Oral History Project
Miriam McClendon
November 8, 1995
Code: Huntley [H] McClendon [M]

H: This is an interview with Miriam McClendon for the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute's Oral History Project. I am Dr. Horace Huntley and we are at Miles College. Today is November 8, 1995.

Thank you Ms. McClendon for coming in and taking time out of your busy schedule to sit with us today.

M: Thank you very much for inviting me.

H: I would like to start by asking some general questions about your background. Were your parents from Birmingham?

M: Yes.

H: Where were their parents from? Were they from Alabama?

M: Yes. They were from Alabama down in the Black Belt.

H: What county, do you remember?

M: I'm not sure which county, but my father's parents and grandparents are from a town a few miles north and west of Montgomery.

H: That's around Prattville?

M: Not Prattville. I think a little further west than Prattville. Again, you could give me 30 lashes with a wet noodle, I should know this, but I just know the general area that they came from.

H: Now, your mother, was her family from Jefferson County?

M: No. Her family was originally was from an area not too far removed from my father. As a matter of fact, they grew up together. They went to the same schools, fell in love in high school. Well, to hear him tell it, they fell in love in grammar school, and he knew, when he first laid eyes on her, that would eventually be his wife.

H: And, she didn't know he existed until later on?

M: Well, I think he caught her eye fairly early on.

H: I said that because that's what my wife says. She said, we started to date in the 11th grade or something, but I recognized her in the 8th grade. She didn't know that I was there until the 11th grade. Now, you were born in Birmingham?

M: That's correct. I was born in Jefferson County at Wenonah.

H: How many brothers and sisters do you have?

M: There are seven living brothers and sisters. Originally there were nine of us. The eldest died in infancy and so there are eight remaining.

H: Where do you fit?

M: I'm number three of the remaining children.

H: So you did the baby sitting?

M: Oh, yes, the diaper washing, the cooking, cleaning, the whole nine yards.

H: Tell me about your parents' education. How much schooling did they have?

M: My father graduated high school and he went to trade school and he majored in tailoring. My mother eventually graduated high school, but she didn't do that until after she was grown and, of course, we had all come on the scene. She dropped out of high school, got married and started raising a family.

H: Did he go to Parker or to Powderly?

M: He went to Powderly.

H: And she went to Powderly?

M: Yes.

H: You know, that's a question, because many people really are not aware that there was a Powderly High School. They think the only thing that was here was Parker, and, then, they talk about Roosevelt, of course. But there was a Powderly High School.

M: Absolutely. And they have their high school reunions every year.

H: In fact, they're trying to get you guys from Wenonah to join them. They said you won't be able to vote, but you can join them.

M: Well, we'll have to talk about that one. If we're there, we want representation.

H: Where did you start first grade?

M: Ishkooda Elementary School. It went from the 1st through 3rd grade. It was a three room school right in the middle of the larger Ishkooda community.

H: Ishkooda was a mining community?

M: Exactly. All of the different communities had numbers, #9, #11. I remember the number of our community until you asked me that question. I think we were #9, but I would have to talk to my Mom to verify that.

H: I think so, because Wenonah was 11 & 12. I remember those. We're from the same general area. So you went from 1st through 3rd at Ishkooda, then where did you go?

M: Then, I went to Powderly for a year. And, then I transferred to Wenonah Elementary for one year. I went there for the 5th grade and found out that we couldn't return. I lived closer to Powderly Elementary so that's where I had to go, much to my chagrin. But, I went from the 6th through the 8th grades at Powderly

Elementary.

H: Then you went back to Wenonah?

M: I went to Wenonah High, that's correct, in the 9th grade.

H: What do you remember about your elementary school days? Anything that stands out in your memory?

M: I loved school early on. I had a passion for learning and I was an avid reader. The one thing that I remember, I think is the fact that at some point I lost that love, that intense passion for school, not for learning, but the structure.

H: Why do you think you lost that, and at that age, in elementary school?

M: I didn't like the teaching methods. I had a peculiar way of learning and I didn't think the instructors were able to make the material interesting enough for me. If we were assigned a reading selection, for example, I would read it and, then, go to class and it really wouldn't be discussed to my satisfaction. So, as a result, I ended up doing a lot of my reading outside the classroom and I would try to talk to a classmate or my brothers and sisters about it, but of course, they hadn't read it. They really discuss it with me. I think there really wasn't enough time to thoroughly digest the material and to thoroughly discuss it. I think again, when I started taking math, I became very disillusioned because, maybe I was a slow learner with the numbers, but I was turned off to math. First of all, the students scared the heck out of me saying that math is hard. Then the instructor didn't make it any better. She didn't take the time to really explain it, she just whizzed through it. And, back then we didn't have tutors. So I was just kind of turned off.

H: As a result of you being turned off, were you rebellious?

M: Not openly.

H: How did that manifest itself?

M: Well, I stopped doing a lot of my homework and started reading other kinds of books. Now, when I was in the 5th grade I was reading at a 9th grade level according to the national standardized test. I was skipped a half grade in elementary school. So, as a result, I ended up being one whole grade higher than I should have been. That created a new set of problems for me because when I went into the 8th grade, I again, should have been with the 7th grade, and, then, my brother was in the same grade and he hated the fact that I was in his class now.

H: So you were younger than the other children?

M: Right.

H: And that impacted upon what you could do versus what the other classmates could do?

M: Yes.

H: At Wenonah High School you were there for four years. Tell me, what do you remember about Wenonah High School?

M: I remember being very shy and I had a sister who preceded me and I was sort of in her shadow.

H: Cassandra?

M: That's right. She was very popular. She had this beautiful singing voice and this very open personality and I was the opposite. I was a bookworm. I traveled to strange, far away places in my book, but I wasn't very open with people, at that point. People were always making the comparison between the two of us. "Are you sure you're Cassandra's sister?" I said, "Well, yes."

H: In 1963 you were a sophomore at Wenonah?

M: Yes.

H: This was the time of the demonstrations and you got involved. How did that come about?

M: I started watching the Movement, if you will on TV. I had watched the news with my family. Once I understood what they meant by the Civil Rights Movement, it made sense to me. I had always felt that there was something wrong between the races and I wasn't really sure what that "something" was. But, I didn't like the way the Black people in my community would respond when a White bill collector would come around.

H: How would they respond?

M: They were normally very proud, aggressive men. But, then, all of a sudden they would become rather subservient in their demeanor when a White man came around and that bothered me and I watched it.

H: Were there discussions of that at all between you and others that were your age? Other children? Did you ever discuss that?

M: No. I don't know that they noticed.

H: You mean the men?

M: No. My peers. I don't think they really noticed it. They were interested, for example, in being outside and playing all the little games that kids normally play. And, I played some too, don't get me wrong. But, I preferred the company of books to the company of the kids.

H: So, were you a loner?
M: Pretty much.

H: So that's where you more or less educated yourself through utilization of books rather than being all consumed by the educational process?

M: Exactly. I didn't realize it at the time, but yes.

H: Your involvement in the Movement, how did that happen?

M: My mother went to a mass meeting and I wanted to go and she took me. And, sitting in the audience and listening to Dr. King touched on that mysterious "something" inside me and I knew that they were addressing the race question and it had never really been addressed before. And, I thought, okay, "Finally, let me kind of investigate this and see where this will lead." And, back then they separated the mass meetings. They had one for the adults and they had one around the corner for the youth. I started going to the youth meeting and just became totally engrossed.

H: Explain to me what was the youth meeting like?

M: A lot of singing and rallying. They discussed the critical issues, the same issues that were being discussed in the larger mass meeting with the adults, but they tailored it to fit the temperament of the student. Again, I just became totally absorbed and fell absolutely in love with Rev. James Bevill.

H: Was Bevill one of those that sort of instructed the youth at that time?

M: Yes.

H: Were there others that you remembered who was just as actively involved as Bevill?

M: There were always people coming in and out. I remember Carlton Reese was there playing away at the piano, leading us through song. I'm drawing a blank now because, I think you are asking me these questions.

H: But there were other individuals who were very actively involved in that process?

M: Oh, yes. You had people who were there on a weekly basis, who were kind of on the front line, the foot soldiers.

H: Right. Tommy Wren was one of them. There were others also, but in that first week of May in 1963 is when the students actually got really consumed with the Movement and they sort of thrust ahead and saved the Movement, in effect. Were you a part of that?

M: That wave, yes.

H: At other schools, particularly in schools that were closer to the downtown area, on the perimeter, like Parker and Ullman, there were workers that would go to those schools and talk with students to try to get them to come and join the Movement. Did that happen at Wenonah at all?

M: Yes. But, now there were a number of us who already were involved in the Movement, again, through the mass meetings. We knew they were coming to our school because they told us. They said, "We want you to walk out and go with us downtown because we're trying to make a statement, we want to send a message." And, I heard them and it really didn't sink into me what they were actually saying until I saw

some of the guys walking up and down the hallways calling the students to come out.

H: Inside the school?

M: Oh, yes. They were walking up and down the hallways beckoning. I looked out there and I saw them and I said, "Oh, okay. Now is the time."

H: You responded to that call?

M: Immediately.

H: Were there others that responded as well?

M: Yes. There were a number of us who just got up, walked out of class and we walked from Wenonah High School to downtown Birmingham to Kelly Ingram Park.

H: That's about 7 or 8 mile walk?

M: Yes. We walked and we sang and chanted and, in retrospect, I think about it now and if I were to really stop and think about it, I say "Wow, that's a long way." But, back then we were young. I was 13 or 14 years old and I walked long distances anyway. I would walk from Ishkooda to Cairo Church of Christ to revival meetings.

H: Which is probably 3 or 4 miles, itself?

M: Right. So I was used to it. And you know, back then, we all walked a lot.

H: Do you remember when you walked that distance, did you walk it more than once or was it just this particular day? I know at other times those students would leave school the first day and, then, rather than going to school, the other days, they would leave home and go to the church or downtown to the Movement. Is that the way that it happened with you all?

M: No. I only, and I think this would be true for most of the other students as well. We only made that long walk that one time. Again, we were trying to make that statement so we walked from Wenonah to downtown Birmingham and that was the same day that I got arrested. When I say that I really hadn't given any thought to it, prior to that, I'm very serious, because I had not asked my parents permission. I really did not know that I would end up in jail that day. I thought I would walk downtown and march. You know, the same kinds of things that I had done many times in the past, and, then go home.

H: Be home by 3:30 or 4:00 o'clock?

M: Right. And no one being the wiser.

H: What were the circumstances of your arrest?

M: When we got to Kelly Ingram Park we were split up in different groups and each group had an assigned

area. My group's assigned area was the Atlantic Mills Thrift Store.

H: Is that on 8th Avenue?

M: Yes. And my parents, of course, shopped there. We had this big family and you know how difficult it was to feed and clothe everybody in those days. So I was familiar with the store and the specific reason that we were picketing at Atlantic Mills, was because they had no Black sales clerks, no Black managers. We couldn't drink at the fountains. We couldn't use the bathrooms other than the one designated for "colored." That didn't make sense to me because, if not the majority, a large portion of their clientele was Black. I thought it only made sense that we should be employed there if we were going to spend our dollars there. So we went there to picket the store.

H: Upon arrival, what happened?

M: The store manager came out. We had our little signs and we had formed our little circle and we started marching and singing. He came out and demanded that we stop, but of course, we kept going. He kind of stepped almost directly in front of me and in order to avoid colliding with him, I said, "Well, let me stop and see what he has to say." So he preceded to tell us that if we did not leave the premises immediately, he would call the police and have us arrested. I'm standing there. There was no leader of that group, so I didn't make myself leader, or anything, he just happened to stop in front of me. I had to decide then and there for myself whether or not to walk away or to continue marching, so I just stepped around him and continued marching and singing and everybody else did the same thing.

H: How many people were there?

M: About 20 I would say. Between 20 and 25.

H: How many people would accompany you from Wenonah to downtown?

M: Well in excess of 100.

H: Is that right?

M: Yes. It was a big group.

H: And it was sort of a festive occasion then for the kids.?

M: Yes.

H: That's interesting because I've heard of individuals walking from Fairfield to downtown, but actually Fairfield is not quite as far as Wenonah. But, the walk from Wenonah seem to be quite significant because it has been stated that there were not many people involved from that area.

M: Not true. Not true.

H: When you continued to march at Atlantic Mills, the manager eventually did call the police?

M: He immediately called the police.

H: And you were arrested?

M: Yes.

H: Was everyone arrested?

M: Everyone.

H: Tell me about that experience. What was it like when you were arrested? What happened?

M: Well, the police car seemed to materialize almost immediately but I imagine maybe 3-5 minutes passed. But, they apparently were nearby because of the climate. They knew things were happening. They shot down there in about 2-3 paddy wagons and we were loaded into the back of the paddy wagons and were driven to 6th Avenue Jail.

H: Southside?

M: Yes. Southside. They took our fingerprints. They took our photographs and background information. Again, it still had not sunk into me that I wasn't going to go home until after the processing they put us back in, either a paddy wagon or bus, I'm not exactly sure which. But we were transported. I think it was a bus because we were with kids from other schools and, then, we were taken to the county jail.

H: Were the 20-25 people that were arrested all Wenonahians?

M: No. Once we got to Kelly Ingram Park we were just sort of integrated into the group. So there were some Wenonahians there but many of them were just people I didn't know.

H: So after you then were transported to the county, how long did you remain?

M: About 3-4 days at the county, I'm not very clear. But, then we were transported to the fair grounds, Fair Park Arena.

H: How long did you remain there, several days?

M: Yes.

H: What do you remember about the experience of being incarcerated?
M: The most vivid memory that I have being incarcerated, is the sweat box. That kind of over shadows everything else.

H: What do you mean, "the sweat box?"

M: The sweat box was a little small room, closet size and you had to step down into it. Just a few inches, not far and they had water at the bottom of it. It was like a big steel coffin because the sides were metal and the

door was metal. You know this was the place where they took you to punish you.

H: You were taken there?

M: Yes, I was punished because I wasn't a good girl. Well, okay, these are the circumstances leading up to both my experiences in the sweat box. The first time I was taken to the sweat box was because one of my cell mates was ill and complaining of headache and stomachache and was just really balled up and in pain. I and a couple of girls in our cell block called for the warden. At first she ignored us and we took some tin forks or cups and banged them up against the jail cell and made a lot of racket and, then she came in and wanted to know why we were calling for her. We explained that the girl was sick and we wanted to know if we could get some type of medical attention for her. She laughed and walked away. Bear in mind that we were young and not used to this type of treatment and, you know, here is this girl who obviously is ill, and we were frightened so we started banging again. We said, "Wait a minute, did you not hear us? She's sick." Well then, she came and took all of us, but the sick girl to the sweat box.

H: Is this in the city or the county jail?

M: This is in the county jail. I don't know how long we were there, maybe an hour or less.

H: So, how many could get into the sweat box itself?

M: Well, I thought only 3 or 4 comfortably. The first time we were put in there, there was no one else in there, just the 3-4 of us. We just kind of stood around, laughed and told jokes and when they finally came and let us out. We said, "Hey, now, that wasn't so bad if that's all the punishment we were going get, we'll just keep on banging." And when we got back, they still hadn't done anything for the girl, so we kind of watched her all night, in pain. That following morning to add to our punishment they brought us little hard biscuits and a fried piece of fat back and some watery syrup. We looked at it and this was not fit for human consumption so we threw our plates against the wall. Now, again, we had been watching TV, so this is what you do in jail, right? So, we're acting out what we had seen when an inmate wants to show displeasure. The girl was still sick. We started banging against the bars again. This time, when they came and got us and took us to the sweat box, they said, "Okay, well, now you've done it, you're going to the sweat box." Well, we had it the day before so we really didn't think that much about it. But, when they took us the second time, it was very different. When they opened the door, it was already jam packed with girls and the heat from the bodies just kind of hit us in the face. I just stood there and they said, "Come on, go on in." I didn't move because I was about to turn around and say "Well, it's already full, it can't hold anymore." And, then, they pushed us in there. I was the last one to go in because I just stood there. They finally pushed me in and I could feel the bodies being pressed back and, then, the warden and one of her assistants had to push the door. They had to use their body weight to close the door, I mean it was just that packed. And, the girls were crying and moaning. There was absolutely no air.

H: Do you remember how long that lasted?

M: No.

H: Probably seems like a lifetime?

M: Yes.

H: Upon being released from that, is that when you were taken to the fair grounds? After coming out of the sweat box the second time?

M: After coming out of the sweat box, it was probably the next day that we were transferred to the fair grounds, because that evening, all of the other girls -- the newspaper was coming to do a story on the kids in jail. So, they had to kind of "put on the dog." It was a fun day. They gave the girls fried chicken, banana pudding, mashed potatoes and gravy. Now we were absolutely famished. Remember we had threw our breakfast against the wall and had no food in the interim. And, when we questioned it, they brought us the same thing we had for breakfast, a strip of fat back, the cold hard biscuit and the watery syrup. We just threw a fit, but to no avail, so we just had to sit there and watch the girls eat, and enjoy their feast and interestingly enough, I couldn't get a single person to share.

H: Is that right?

M: No. I couldn't get a single person to share with us.

H: What do you remember about when you were released from the fairgrounds? Did your parents come get you?

M: My father came to pick me up. When I got home I started talking to my Mom and I said, "Weren't you worried about us?" She said, "Well, no, because when you didn't come home, we knew you were in jail." That surprised me because I didn't know that my parents knew me well enough to know that if they came to my school I would be one of the first to get up and go. But, of course, parents always do. She continued to go to the mass meetings and they were explaining the process to them and explaining to them that they didn't want them to come and bail us right out. But, they did want us to stay in jail for a few days. They wanted us to just fill up the jails and even once they were full, to keep coming and that's pretty much what happened.

H: Were any of your other brothers and sisters arrested?

M: No.

H: Did they demonstrate?

M: No. My younger brother, the one immediately under me, wanted to, but he was too young and my parents wouldn't allow him.

H: What was your reception when you returned to school?

M: We did not have to face any negative repercussions. It was as thought it never happened.

H: You were not suspended from school?

M: Oh no. Not at all. And, I think that was the administration's way of supporting us, by not taking action.

H: Who was principal?

M: Leon Kennedy.

H: Mr. Kennedy was still there. So when you returned then, how did your classmates treat you? Did they treat you any differently, or did they ask you questions about what happened?

M: No.

H: Was it ever discussed in class?

M: No.

H: It was just as if...

M: It had never happened.

H: It had never happened.

M: Right. Although I didn't realize it, that sweat box experience really traumatized me because I didn't talk about it. I talked about it maybe a little bit to my parents and my family that first day that I got out. But, after that, I just never discussed it again and didn't realize that it was a sore spot for me until many, many years later when I was talking to someone and I mentioned the sweat box and they wanted to know what the sweat box was. I started explaining it and just broke down and started crying and I was "Where did that come from?"

H: Have you written about the experience?

M: Yes and no. I have written about it to the extent that once that happened, I realized that there was a little problem area for me and I wrote about one aspect of my experience. Just enough to kind of get it out because it was cathartic for me. I have actually started a book.

H: About the experience?

M: About my involvement in the Civil Rights Movement, about my analysis of the African American experience in this country, from my perspective. But, I have not been able to make much headway and there's a block somewhere that I have really got to work on. I've got to tear it down, because I'm just full of it.

H: Well, I sort of understand that being a writer myself, that once you figure out what the block is, and you get it out of your way, you'll be well on your way. Did you demonstrate after you were arrested and returned to school?

M: Yes.
H: Were there any other arrests?

M: No other arrests, but I continued to picket and demonstrate. I wore out, I don't know how many pairs of shoes. I was driven. And, even after I graduated high school, there wasn't much activism going on at my

high school. We went to jail, those of who walked to downtown Birmingham, and, then we came back to school and it was pretty much business as usual. The real activism didn't start until I attended Miles College.

H: Tell me about the transition from Wenonah to Miles. Did you go directly from Wenonah High School to Miles College?

M: Yes. I wanted to go away to college, but I was only 16 and my parents wouldn't have it, so I had to go to Miles College so that I could remain under their watchful eye. My freshman year, Stokely Carmichael came to Miles College to speak. That, I think was my great awakening. Stokely spoke to me. He touched a chord in me that had never been touched before because he was verbalizing many of the ideas and concepts that I felt but had not given expression to. So, I think while I enjoyed the Civil Rights Movement and those who were preaching turning the other cheek and non-violence as the way, I heard that and I accepted it, but I wanted to try Stokely's way.

H: What did Stokely say?

M: It was more his rhetoric. He was very forceful and he was talking about Black power. And, he was saying "I'm not interested in sitting next to you at the lunch counter, or necessarily drinking at your water fountain, let us get our own." We, as a Black community should galvanize our strength and unify to build for self." That made sense to me.

H: What then did you do as a result of being really understanding of what Stokely was suggesting?

M: Well, on campus I started working with other like-minded individuals and we had a little underground newspaper. We would go out into the community and try to register people to vote. We continued doing many of the same kinds of things that were being done through the SCLC, but we also tried to raise people's level of consciousness. And, you know, we were very quick to call people "Uncle Toms" if they didn't do what we wanted them to do. So, in this underground newspaper we had what we called a "Tom of the Week Award." This is right out here at Miles College, too. The "Tom of the Week Award." Those professors, for example, who we felt were impeding the progressive thinking we honored them with that award and we put it in the paper. They didn't know who was publishing the paper, so we could be very, very forthright and write exactly what we thought and felt.

H: After Miles College, what did you do?

M: I moved to Chicago, followed my big sister to the big city. I was just bursting at the seams, ready to get out of Birmingham and moved up there and immediately met the man that I married. So, then, for the next 13 1/2 years I was married and raising a family. That was the main thing that I did at that time, but not the only thing, because I continued to be active politically. Not politically in terms of the Democratic or Republican Party, but politically active in terms of searching out organizations that had what I thought was a progressive agenda.

H: Community kinds of activities?

M: Exactly. Grass Roots.

H: You were in Chicago in the 70s?

M: Yes.

H: Your children were born there?

M: Right.

H: How did you happen to end up back in Birmingham?

M: I moved around quite a bit. Well, first of all, I got divorced and decided that Chicago was not big enough for me and my ex-husband. The company that I worked for was undergoing this massive restructuring and they were transferring a lot of their business to their Orlando, Florida office and, because I was in management, I was given an opportunity to transfer, and I decided that I wanted to go to kind of make a new start. So, I transferred to Orlando, Florida. Then, I transferred from there, with the same company, to Washington, D.C. and took over an office in D.C. and kept it for a few years. I went to Nicaragua in 1986 as part of the Washington, D.C./Bluefield sister city project. We were trying to make Washington, D.C. a sister city to Bluefield, Nicaragua, which is an English speaking town on the Atlantic coast in Nicaragua. Everywhere I go I was involved in what was going on in the community. I liked the idea of the sister city project. I found that the major of the residents in Bluefield were Black. I said, "In Nicaragua?" I said, "Let me go and check that out." So, we had this delegation that travelled to Nicaragua. When I went to Nicaragua I think that was one of the capstone events in my life. I saw poverty like I had never, ever imagined in my wildest dreams. This was a war torn country and to see the people struggling for their freedom made a profound impact on me. It made me realize that the "little things" that I had been subjected to, here in the United States were peanuts, compared to that. When I came back to the United States, I was very disenchanted with my job, with everything. I sort of took a

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M: ...12 and 14 hour days. Not spending a lot of time with my family because I was trying to climb this ladder, and I wasn't happy. I decided at that point that I wanted to do something different with my life. I turned in my resignation. This didn't happen overnight mind you. I gave it a lot of thought. I went to Nicaragua in June and in August I turned in my resignation. I wanted to give them a couple of months to find a replacement for me. In October of 1986 I left corporate America and came back to Birmingham, Alabama to start my own business.

H: And, that's where you've been ever since?

M: Yes. Actually I came back to Birmingham to spend three years. I wanted to start this business, get it going and have it be a family business and, then I was going to go to graduate school and pursue my PhD, but it didn't quite happen that way.

H: It usually doesn't happen the way that we've planned it out. That's a very interesting story. Tell me just in retrospect, what impact do you think your activities within the Movement had upon your life thereafter, what you learned in those years of the Movement?

M: My years in the Movement taught me to evaluate and to analyze. They sowed the seeds or laid the ground work for everything that came after. It allowed me to give expression to my thoughts and it provided an outlet for me to put those expressions into some type of practical practice. When I was out marching, picketing and demonstrating and going door to door, regis tering people to vote, that was something that I could actually do. That was something concrete and I felt that I was making a difference and that was important to me. I don't know what direction my life would have taken had I not been involved in the Movement. I can't even imagine it, because I'm so much of a doer. It's so important for me to attack injustice wherever I see it, that I guess I would have had to have been a different kind of person to not have been involved in the Movement.

H: What business did you establish once you got back to Birmingham?

M: A business called First World Imports. It was an African art and artifacts store. And, what I realized, belatedly, was that I really am not a businesswoman. I am an educator. When I opened the business, I didn't open the business with the idea that I would make tons and tons of money. I wanted to have a location in Birmingham where people could come and purchase African art. I wanted them to want the African art. I wanted them to want to learn about their history so we had a little book section in there. And, when people would come into the store I think I spent more time talking to them than trying to sell them things. So, of course, I wasn't a very successful businesswoman, but people started just coming by to talk and they were thirsting for knowledge and we, in that respect, were serving a purpose. People knew that here was a place in Birmingham, where even if you didn't have any money, you could come and at least engage in conversation about world issues, about the plight of Black people and maybe throw out suggestions as to what could possibly be done. I miss First World Imports purely for that reason. I have not found anything since that would allow me the latitude to just have people drop by and just sit down and talk.

H: Since then, what have you been involved in?

M: When I left First World Imports, I was waiting to get back into education. I started working at Birmingham Southern College as Coordinator of Adult Student Services. I was also working there as an adjunct professor. I worked there in their evening program until last year, until 1994, when I left to become Director of the African American Institute and that's where I've been for the past year.

H: What is the African American Institute?

M: The African American Institute is a non-profit organization whose mission is the betterment of African American people through various programs. We do a women's issues conference every year. We're doing a youth conference. We do the Magic City Film and Music Festival. This provides a venue through which we can kind of debunk the myth of Hollywood and bring some of the people that they see on TV and at the movies right here to Birmingham. They can touch them, they can shake their hand, they can talk to them. And, if they're interested in entering the entertainment industry, find out the nuts and bolts of how that can be accomplished. One of the projects that I'm working on right now is called "A Gallery of Distinction," whereby we're collecting photographs, painting and prints of prominent African Americans from the State of Alabama who have made significant contributions in their respective fields. We want to have a gallery of these people who have had a positive impact on the growth and development of the state. And, we'll have a blurb about that person, why they are important and why they are a part of the gallery. For example,

Congressman Hilliard is not the first elected congressman in the State of Alabama. You know a lot of kids don't know that. He's the first one in a hundred years, but you know, what about those people a hundred years ago. Let's kind of unearth them and let our students know that these people did exist, that they were out there doing things and that way kind of fill in the gaps in their education.

H: Is there anything else that you would just like to share with anyone who would review this tape as it relates to you, Birmingham, your careers, something that you may just want to say to people? This is your opportunity. Anything that we have not covered that you would like to just mention.

M: Okay. When I thought about coming back to Birmingham I was very apprehensive because I remembered the climate that existed when I left. And, Birmingham, from a progressive standpoint is a bit behind some of your major metropolitan cities. And, of course, I've been to D.C. and spent a lot of time in New York. And, I wondered how I would fair back in Birmingham. When I came back to Birmingham, I realized that I could not run away, that my fight had started here and while it may not end here, at least I have to give it the old college try. Birmingham is a hard nut to crack because many people have a certain mind set. They are comfortable. They've reached a comfort level and they don't want to upset the apple cart. Therefore, they don't want to raise the hard issues, but the hard issues must be raised if we are going to break the mental shackles that are still very much entrenched in us. And, I guess the last thing that I would like to leave with everyone, is that the struggle continues.

H: Thank you.

M: Thank you for having me.

[END OF INTERVIEW]