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Interview with Kathleen A. Saadat

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Interviewer: Cameron Chambers (CC)

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0:00.00

CC: Ok, so it is March 2nd, 2010 and this is an interview with Kathleen Saadat. So the first question that I had was could you talk about your childhood, where you were born and grew up, and what your family life was like or is like?

KAS: Mmhmm, I was born in 1940 in St. Louis, Missouri, and it was right before we got into World War II. My dad and mother separated in '45—I think it was, but meanwhile, a little bit before that, my brother and I went to live with my father's parents, a large extended Black family in what I would call “aspiring to middle class.” My grandmother and grandfather had been teachers—my grandfather had been the principal of the colored school in Farmington, Missouri. My grandmother had attended normal school, which was a school where they trained teachers, and had been a teacher. They had seven children: Anna, Gladys, Joseph and Charles [Gunnell]. Four of the seven children, all went to college. And my father had an advanced degree; he had a master's degree. My Aunt Anna and my Aunt Gladys both had post-baccalaureate training; they'd gone to school. My Uncle Charles went to school I think most of his life until he became incapacitated. I lived in a family that was—well, my life was very complicated, so it's not a straight line. I lived with my father and his extended family, a very large, loving family, where I guess the feeling you got was camaraderie. Very strong on manners, very strong on appearance and very strong on being a Gunnell, which is my family name. "You are a Gunnell, you don't behave that way." And some of that bred some resentment in my brothers and I [laughs]. My dad remarried in '47, and that changed my life a lot. My mother had walked off and left my brother and I, so that's why my dad took us to his family.

Living with that family, what I remember mostly is joy. I had freedom to be a kid, I played in the backyard, I was Tarzan. And I had a quilt that my grandmother had given me and that was my raft, and I would I would float down the river and I would let you on the raft if you were cool, but

if you weren't you had to stay off the raft [laughs]. I remember sleeping under the lilac bush, I remember getting in the bed with my grandmother when I was frightened, I remember my Aunt Anna's room which was all pristine and very—everything was very beautiful in that room, I was not allowed to go in there, so I would sneak in there and drink her perfume. I figured if it smelled good it should taste good [laughs] it never did taste good but I kept trying. My dad remarried, and he married a woman who was from Mt. Vernon, Illinois, which is a small town in southern Illinois. She was pregnant. We moved to Nashville, Tennessee—this is like 1947-48. We lived—my dad wanted to go back to school, and he went back to school at Tennessee A&I State College in about 1947, and he'd been in the Navy and he'd come out. We lived in a trailer, and I don't mean a mobile home, I don't mean a double-wide, I mean a *trailer*, a bed at each end of the thing, one for us kids and one for the parents and a little bit of space in between, for cooking and sitting. So there were three children and two adults. That was a hard time, it was, um, [pause] too close, it was, too… there were a lot of things going on between my dad and my stepmother that made it difficult. But it's also there that I got one of the very early lessons in how to stand up for myself.

In 1947 in Nashville, Tennessee, when you got on the bus the signs read, "This Section for Colored" and that was the back of the bus. I decided I wasn't going to do that. It was only later that I figured out why I got away with it, but at the time it was, I was not going to do it. And, I didn't. Any chance I got, when I was by myself I sat up front behind the bus driver. I came home one day and my dad said that his friend, Ofero Nelson, had told him that I wouldn't ride the back of the bus, my dad said "Why is that?" and I said, "Because it's wrong for them to tell us where to sit because we're colored." And my dad said the most amazing thing to me, he said, "You do what you think is right." I was seven years old. I don't know if he was just blind to possibilities or if he just wanted to instill courage in me, or what, but I will never forget it. When I went on the bus with them, I sat with them in the back of the bus. I got so, that when—I used to have to walk to school when we didn't have much money and that was a lot—the bus driver who came on to the campus, and the bus drivers were white then, came onto campus, and I'd be walking along and he'd stop the bus and he'd say, "Take a token outta there," and I'd take a token out of there and I'd drop it in the box and I'd sit behind him, and I'd get a ride to school. He never made any advances, he never said anything mean or smart, he *just* let me get a ride to school, and I'm still grateful [laughs]. I was going to Fort Green School in Nashville, and it was of course a segregated school, and we were on the Tennessee A&I State [now Tennessee State University] campus and it was a segregated college. And when you went into town to the movies, *if* you did, you went to the front and bought your ticket then you walked around the corner down the alley

and climbed to the second story and sat in what they called the "nigger roost" where there was a light over your head, and it was not particularly clean. So we didn't go to the movies very often [laughs], we spent time with other people and at home.

Living there was different from Missouri. In Missouri you didn't have to sit in the back of the bus; people wanted you to but you didn't have to, there was no law there about that. Missouri segregated its schools, so, by the time we got back to St. Louis I became acquainted with just more segregation, just a different level of it, Tennessee was worse than Missouri. In Tennessee, I became very comfortable with being on a college campus, and I think it made a lot of difference in my life. To be able to walk around and talk to professors and go in and out of the administration building and go behind the stage and see what set building—I mean I remember the first time I went behind um—my dad was in a, he was a Theater Arts major—I'm sorry, minor, and Social Work major, and he was doing, um, *Arsenic and Old Lace*. He was "Teddy," he was the one who played the brother who was kind of nuts. And I remember walking behind the set and being so disappointed, because it was all set, I mean there was nothing back there, there was not a real house that was built, but I *loved* what they *did*, I loved what they did. And I learned about theater. They rehearsed *Macbeth* in our trailer, he and um… god I can't even think of his name anymore. So I got exposed to a lot of really good stuff, being a Black kid in the 40's in St. Louis and Tennessee, and when I look back at it I say my fortune was good. My aunts were teachers; they taught me to read. They told me when my handwriting was lousy and they made me sit down and write better. That's in addition to all the other stuff about "You're a Gunnell, you can't behave this way." When I came back to St. Louis to live, my dad bought a house and by that time I had two more brothers, so there were four of us now, three brothers and I was the oldest one.

CC: And your stepmother was there?

KAS: Yeah, my stepmother, my dad, three brothers and two cousins lived in the house. The house had one, two, three rooms on the first floor and in the basement another three rooms and one bathroom, and we were in good shape [laughs]. Uh, there were people across the street who—I don't think Henry ever had a bed, he um, he slept on two chairs that were pulled up, two overstuffed chairs that were pulled up in the living room, that's where he slept every night. I think there were seven kids over there, and one day the father walked off. We probably were the—one of the two houses on the block that had books all over the house. At that time, you have to

0:10.00 remember that neighborhoods were economically integrated, racially segregated but economically integrated, so if you if you were Black and you found a nice house and it bordered on somebody without a nice house, you bought it. And you lived in a neighborhood where there were day workers and janitors and—day workers or domestics—janitors and teacher and nurses, whatever jobs that Black people could get then.

My Aunt Anna and her sister, my Aunt Gladys, were pretty active in civil rights efforts and in union organizing and they took on the—they protested the fact that in Missouri, if you were a married woman, and a teacher, you were supposed to resign your job, because some man might want that job, or need that job. And they took that on. I don't know how much they played in the final analysis of it I just know that they were a part of sit-ins before sit-ins, before the 60's. They did make sure that we got exposed to lots of good things. We went to—they have a muni opera in St. Louis where they do musicals, not real opera, not European opera. But they do musicals, and we got to go to that, we got to go and have lunches with people, we got to listen to music that was classical music, blah, blah, blah, blah. When I was… how old was I? Twelve and a half I graduated from grade school, and I went to stay with my aunt and uncle in Chicago. Chicago was a whole new world to me, and I thought there was no segregation there; I thought there was no bias there, and I found out differently, but I was so oblivious to it, I was so happy. I was going to Farragut High School on the South—I'm sorry—on the West Side of Chicago and I was in my Junior year and I was out with a bunch of friends and it was an integrated group and we went in this store and I asked for… something, and I'm busy talking to them and their sayin', "Let's go." And I'm sayin', "Why, I haven't got my stuff yet?" And they said, "You're not gonna' get it, they're not gonna' wait on you, *let's go*." I just missed it. But other times, it was clear, when somebody wouldn't wait on me or gave me grief or whatever, that's in Chicago. So segregation was more underground in some ways. Instead of having a sign on the door that said *we don't want you here*, people acted it out, which in some ways is really, really painful, more painful than the sign to me. Because it's somebody looking at you and telling you they hate you and they don't know you, the sign just, you know, it's just there, but here's somebody actively saying, "I don't wait on this table." "Well can I move over there?" "No you can't move over there, I don't wait on that table either." And then when you look at class stuff in Chicago—I was going to a working-class school and those kids had a different view of the world—German kids, Czechoslovakian kids, Bohemians, Mexicans, and Black kids, and I wanted to be friends with everybody. When I first got to Chicago I went to Hyde Park High on the South Side, which then was predominantly Jewish. I was amazed at what I didn't know. It was, what I thought Christmas time, and the halls

were empty and here were all these candelabras, and I don't know what the hell is goin' on! And somebody told me about Chanukah. I never really had a big foundation—I was raised in a religious household, but I never… it didn't limit me to seeing the joy in what other people did with their lives, because that's how I regarded—this is how people save their lives, this is the stories people tell each other—I didn't have all those words, but I knew, this was important. And so I learned about Chanukah. I didn't know anything about the Holocaust and I remember two friends took me into the library, sat me down, put a book in front of me and said, "Start reading here." And I started to read, and it was the story of a town where they had forced the Jews out of their homes and on to their knees, made them take their clothes off and put them on their knees, and drove them to the slaughterhouse and killed them. *I had no idea, I had no idea*. I knew little about what had actually happened to the people in World War II. In Japan, I knew that we were fighting “Japs.” When my father came home—this is before he married my first stepmother—I said, "How many Japs did you kill, daddy?" And he looked at me and he said, "Did you want me to kill anyone?" and I started to cry. He was the first person that had made it real to me that this - that killing was not this game that people were playing, and that there were people on the other end of that killing and he just picked me up and I just said, "No, no, I didn't want you to kill anyone, no, no." It was like another amazing thing—this was not the best father in the world, but he did a few amazing things in life that I always remember—and so people became people to me, as opposed to “those people,” they're *people*, you know.

When I was at Hyde Park, part of what was happening was Puerto Ricans were moving into the neighborhood, many with no English. And so one of my teachers asked me to spend time with them, talking with them, trying to help them learn English. And in the course of that, there were a number of people I'd been introduced to, because when I was living in Hyde Park I was living, you know, two blocks from where Joe Lewis had lived, or *lived*, and six blocks from some other famous person and blah, blah, blah and then there were doctors and lawyers and their children and I was introduced to them as people to be friends with and I didn't like ‘em. But when I was sitting in the park across from the high school talking to the Puerto Rican kids, one of the girls came over, a Black girl, and said, "Why are you hanging out with them? You're going to ruin your reputation." And my response was, “Fuck a reputation, leave me alone.” I watched them do to other people what had been done to them. And their way of surviving that was not a way I wanted to survive. It seemed to me unreasonable to cut off yourself from people who know things you don't know—number one, just starting there. These are people who speak a language I don't speak, these are people who have been to a part of the world that I don't know anything about—

this is *wonderful*! I get to learn from them, I get to know something different. Here are people that have a story I've never heard. *Chanukah, wow*.

In one class at Hyde Park, there was a young woman who said she had been on Hiroshima when the bomb was dropped, and the teacher, *the teacher*, a white woman with red hair and I don't remember her name anymore, said, "Oh that must have been interesting, tell us about it." And I remember how I felt, I was just learning about all this stuff in depth, and I was so glad that she said, "It was awful, and I'm not going to talk about it." These are things that like stick in your head about what you learn just growing up and going through your life. I hung out with misfits most of the time, the kids who didn't fit somewhere else. The kid who constantly twirled her hands and had sweaty palms, and the Greek kid who was huge as the doorway and you'd look at him and you think he's not too bright, but he was really sharp. I mean I hung out with the kids who didn't seem to fit anywhere else and I liked them. Because they were smart, because they knew things, they had intuition and they had compassion, they were not mean. I graduated from Farragut in 1957. I did pretty well there, I learned a lot about interacting with white people. When I got to Chicago, I didn't know that white people fought among themselves. I just thought, “Well there's white people,” okay, “and then there's Black people,” or colored people, ‘cause that's what I was at the time. And then I found out that Jews and Germans and Bohemians, all could identify themselves, either by name or something, and that they all had conflicts and it kind of blew me away. I mean how do you know how to—if they don't have a badge on, how do you know who to fight, you know. I thought it was all pretty stupid, so I made friends wherever I could, and again, hung out, even in that school, with the misfits, the kids who didn't fit somewhere else but had something else to think about other than being cute, or what to wear.

When I graduated I left Chicago, I wanted to, there's some personal stuff, some stuff in my family that made me want to get out from under my mother and stepfather. And I went to a segregated college, Lincoln University in Jefferson City, Missouri. My grandfather had gone there, my father, my mother, uncles and aunts had all gone to that college. On both sides actually, my mother and father's sides, because that's where my mother and father met. I didn't do well, I drank myself silly, I was miserable, I was depressed, nothing challenged me very much. I quit school after a year and a half. I was still, you know, still just sorta sloppin' around in the world. I'm aware of stuff but not doing anything about it. And then we come to the sixties. And my first reaction to knowing about riots was, “What are they being pissed about?” And then I had to help a friend find an apartment, and she had children. And I couldn't believe the places that people

were showing her to live in, or how they didn't want children or how they didn't want Black people. And I got it, it's like, *Oh yeah, oh yeah, this makes me wanna pick up a brick, this makes me wanna do something really awful*. I still was not as involved as most of my friends. One is I knew that I could never be, at that point in my life, a person who... could do a peaceful demonstration, because I knew if somebody hit me I'd hit 'em back. I knew that if somebody spit on me I'd just… I wouldn't be able to just take it. The other was, I didn't like what I saw in the Black Panther Movement. I didn't like what I saw in terms of how they treated women, and I didn't have the word feminist in my vocabulary at all, but I knew I wasn't gonna' be treated like shit, and I didn't like how they were treating women. I didn't like how they were talking about white people. I was just telling somebody, this was one of my discussions with friends in the sixties was, *What are we gonna do with our white friends*? Because I was then living on an integrated block, but on one side was lily-white with big cars, and the other side was drugs and Black folks and meanness. There's meanness over here but it was well disguised under, you know, having guards on the street, because I remember going for a walk on one of the private streets and being stopped by a guard and wondering why, and it's because I was Black. Black people didn't walk on those private streets, they probably still don't. They were gated communities back in the forties in St. Louis, okay? And there was one that was actually Black, Lewis Place, which was—it never had a patrol person, like a—I mean a hired chain person or whatever you call them, but it was not easy to just walk down Lewis Place, you had to know what you were doing ... Where was I? Wandering around St. Louis.

CC: What are we gonna do with our white friends?

KAS: Yeah, what are we gonna do with our white friends, because it was scary, it was a scary situation. One of my best friends, who just died, lived across the street from me, actually we shared an apartment later. But she lived across the street from me and she was just a radical; she's the one who went to the March on Washington [1963], she's the one that hung out the Communist flag on May Day, she's the one [laughing] that was makin' all kinda noise! But I was learning from her, and watching, and still knowing that I was not gonna be able to do what they were doing. And part of that was being gay. And knowing that anybody who pulled the cover off of that, it was going to destroy me. I tried to keep a lot of my sexual orientation away from my family. Because they disapproved—I don't think they disapproved of me; they disapproved of being gay. That changed over time. So I didn't, you know, I didn't go home and take my girlfriend and say "Hi! Here's my wife," you know [laughs]. But I still was drinking very heavily, spent a lot of time with

just a mixture of people, different economic backgrounds, different ethnic backgrounds, and I was working for Washington University Medical School at the time, and I was working for a Japanese guy and I was working...

CC: What were you doing?

KAS: I was a lab tech, in a biochemistry research lab. Working every day, drinking every day, I don't know how I got to work some days; some days I didn't get to work. At some point in time feeling miserable—and my girlfriend left me—I checked myself into a mental institution. [I] stayed for about a month, came out and made some decisions about how I was gonna be in the world. And one of the most important decisions I made was to speak up for myself, and to say what I believe in. And to not be... *dissuaded* from speaking because I'm gay, and that's the word we used then, we didn't say lesbian then, we said gay. Everybody was gay. Then we got to be lesbians when I got to Oregon [laughs]. But a lot of what I learned, when I look back at it, what I was learning was, no matter how I saw myself, people saw me as different. So no matter if I thought, “Oh these people were really cool and they’re my friends and blah, blah, blah,” it wasn't that they weren't my friends it's that they never quite saw me like they saw their other friends, if I was the Black friend. And, that would come out sometimes. The core group, on Westminster, didn't have that problem for me.

CC: This was the street?

KAS: Yeah, this was the street we lived on. And my friend that just died, Ann Marie, she was just a big factor in my growing up. I was in my twenties but I was still trying to grow up. My friend Oz who lives over in Southeast, we've been friends since third grade, and she's another one, you know, say "Eh, you know, you're being an asshole." You need people in your life to say, you know, *you are being an asshole*, and you need to pay attention to those people if they care about you. So I got that, I got that from my friends.

When I decided to leave St. Louis, I was depressed about several things, one was a brother who continuously got into trouble, the other was a city that I had loved and watched—just be a—it's a beautiful old city, and I just watched crime and despair take its toll on the city. Racism… when Annie and I did share an apartment—and I was always at my girlfriend’s house, she called me out there one night, she said, "Somebody's trying to break in." Now Ann Marie's white, and we were

living in a mixed neighborhood. She said, "What really scares me is he can see me and I know he knows I'm in here." I said, "Get out of there." And so she went across the hall to, what do you call 'em, uh, a guy who's like a ward person, I can't think of his name.

CC: Just like the building manager?

KAS: No, no. Somebody who's like a city... not a councilor quite, but something like that. And she went over there and they called the police. They're white, Annie's white. And the policeman's question—this was 1969—the question to her was why was she living down here with all these Black folks. Which… I mean she was outraged. She had another policeman friend who came by the house and told her that all Black people were thieves. He was a Black policeman; I heard him, I was in the other room, I got into it with him, he didn't come back anymore. You're surrounded by it, you live in it, you learn what to do and what not to do. And when the time came, I was ready to march with folks. I was not ready to be—I was not ready to go south; I was not ready to be beaten in the head. And I've been lucky, I've been lucky. After I got to Oregon it feels like I could have my whole self. I could be Black, I could be lesbian, I could be a woman, I could be, you know, whatever. Nobody was telling me to be dumb, to be quiet... and, I didn't have to worry about the impact my behavior would have on my family. My family was precious to me.

CC: How did you get from there to here?

KAS: I sold all my shit and got on a train [laughs].

0:30.00

CC: Why did you come here?

KAS: Because my friend Oz and her husband and my godson were here. And she said "C'mon, c'mon," she kept sending me these little things about gay rights organizing [laughing] and I kind of go like this [mimes holding the pamphlet away from herself] and read 'em, cause I expected a bullet to come through my window or whatever. And I finally just said—I was with Jenny, and I said to Jenny, "Jenny, I'm going to Oregon, and if you want to come with me, I want you to come." And we came here with five kids [peers], and they did well here. They're all back in St. Louis now, but

they did well. They didn't like the *niceness* of Oregon, and they didn't like that you couldn't find a brick if somebody was fuckin' with you [laughs]. But they did well.

CC: So you went to Reed [College]?

KAS: I went to Reed after I got here. I was at a party, at Oz's house, and a Reed professor was there, and he said something about school and I said, "No, I didn't finish," and he said, "You need to go to Reed." And I said, "That's a rich white kid's school, I can't go there." He said, "I'll write you a letter of recommendation." And then I did the application and I got my old boss, Will Sherman, to write a recommendation, blah, blah, blah. I got accepted, with no money. They had no money for me. I went over trying to find somebody to—including the financial aid office, nah, not a dime. At the time that I went to Reed, they didn't give you grades. After the first grading period, they found money, because I had made, I don't know, "A's" and "B's." And the way I know is that year somebody stole all the grades and copied them and put 'em in everybody's box. It was another adventure in learning. My naiveté had led me to believe that people who had money, at least would be civil, civilized, and probably not racist. And lord have mercy, I was wrong [laughs]. Just from the get. No money; I sit down and talk with the dean, who asks me, how I think I will fare in a upper-middle-class white school, as a Black person. And you know, I just said, well, *some of my friends are white, what is that about, you know*. They were trying desperately to discourage me from going there. Nobody inside the school helped me. Outside the school, the wife—or was she the ex-wife then, I don't think so I think they were still married—of the guy who told me I should apply helped me get a loan, and loaned me some money. And it was not quite enough for the whole of the first year, but I figured I was going to get some more money. And I was working two jobs, and I'd get a check and I'd take it over there, five dollars sometimes; *There, here, put that on my tuition, put that on my tuition*. I showed up first day of class, they had no packet for me, they acted like they didn't know I was coming, and I said, you know, "What is going on here, why have you not put this together?" [dramatically sucks in her breath] "I don't know! Blah, blah, blah, blah." They got my stuff together, they got me into the infirmary to get my shots and whatever it is; I don't remember what they put you through. But I was blown away. I had brought them money, and tuition was what, three thousand dollars a year instead of thirty, at that time. I brought them most of that, I hadn't brought them the whole tuition for the whole year but I figured I'd earn that, I'd get it. They had no packet for me, they didn't think I was coming.

So, I got there. And at first I thought, “Yeah, man, what are you *doing* here, how did you *get* here?" And nobody was mean to me, at that point, they were just indifferent, but they were also indifferent to each other. So it was a great big culture shock. Huge culture shock. And I watched other Black kids come on the campus—and there weren't a whole lot of them—new, and they'd walk up to somebody and start talking and say hello and that person would drop their eyes and say "Bye," and walk off. And it wasn't that… I don't think it was about race, I think it was about culture. The Black kids were used to connecting with people. These other kids were used to being isolated. But what you can feel is racism, that it's racist. But when you look at it you say no these
0:35.00 kids don't… they don't relate to each other, you know they're not going to relate to you. And more than once I grabbed somebody and said, "Hey c'mon, sit down, let me talk to you." The kinds of things that happened there had to do with a group of privileged kids who thought they were so hip they could say anything. I'm sitting in the cafeteria, the coffee shop one day and, some guy say's something about—he's sitting across from me—and he says something about “spics.” And I said, "You can't talk like that to me. You may not talk that way to me. What makes you think you can talk that way?" [laughs]. The young woman who is sitting over here who is Jewish, and she says, "What's a ‘spic’?" I don't know where she was from. I said, "It's like kike or nigger." She said, "What's a kike?" [laughing] I went, "Oh Jesus, where am I, what planet am I on!" I said, "It's all a way of denigrating people and you may not talk to me that way." To his credit, he came back the next day and apologized. But it was like all that little stuff. People who… I got a failing grade, and again they didn't give you your grades they did this kind of—you're sitting with your advisor and he says, "Oh you're doing very well in so and so and very well in blah, blah, blah. But you need to go see your biology teacher, there's something going on there that you may want to take a look at because it's, just not very good." Well, this guy, had marked me down, I don't know why, and I went and talked to him, I said, "You know, before I came here, I spent twelve years working in research laboratories." And I said, “The least you can do is move this ‘D’ up to a ‘A’ in the lab," because I was helping to train the other students. He moved it to a "B," and I think I got a “C" in the rest of the course. [He] Couldn't abide... I think looked at me—fat, Black, older, can't *possibly* be smart enough, *can't possibly*. That's not anybody calling you names. And at that point in time, I had enough reinforcement from the world to have some degree of confidence in myself, or else I was incredibly stupid, which is also possible [sniffs]. But I believed I could get through this school, and they were pissing me off because they were telling me I couldn't because I was Black. They didn't tell me I was dumb. They didn't tell me I didn't know how to do anything. They just, you know, "How are you going to fit in here?"

I had an instructor there whose name was John Reed, who I don't think I'll ever forget, I took my first paper to him. I went into my first paper conference, and he had marked it up; I mean it was just terrible. He said, "What am I going to do with you?" I said, "I'm going to tell you what you're gonna do with me, you're gonna teach me how to write, and you're going to let me write about what I want to write about. Because I don't think that you're talking to me when I'm sitting in a lecture and somebody says, 'Write a paper on the moral implications of Achilles' refusing to join the war until after the burning of the Argive ships, as described on page 236-238.'" And except for the page numbers, that's what was said that we were supposed to write on. I said, "That's not—that's for you guys, you're talking to each other, you're not talking to me." He said, "Okay, deal." And it wasn't that I didn't have the thoughts; I didn't know how to organize them. I didn't know how to put them so that they made sense to other people. I could talk it, but I couldn't write it. And, at the end of it, I wrote a poem, at the end of the class I wrote a poem, and I gave it to him, and he wrote me back and said, "It's such a fine time being in your mind, thank you." I don't remember what I got in the class, probably a "B." But I looked at what I had *not* gotten, and this is when you start looking at the systemic level, and I thought, you know, these kids walked in here already having read Marx, which I asked for when I was fifteen and nobody would give me because it was the middle of the McCarthy era and they would lose their jobs, and I'm a Black kid in Chicago. And I finally read it when I get to Reed and I went "Aha! No wonder they didn't want to give this to Black kids in Chicago." [laughs]

Reed was quite an experience, it was, again, this hip group of folks. They wrote a—the woman wrote a column in the newspaper [*The Reed College Quest*]—that said "Wop Food." And I wrote back and said, "Well, when you gonna give us the 'Chink Food' or whatever kind of other... " Well she says, "Well I grew up with Italians and I wrote that." And I said, "And Hitler grew up with Jews." That stopped that one. Then there was the cover of the newspaper that had a big watermelon on it, and under it, the words from a Negro spiritual. [pause] Why? I just wrote and said, "You know, I think whoever did that should take the watermelon, turn it sideways and shove it up their ass." Here I'm learning something about people I thought might be a little more astute, a little more compassionate, a little more knowledgeable; I'm learning, they are not. I learned that they would steal things and I couldn't figure it out. I knew people that stole things in St. Louis, they stole because they didn't have any money, they stole because they were hungry, both physically and spiritually. Here are rich kids, and I finally figured it out, they're hungry spiritually. They go up to the Safeway and steal shit! And I didn't want to go with them. I didn't

want to go with them, I didn't want to be involved in that. Anyway, I think I gave them some things, they certainly gave me some, I made friends. And I was selective about them. I didn't want to hear a lot about how they hated their parents or whatever, I was too old, I was thirty years old when I went back there. I didn't want to hear about, you know—I wanted to hear something *up*, something good, of people who had some hopes, who weren't just angry at the world. And I made good friends, I made good friends.

CC: When did you graduate?

KAS: 1974, when I was thirty-four years old. Getting to Oregon was really a trip because I didn't know about this bias against Indians and Gypsies until I got here. Those two groups had always been romanticized where I grew up. Which is another kind of bias, another kind of stereotyping, but at least it's a little bit pleasant, you can, you know, you can hold some positive thoughts. When I was working for—when I first got here I worked for Stanley Drug, in their laboratory, and I did a lot of their assays of their pills that they were manufacturing. I asked one of the guys about going fishing and he said, "Oh yeah, you can go up to Warm Springs, on the Indian reservation." I said, "Oh yeah?" he said. "And you don't have to worry about those Indians, those are good Indians." I said, *what the f... what does that mean*?! [laughing]. It's like by this time I am just coming out of my shell, I'm not shutting up about anything, especially about bias. And I don't care who it's against, I don't like it. He apologized. Later, the same guy—I came in and I said I was gonna quit. When I was hired I was told they were gonna get a gas spectral photometer machine, which does—I'm sorry, a gas chromatograph, that's what it is; I haven't used that language in a long time, that's what it was, gas chromatograph. It's an assay thing, you put something in it, it goes through a tube of diatomaceous earth, it comes out, and you'll get a graph; and the height of that graph, depending on the speed of the gas and what you've got, what you're using, in the tube, will tell you what the elements are in that particular solution. So, you know, like we did whiskey one time and we got a [laughing] an [assay] for wood alcohol, that was back in St. Louis when I was working there. But, I came here and they said they were going to get that machine, that's why they hired me, they never got it. And the guy who was in charge of the lab kept giving me all the, just the rank, the rank assays. So the ones that were most likely to explode, the ones that really stank, I got. And I came in one day and I said, "Make it easy on yourself, you want me to quit in a week or two?" and he says "What?" I said, "You're giving me all the nasty assays, you're not sharing 'em around, I came here as somebody who had ten years' experience working in labs, and you're not treating me well." And he went away, and he went into his boss's office, who was a

Japanese guy. And Ted called me into the office, and I don't even remember my immediate supervisor's name; he said, "What's up?" I said, "I'm not going to be treated this way." I keep wanting to say the guy's name was Sam but I'm not sure—he said, "Well, it's not because you're Black." [laughs] I never said it! I mean, I wasn't even thinking it! I was just thinking, you're just dumping on me 'cause I'm the new kid, you know. And Tomaki looked at him, at then looked at me and said, "Would you excuse us please?" and I could see him in there going like this [gestures]. They decided to change, so that I could have more variety in what I was doing, but by that time I had decided to go back to school.

CC: So this was before you started at...?

KAS: It was before I started, yeah. Coming out of Reed, or, while I was in Reed actually, getting in touch with the women's movement, going to the Women's Resource Center, getting there and having nobody say hello. Having people drop their eyes. And... I get pissed off and I just make people do shit. I'd say, "HELLO! HOW ARE YOU?" [laughing] "YOU SAID YOU WANTED YOUR SISTERS OF COLOR HERE, HERE I AM! Goddamn it," you know. And again, they're *nice*, they're nice people here, they don't want to say what's in their minds, and it's very hard to do that fighting. If you're in St. Louis, or if you're in New York or if you're in Chicago, and you call somebody out, my experience has been, they're there! "Yeah, what do you mean motherfucker?" you know, but this, niceness and being afraid of me—like I'd say my name and you'd think I was gonna kill somebody, because I wasn't apologetic about the way I said my name. So I got involved with the women's stuff, I got involved with lesbian stuff, I got involved with Black stuff, that came later actually. Although I'd show up for Black stuff, I didn't get a lot of... credibility, I didn't have a lot of credibility. Avel [Gordly] helped a lot with that; working for the Urban League helped a lot with that. And me standing up for some stuff at work, and working pretty hard.

CC: What did you do for the Urban League?

KAS: I ran the youth services arm of the organization for a short while, yeah. I worked for the city in job training programs for almost ten years, and I got to be known there as somebody who was fair, and somebody who would speak up, and even on the issue of gay stuff. I wouldn't necessarily come out, but I'd say *What is that about? Why are you talking to him like that? How do I know* you're *not gay*; you know. It was, it just pissed me off, it's like a stupid way to spend your life,

you know, is worrying about what somebody else is or isn't. Is she Black or is she white; why do you care? Does it matter?

CC: So, one of the things that we started to talk about last time we spoke was, you were talking about the relationship between your feeling marginalized and how that led to leadership.

KAS: It's a concept I learned from a guy named Chuck Willie, who is retired from Harvard; he was an instructor there, I think in sociology. And it made sense to me and it still makes sense to me. He said, the view from the margins is a different view than if you're just, if you're with the mainstream. And I just thought, yeah, that's part of why I can see, if I have to integrate everything in me, then I can see how it could work in the rest of the world. And raised as a light-skinned Black in the 40's, which means you had to acknowledge you had some white ancestry, and then you look around at your cousins, you got cousins that range from white to *really* black, and then your Uncle Billy marries a Mexican woman, and they got a bunch of beautiful kids living down in Hobbes, New Mexico. And you say well, there's probably an Asian in there somewhere, what is all this stuff about? What is it all about? So for me it was like, all these people are me, I am all these people. I tried to live a life as a straight woman; that didn't work, but I have some appreciation for what women go through. Living a life as a hard butch, I have some appreciation for what boys go through, for what men go through. I don't think we're very nice to each other. But it's *because* I can see myself in these different places—in this room I'm a minority, in this
0:50.00 room I'm a majority—then when I add to that the privilege that I have, and I try to remember that at all times, sitting here with you, we got a computer, we got a recorder, we got lights, we're warm, we're dry, nobody's gonna stone us for, you know, doing something that they think we shouldn't do. We're privileged. I try to remember that every day. And that helps me see the world in a certain kind of way, and it makes me want to change the world, because it's not kind; it's not a kind place. I found out it wasn't kind by having my mother leave, by being raped, by being beaten, but those are the *extremes* of the unkindness, those are the visible unkind. There's an unkindness to children who are cold, who are hungry, who are without. I mean thank god I had a family that took me in, took care of me, loved me, and tried to, you know, make me wear skirts and go to school. They cared about me. But everything that's violent is not *apparent*, and I know that. What I didn't live through I saw. People who emotionally abandon their children, people who—and I have been beaten as a kid, really beaten—and people who rape children, and people who are indifferent to one another, who would choose to be mean rather than kind, as though their meanness would protect them from something, or give them something that they didn't have.

I think if you are both a lesbian and a woman, and Black, and smart, and by some measure, people thought I was pretty. I never thought that was important, I was raised that pretty is as pretty does. And what I learned early on was pretty got me raped. That's what was said to me as I was being raped, "You're so pretty, you're so pretty, I can't live without you, I must have you." That's *one* of the times I was raped. You look at all that, and then you go through some parts in your life, and you learn that you can't condemn everything. That, that—tell you a story, one of the guys who raped me when I was a kid lived in the neighborhood. By that time I was so internalized and so—wouldn't talk to anybody, just like this [hunches in], I wouldn't cry, you know, you could beat me I wouldn't cry. I got grown, came to Oregon, went back home to see my family, walked in to see my uncle, who was very ill, and there was this guy, Connie. I said to my brother, "What is Connie doing in our house!" He says, "He comes here every day, he makes sure Uncle Les is clean, he fixes his food, and he walks him back and forth to the bathroom. And he spends time with him." And my response was, *Okay, what am I supposed to learn? I'm supposed to learn something here*. And I let it go, I let it go, what he did, I let it go. I don't think he was right, I think he was wrong, I think he should've been punished. But I also have to say everybody's not a monolith. One thing that you did wrong—and I've done wrong shit in my life—don't make me a bad person. And so I have to look at, being pushed to that place where you've been abused, and the licks you take for it, and what, instead of “Oh my god, I'm a victim," what do I get out of this? What can I learn from this? How can I help somebody else? How can I talk to somebody else about it? Because one of the gifts I have is talking, you know, I know that. Well, I can go to Project Network and I can talk to the young women over there about the difference between affection and technique and sex and love. And they loved it. I'm saying, you know, "He kisses really good." That's not love, that's technique [laughs].

And that's what, I guess what I mean by, if you're on the margin, it's like standing on a wall that's higher. And you look around and you say, aha, Black folks over here, white folks over here, Asians over here, Indians over here, oh, Latinos over here. But what's the real difference between these people? Fundamentally, they want to be warm and dry and loved, they want to be fed, they wanna have something to *laugh* at, and when they're sad they want somebody to comfort them. So, fundamentally, we're about the same. I can see that. What's the difference between all these people and the Lesbian and gay folks? Well, 'bout the same stuff. What about old folks? Well, they need a little help getting around but other than that it's about the same stuff. And some of them are Lesbian and some of them are gay and some Latino and some are Indian and, you know, it's—cultural differences are *real*, but they should not preclude our ability to interact peacefully.

And to be able to help one another as opposed to killing each other ‘cause we're different. I think you see that better when you see yourself as different. When you know you're different, you're outside of so many groups, and you figure out how to be inside, or how to get to a place where you can work *with*, as opposed to decide to destroy. And I'm not naive enough to think that you can go through life and never have a fight, because there are people who wanna kill ya, I know that, and you get to make a decision about whether you want to just lay down and die or whether you're gonna fight back, and I probably would fight back. And I don't know what I'd do if I had to make a choice between my life and the life of some young kid. I'd probably just say, well shoot me. But that would be a hard choice. So I don't think that those things don't happen to people. I just know that where I am, in a place of privilege, with certain kinds of gifts, I can talk with people about changing the dynamic that we've always had. And I can talk with almost anyone, if they're willing to talk with me. I don't have to draw a line and say I won't talk to so and so. Yes I'll talk to Republicans, yes I will talk to people who don't like gay people, yes I would… I have a great story. My friend Frances Portillo does workshops and trainings for diversity. And she called me one day and she said, "I got this woman up from Southern Oregon who just does not like gay people, will you talk to her?" And I said, "Sure." And I go over to Frances' house and I spend a couple hours talking with this woman. Her religious beliefs are very strong and I said, "You know, I want you to do something with me, I want you to come and go to the gay church with me on Sunday." I said, "I'm not a member, I don't really go to church, but I'd like for you to come and see what that's like." And she said, "Okay." We got there and we're outside the church and I said, "You know they’re going to think you're my girlfriend." And she laughed, and she said, "I don't care." I said, "Okay, let's go in." And we went in and—have you ever been to MCC [Metropolitan Community Church]?

CC: Is that the one on Broadway?

KAS: Yeah.

CC: Yeah.

KAS: I *love* their communion service, I love the way they do it.

CC: I've never been there for a service.

KAS: Well, they do a communion where, like if we wanted to go up as a family, we could go up and then we'd be given the communion.

CC: Together.

KAS: Yeah, together. Or if you wanted to up just with your partner or by yourself or, you know, and I just think it's a lovely way to do it. But I don't take communion. I'm a non-believer in that. Although I find it comforting, I know what is comforting is for me is memory of my childhood. So I don't take communion. Afterwards I asked her what she thought she said, "Wow, it's a great service." I said, "What did you think of the communion?" She said, "I really wanted to go up." I said, "Why didn't you?" She said, "I was waiting for you." And I said, "I'm so sorry, I just don't take communion." I'm not about taking people's religion away from them, I am about hoping they will look at it and see what the symbols say, and what the message is in the symbols. Especially messages about suffering and messages about self-righteousness, you know, don't like it. Anyway.

CC: But she... what was her experience?

KAS: She said to me, she said, "I don't know if I can ever say it's okay to be homosexual, but I do know that when people say things that aren't true now, when I go back home, south of Salem, I can say that's not true." I said, "Good." That's all you can get right now. That's wonderful! That's a big—if you don't talk to people, you can't get even that little bit of movement. When we were fighting Lon Mabon [founder of Oregon Citizens Alliance, the sponsor organization of Ballot Measure 9 which sought to amend the state's Constitution to prohibit it from recognizing sexual orientation in its operations and for public schools to teach homosexuality was abnormal and perverse] in '92 I went down to… what's the place with the caveman outside of it? It's either Monmouth or one of those cities down there. We're in a room and it's people of color and we're going to talk about Lon Mabon and fighting him, and I introduced myself, we go around the room, the last guy in the room says, "I think I don't belong here." I said, "Why not?" He said, "Because I support Lon Mabon." I said, "Please stay." He said, "Why?" I said, "Because we get to live on this planet together." And we talked about children and schools and roads and jobs and trees, in *addition*. So when it was over, he said, "Thank you for asking me to stay." I said, "Why?" He said, "Because I know now that you're not just about one thing." That's what you see when you're on the margins, nobody is about one thing. Nobody's about—ultimately, you can't be *just Black*, you gotta be a

Black woman or a man, you gotta be a certain age, you gotta have a certain sexual orientation, you gotta have a certain background, level of education; you can't be *just Black.* And *just Black* won't take you anywhere, if you're talking about living in a peaceful world, which is what I'm talking about. It won't take you anywhere until you can connect with other people on the level of your willingness, number one, to have compassion, to extend yourself, to accept from others things that they're willing to give to you. And that's just getting to that multi-faceted analysis of the world, which again, is a part of what I think happens when people who are marginalized—if they're not made sick by it, 'cause I think a lot of people are—then you get to look at the world and say, "Hmm, yeah, okay, looks like this. Hmm, yeah, looks like that. Let's bring this together, let's see what we can do here." And I watched Avel [Gordly] do it with me, bring me in to places I would not have otherwise been, you know. *I'm sitting here,* [looks around] *Whoa, I'm sittin' here with some preachers.* I know how I got here, I know how I got here.

CC: This was Avel's question when I asked her what she would ask you. She said, "As a woman, when did you know and really believe that you were smart?"

KAS: Oh, from the time I was a little kid, my dad always told me I was smart, yeah. He um, [laughing] he would tell you [that] you were not allowed to be dumb. [Laughing] You were a Gunnell. But I was told that I was smart and then I was skipped in school. But what I didn't understand, for a long time, was that everybody else wasn't as smart as I was. And I don't even know if they were not as smart, as they didn't have the kind of support that I had. When I got home my grandmother would say, "Where's your homework?" "Don't have any." "I'll give you some." I remember struggling with long division, and just sitting at the desk and having such a hard time, and my uncle saying, "Do you want some help?" And me saying, "No, I want to learn this." "Okay." So I had a lot of support. And then when I was successful and I brought home good grades, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, you can do it, you can do it." I had friends who were very, very smart who didn't have support. One of whom I talked about with somebody else the other night, who I don't even know if she's dead or alive now; she went so far off in to drugs and… but she was smarter than me, she was a lot smarter than me. Oz, my friend who lives over in Southeast Portland, when we were in the third grade together, she was commended for excellence when she was at Reed. She's a Black woman that went there, had a baby, was married, was making bread every other day, had two children, she carried the baby on her back, commended for excellence, smart, smart. But we felt dumb sometimes, I think. I think when you get around people who are committed to making you feel dumb—which is something I have found happens with insecure men; they need for you not

to be smart. I didn't have the word sexism in my vocabulary either, but I can remember one of the last times I went out with a guy, his name was Johnny, we were having a nice time sitting somewhere and talking, and two of his friends came in—we were in a bar—and two of his friends came in, they started talking, and when I would try to interject, nothing, you know nobody smiles, and finally somebody handed me some money and said, "Go play the jukebox." And I'm standing at the jukebox thinking, *There's something wrong with this, something's wrong*. I didn't know how to explain it to myself, but I knew it wasn't the right thing, because my dad told me I was smart and that I could talk, you know. Yeah he... well we weren't gonna go anywhere 'cause I wouldn't go to bed with him, number one, but... I think there's being told you're smart and then there's the discovery of what that *means*, and what it *obligates you to do*. I don't believe you just get to be smart, I believe you're supposed to use that for something. Some people use it for themselves, and I'm not going to argue with them about that. But I believe that—and I think it has to do with my family of origin—you owe something back. You owe something back to the people who came before you, and you have to give something to the people who are coming after you. And sometimes you can do it easily and sometimes you can't, but you *owe something*. When you think about Black people in this country, and what people went through, what my folks went through, what *their* folks went through and what *their* folks went through, each step, each generation, has been a reflection of their hopes. I went to Farmington, Missouri—I told you my grandpa had been the principal at the colored school down there—I went to Farmington, Missouri some years ago, and I went to the graveyard there, the Masonic, colored, graveyard. And I found the corner of the graveyard where a lot of my family the Caseys were. And it was probably one of the most uplifting experiences I've ever had. I stood there and I thanked them. I said, "I'm here, I'm your child. *I'm the one that you put effort into*. You didn't know who I was; I'm here. I'm back to thank you." And it was like being lifted up off the ground. I'd never felt anything like that in my life, it was amazing to me. But I thanked them. *I didn't do this myself, I didn't do this*. I did some of it, but the ideas, the feelings, the compassion, the understanding, they come from some… they got handed to me. And the—whatever ambition I have, whatever determination I have, whatever courage I have, these were handed to me; they were taught to me. My father would say, "Go upstairs and get my socks out of the drawer." And I would say, "It's dark up there." And he'd say, "Yes it is." [laughs] And I'd go upstairs, because I wanted him to think I was cool.

CC: So what are you most proud of in your... that you've achieved or struggled through or...

1:10.00

KAS: I'm proud of... hmm. You just got the top of my life, you just got the surface. I'm proud that somehow and some way, I still care about the world; I am not its victim. That---when your mom runs off when you're four years old, you can choose to hang on to that as a comment on you, or you can see yourself as a statistic, or see her as somebody who was irresponsible or whatever it takes. But if that's the beginning of your memory cycle, and then there's beatings and there's rapes and there's abandonment again and again, and there's bad relationships with various people and there's moving from here to there, and there's somebody telling you [that] you can't come to this school because you're not white and rich, and there's somebody else telling you [that] you can't have this job, I mean I climbed stairs for jobs and found out it was for white only back in the 50's and 60's. You get all that, and somewhere there is the risk, always, of becoming bitter, of deciding that the world is not worth your participation. And I'm really proud that I still care. That's taken a lot of therapy [laughing], which means a lot of money, and it's taken a lot of introspection. And it's taken a lot of… forgiving myself for not being god, is what I call it. Not being able to do *all* the things I'd like to do, and not being perfect.

I'm also proud that I have good relationships with good people. I love that, I love my friends. I'm not a good follow-upper, you know, I'm not real good at checking in. I'm a hermit basically. But I love my friends, and I feel loved by them, so I am proud of having developed those friendships. I was proud to fight against Ballot Measure 9, to be out there, to be, as a Black woman, somebody who was not going to apologize for being a lesbian or a Black woman, that they didn't need apology. I was proud to have worked for Neil Goldschmidt [Oregon governor, 1987-1991], no matter what anybody else thinks of him. He was a good boss, he's a smart guy; he made a really bad mistake and he apologized, and I wish people would leave him alone, but I was proud to work for him. I don't know, I just feel, I feel *lucky*, more than proud I feel *lucky*. I mean, you know, I never planned on doing most of the stuff I've done in my life. I didn't sit down and say, "Gee, I want to be the director of affirmative action when I grow up." There was no affirmative action, you know, I wanted to be a chemist, and I flunked chemistry, first time in college, and I went and worked in biochemistry labs for ten years, I mean, *What was that about?* I mean I never have figured it out. Anyway, I feel lucky more than proud, I guess, I feel blessed; I feel that I've been presented with opportunities that have been hard sometimes but I feel blessed that I had enough courage to try them. Climbing a rock in Colorado, sailing on a hundred and thirty-five foot ship in the South China Sea, going to Reed College, those are big adventures for me. And I think I went because I wanted to learn something about myself, and I feel lucky that I got to do it, and I did learn something about myself, some of it good and some of it bad, you know, not so

good. But yeah, I feel lucky more than proud, I mean proud, eh. I'm proud of some of the poetry I write sometimes, then I look at six months later and I go "Ehhh." [laughs]

CC: Everybody does that.

1:15.00

KAS: Yeah.

CC: Okay.

KAS: Is that it?

CC: Is there anything else that you would like to say?

KAS: Mmhmm, probably.

CC: I'm sure! Say it!

KAS: First of all, it's an honor to be interviewed. I don't know what anybody will make of anything I have to say. I think one of the most important things in my life is that I have believed in people, and part of that is because people believed in me. When Thelma Dickerson said, "Your handwriting's terrible, sit down!" she had no doubts but that I could learn to write legibly; there was no doubt there. It wasn't, *You are culturally deprived, you have been mistreated and therefore you're handicapped.* I feel *lucky* that I came before that era when everybody decided all the little Black kids were culturally deprived. I believe that young people, people forty years my junior, are going to make the world a different place, if they can get a hold of it fast enough. I think it's spinning out of control right now, and I think they don't know where to grab hold. I want to see people in the streets again. This stuff that we're going through is just *insane*. All the way from the banks, to the healthcare system, to just plain old taking care of people, just being friends with people or respectful of people. You know, people are just—well, I think young people can make a difference, I think they can, they can teach, they can teach *us.* Your world is different from mine; it's not the same, and I can unlearn some things that I may need to unlearn. But I need help in seeing what *this* world is like, and I can give some things to say this is what this has been

like, this is what the history has been, let's don't go there again, or let's try to avoid the worst part of it all.

[Phone starts ringing]

KAS: Whoo that's terrible, that phone; it'll stop in a minute. One of the things that I learned, and I think it comes out of…learned. *Realized*. I think it comes out of being born right before the war, or right before we got into the war, because the war had already started. I realized at some point in time, there was World War II [phone starts to ring] let me make sure that's not my mom.

[End of interview]

1:18.21