher and an assistant in each classroom, to help these children who come to school." I looked right into her face, "In your community, you heard that we were hiring assistants, and the white person you were working with heard that we were hiring teachers." I said, "You came because you thought you could be one of the assistants in the classroom, right?" She said, "Yeah." I said, "When you and I sat down, and I talked to you about what kind of school we're setting up for these children, they're white children they're black children, they're blue children, they're yellow children,

whatever they are, the school is for them!" I'm telling her all these things, I said, "You came because you thought you'd like to work with us as an assistant because you didn't go far enough to be a teacher." She said, "Yeah." I said, "When I talked to you about giving you the job, to be an assistant teacher in one of the classrooms, and the teacher would be a white person," because I had talked to her. I said, "Did I tell you that your job would be to wipe tables and mop floors?" She said, "No." I said, "So why do you do it?" So I said, "All right go on. You did it, so what are you coming in here talking to me for? When I spoke to you and thought you would make a very useful person for these children." I said, "This is not a job to hide people as teachers, this is a school for children. And you're the service for these children." I said, "Go." I didn't help solve anything.

So the teacher comes, the white one. "I would like to have a conference with you." So she got just the opposite. "The black assistant who's working with me, all she wants to do..." That's how she put it. The black assistant comes, "All the teacher wants me to do..." See what I'm saying? So I asked the teacher, "When you heard that we were setting up a school for children, and you came, because you thought you would be a good teacher for these children," I say, "it's not a job employment for grown-ups, it's a school for children." I said, "When you came, and you and I set down, did I tell you that you would have an assistant teacher with you? And that assistant job would be to wipe tables and to mop floors?" She said, "No." I said, "So why do you let her?"

And then the two of them came together, after I let them go to see how far they were going to take this stupid thing, so I could have the right to fire the hell out of them or whatever. So the two came together, for a conference. I said, "This is a school for children. It's not a job employment agency for grown-ups. You're here to service children, and if you can't do that, who do you think is going to go home? You think I'm going to put the children on a bus and send them home because the two of you can't get along, and the two of you will be in there on your job?" I tell you I didn't help them say anything further. I said, "Okay. If you're going to be teaching,

you can go back to your classroom.” The end of that school year, every assistant teacher, because some of them were white, the assistants, every assistant wanted to work with that teacher the next year, every teacher wanted to have that assistant in her class. Those two worked out human relations like you never saw it in your life.

BN: What a great story about being a manager. (To Amy Shumaker, executive producer, who is in the room). Is there anything you want to ask?

AS: What did Belle Baruch look like? And you could use her name and describe her.

MK: She was an independent youngster. There were other white families that had children our age and stuff, and we could play with each other, but you know there was never a time when Belle played with black kids and black kids played with Baruch’s kids. But anyway, the life of Baruch’s family was that they had the plantation for winter times and too many of us were outdoors in the winter because you didn’t have the proper clothes and all that stuff. But anyway I don’t remember any time when we were feeling the same age as Belle or whatever but we never played together.

BN: What did she look like?

MK: You’ll see when you go to that place.

BN: Well we’ve seen pictures of her, but it would be great to just hear you describe her.

MK: She was a lesbian you know? And people didn’t know, or didn’t talk about it until later years...And she looked, and dressed, and behaved with that

strength and that bossiness, you now? That sometimes, she talks like a man, you know, we didn't know anything about lesbians, this that or the other, but um, and so she...she was boss of herself, I think, as she grew up in her own family. Because she always had these foreign or French friends, or whatever, as a matter of fact she wrote her will and gave the plantation to a French woman who was her girlfriend or whatever. I saw her when we used to go to the same church. I don't know - we couldn't do anything with that...But Belle was always out of our range. We didn't even know she was the same age or anything, and she might not have been, we didn't know. Because she was a boss since her father bought the place.

None of them were born on the plantation. They were already teenagers, you know, when their family bought the place. But it was just after she died that people were able to talk about her lesbianism. Nobody could talk about it. I don't know if they could or couldn't, but nobody did. I didn't know until she died that she was a lesbian. And she had all these girlfriends from France and from Germany and this place and that place. One thing about her, she was very independent. She got her own plane and she used to fly all over the plantation to see if people were shooting ducks, which they shouldn't do, because they didn't belong over there. She was a real superintendent of that place, or whatever it was. And she bought piece by piece the plantation from her father. By the time she died, she had owned the whole thing, and her father had bought another little plantation near Kingstree.

BN: And I guess, to her great credit, she saved Hobcaw?

MK: That's right, because she wanted it to be an educational place. Right. And then she set these rules, without any care of being inhumane or whatever. I mean, "If you move from the plantation you can't bring dead people back here". So half of my people are buried on her place, half are buried on Arcadia, you know? She wanted to be what she wanted to be, and to set rules that she thinks she should set, and she didn't care. How do you split up dead people? (Laughs) What can they do,

you know? I tell you, she was something else...I told you how she asked my mother, when I sent her an invitation to my graduation, "Got this thing here from Minnie, what is it and what does she want?" She knew what it was and what I wanted. And my mother talked to her like she was talking to an imbecile or something. "Well, Ms. Belle, when children are graduating from school... they send you an invitation...because they want a present!" I thought she'd known...and Belle sent a check for twenty-five dollars.

BN: And she was tall right?

MK: Yeah. And sorta skinny, you know? Did I tell you about a black church here in Georgetown? We went from black history day to black history week, and now we're up to black history month – all of February. So this church asked me to come during black history month and talk to whoever comes, but predominantly children. So they had three speakers, kids from toddler all the way from high school through college. So they had three speakers and I was one of them, and when I saw the speakers coming in with all their stuff – when are they going to have time to talk about all this? I didn't have one thing in my hand. What I wanted to talk about had to do with human relations and with how the hell are you living? And kids used to come and tell me, "I don't like history – it's too boring."

So the morning they had me come to speak, I made sure I was the third one because I didn't want to mix them up – I just wanted to tell them what I wanted to tell them, and I would be the last person. So the two speakers get up with their history books. I mean, the kids already said they don't like history, so – what? – they gonna sit there and listen to you read out of a book or something? I got up – I didn't have a thing in my hand – not one thing. "Is there anyone in here who would like to tell me what you did yesterday?" And I made sure I said yesterday. So they were – what's she talking about, she ain't got no books, whatever...

A girl, maybe middle school age, she had the courage to get up and say, Uh, yeah." I said, "Good. Tell us all what you did yesterday." She went shopping, you know, all that. So I stopped her occasionally and asked, "When you did this, was it morning, afternoon, night?" She said it was the morning. And I said, "Then it got to be lunch time, then afternoon, then suppertime?" She said yes. And then they had supper with the family and what not. "Then it got to be bedtime?" She - yeah. "then the whole day was gone, right? You did a lot of things in that day, and now this is another day. This is not yesterday. You did all of those things yesterday." And I kept emphasizing. "this is another day and you are telling us about what you did - and George Washington did such and such and somebody thought it was interesting enough to put into a book and somebody's reading it to you and saying, "George Washington did that," but you don't know when, how, what.

But you did things yesterday, and George Washington did things yesteryear, and I keep emphasizing that. I said, "The teacher tells you to open the book to page 59; we're going to talk about George Washington. Your history - you told me some of your history from yesterday. Someone might like your history and put it in a book. Then, would you tell me, I don't like that history. It's too boring. It's your history, right? Somebody might like it well enough that they want some other people to read it, some other people to know about you, because you might be dead before somebody wants to write it. And that's history. You have history, George Washington had history..." And they begin to look at me like - huh! I said, "You better stop saying history because somebody might say that about you one day. "I don't want to read that book - it's about that boring lady or whatever..."

They stopped telling me history was boring. And I tell you, teachers in general - or maybe not in general - they go by, "OK, close the book, math is over. Open the book - time for history." What the hell is that? "All right, history's over - open the book, time for geography." You can make anything come to life. You want to do math, have kids measure with their feet the classroom. I had three-year-old kids I was teaching one time. I would take them out of the classroom into the

community so they could see that the world is bigger than the community, the community is bigger than school, whatever. So I would find a destination to go to. So one time I took three-year-olds. We went from the school, up to the corner, turned the corner, and on the next corner was a church I wanted them to see.

So, two kids in my group – I had them in partners – the two were way at the end of the line, they thought I couldn't see, so they ran across instead of going to the corner, and turn the corner and go. The other kids who didn't do that – they were three-year-old kids – “Oh, Miss Minnie! (I always had them call me by my first name) Minnie! They got there before because they ran across...” I put the whole group down. I said, “You know, some of you have older brothers and sisters, and they are studying something called geometry, algebra, and one of things they are learning is if you need to go to the corner, turn the corner, you are going two lines. But those two kids – they ran and got there before you did because they only ran one line.” Isn't that a theory in geometry? A straight line is the shortest distance...three-year-olds!

In one of the private schools – these rich families travel all over the world – but what did they learn? So I would tell kids, different people do things different. There's nothing wrong with that. I said, “They didn't make a mistake. They probably even thought, ‘Oh boy, if we run across there, we'll get there first.’” I said, “wouldn't you want to be a winner sometime? They thought if they ran across there they'd be winning.”

And sometimes I'd take kids with their blankets, and we'd go in a park, and the sun is shining, and I'm reading to them in the park, and they're lying down. And we'd go back to school and they'd say, three and four-year-olds, “We went to the park and we were lying down, and Minnie was reading to us, and we got a suntan, and Minnie got a big, big, big suntan!” I mean, learning can happen – it's going on, you might as well help kids to understand. I hate teachers who say, “Open the book to page 59.” Is that all history is, page 59? If you want to do practical math, have the kids step from here to there and measure, and be realistic.

I would say, "We have to have a meeting." And they would ask, "What's a meeting?" And they would sit down – I never let them sit in rows, because it was always, "I'm in the front!" "I'm in the back!" So it's a circle – nobody in the front, nobody in the back. During the Second World War I was teaching at NYU. If you weren't teaching in the so-called ghetto area you would be called into war. And so, these beautiful young white boys in the school of law, the school of medicine, they had to change over and teach in so-called ghetto schools, and in Harlem there are plenty, so they wouldn't have to go into World War II. So my course that I taught at NYU was curriculum planning. They wanted to take that course so they would know how to teach. They come into class with the notebook already open, pencil in hand, sit down, wanting for me to talk and they write. I said, "What are doing? What are you bringing your book for? You never ask any questions? You accept everything I say with no question?" These beautiful young men, wartime age or whatever, "You didn't tell us we could ask questions." I said, "You want me to give you a gun so you can shoot me? I don't want you to ask questions – I want you to know you have the right to ask questions." I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

So – I think by the time I leave this earth I would have had all the whatever it is that God put me down here for. Because now it's Minnie, Minnie, Minnie!

BN: Thank you. It has been a privilege to talk with you today.

End of Interview

