

Voices of Feminism Oral History Project
Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College
Northampton, MA

JOANNE EDGAR

Interviewed by

KELLY ANDERSON

JULY 26, 2005
NORTHAMPTON, MA

This interview was made possible
with generous support from the Ford Foundation.

© Sophia Smith Collection 2005

Narrator

Joanne Edgar (b.1943) was raised in Baton Rouge, LA and graduated from Millsaps College. Graduate study brought her to New York City and there she found the women's movement. Edgar was the founding editor of *Ms. Magazine*, joining the collective in 1971, and remained on staff for 18 years. Edgar was at the founding meeting of the National Women's Political Caucus. She now works as a consultant and lives in New York City.

Interviewer

Kelly Anderson (b.1969) is an educator, historian, and community activist. She has an M.A. in women's history from Sarah Lawrence College and is a Ph.D. candidate in U.S. history at the CUNY Graduate Center.

Abstract

In this oral history Edgar talks about her family background and childhood, the impact of the civil rights movement, and her experiences in college during the movement's heyday. The majority of the interview focuses on Edgar's connection with Gloria Steinem and her tenure at *Ms. Magazine*.

Restrictions

None

Format

Interview recorded on miniDV using Sony Digital Camcorder DSR-PDX10. Two 60-minute tapes.

Transcript

Transcribed by The Tape Transcription Center. Audited for accuracy by Kate Mitchell and edited for clarity by Revan Schendler. Transcript has been reviewed and approved by Joanne Edgar.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: Edgar, Joanne. Interview by Kelly Anderson. Video recording, July 26, 2005. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote:** Joanne Edgar, interview by Kelly Anderson, video recording, July 26, 2005, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, tape 2.

Transcript

Bibliography: Edgar, Joanne. Interview by Kelly Anderson. Transcript of video recording, July 26, 2005. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote:** Joanne Edgar, interview by Kelly Anderson, transcript of video recording, July 26, 2005, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, pp. 23–24.

Voices of Feminism Oral History Project
Sophia Smith Collection
Smith College
Northampton, MA

Transcript of interview conducted JULY 26, 2005, with:

JOANNE EDGAR

at: Smith College

by: KELLY ANDERSON

ANDERSON: OK, great. So, this is July 26th — Kelly Anderson interviewing Joanne Edgar for the Voices of Feminism Project here at Smith College. So, before we start talking about politics and the movement, let's talk about your family background a little bit. Tell me how your family got to Louisiana and what you know about both sides of your background.

EDGAR: It's Southern. All my roots are Southern, and both my father's side of the family and my mother's side of the family have been in this country for a long, long time. I don't know, actually, when they came, but my father's family was Scotch-Irish and my mother's family was French, and they came to the South, they came to South Carolina. And I don't know very many of the old, old stories, but I remember one, that during the Civil War, they were trying to escape the Northerners and they sewed their silverware into their big dresses and all that sort of stuff. So, you never know if that's true or not, or if it's just a family story.

But the last name, Edgar, is a British last name — because here it's usually a first name. And, uh, there was a King Edgar who reigned in England in about 959, and I remember my aunt told me that once, so I concluded that, of course, I came from royalty. I was about eight and they had to call me Princess and all of those silly wonderful things that kids can come up with in their minds. But there is a sort of heritage that goes back to Britain and Scotland and Ireland.

And my immediate family — my dad was born in a little town outside of Shreveport that's half in Texas and half in Louisiana, and my mom was born in Jackson, Mississippi, and so both sides are extremely Southern. I never knew my father's mother because she died when he was 12. My grandfather on my dad's side was an artist and a painter and he also was an electrician and put in the first street lights in Marshall, Texas. And he worked for Texaco Company and he actually designed the, you know, the red star for Texaco. He designed that many, many years ago.

And my mother's parents, both dropped out of school very, very young and my grandfather was a stationery supply salesman and he traveled all over Mississippi selling stationery supplies and printing

supplies and things like that. And they lived in Jackson there — I mean, their whole lives, Meridian and Jackson. And my mother was raised in Jackson and went to Millsaps College, which is where I went to college, and got a degree in library science at Randolph-Macon, but [she] never really worked [outside the home.] She didn't have a career other than being a housewife and raising us.

ANDERSON: Why do you think that was, when she went on to get an education?

EDGAR: Because that's — she did, and believed in doing, what was expected of her as a Southern woman. And as a Southern woman, it was expected that she would get married and have kids and raise her kids and that would be her life, and she really never had a life of her own, which I find very sad — and even sort of recognized a little bit when I was growing up, not a lot, because most women in the '40s and '50s when I was growing up didn't work. So it was not unusual, but still. After she died — she died in 1978, and I was going back and trying to figure out what I knew about her as an individual, apart from her role as my mother and sort of head of the family, because she certainly ran the family, but what did she like? You know, what did she really care about? And you know, I couldn't think of very much — chocolate ice cream. But —

ANDERSON: She didn't keep a journal or anything to tell you about her life?

EDGAR: No, no, not at all. And she was actually quite depressed as a grownup and it was — but not in a way that was recognizable or discussable, which was too bad. So, in any case, our roots are Southern. I was born in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. And I was expected to do what Southern girls do, and I didn't particularly do that very well. We moved around a lot when I was a kid. We moved — the first time we moved was to California for just a year, when I was in the fourth grade.

ANDERSON: Why was that? What did your dad do for work?

EDGAR: He was in management for chemical companies. He worked for Ethyl Corporation at that time. So we went to California for a year and then back to Baton Rouge, and then to Canada, southern Ontario, which was sort of a major transformation in my life, because it was — first of all, it was a different country. It was all new people — totally different culture. And I loved it. I loved it. I had this thick Southern accent at the time and everybody would — both make fun of me, but they really enjoyed knowing somebody who was completely different. And you know, I was an adolescent and it was a time of great turmoil, as most adolescents go through. But I really enjoyed it.

We were there four years, and then we moved to California, where I finished high school — and did not like Southern California at all. My high school had three thousand people in it, so it was just, like, way too

much for me to handle. And I went to college back in Mississippi, so I sort of went back to the Southern roots.

ANDERSON: Tell me about your childhood in Louisiana and how did your parents meet and end up there, since your mom was from Mississippi?

EDGAR: My dad was working there. He worked for DuPont Company and then Ethyl Corporation during World War II, so that's how they ended up there. They met in Shreveport. My mother was doing some kind of a library conference or something at Centenary College in Shreveport. And she was living in Jackson and he was living in Baton Rouge, so they sort of courted. On the weekends, he would drive up to Jackson, and from Baton Rouge to Jackson at that time, it was probably a four-hour drive, so he would drive up on Friday night after work and drive back really late on Sunday night, and that was sort of nice. And he had another pal who worked at DuPont also who was courting someone in Jackson, so they drove up together.

And then, when they were married, they moved to Baton Rouge, which was a huge problem for my grandparents, because my mother was an only child. She wasn't — because her brother had died when he was 13, and the brother was, like, the love of their life. He was Wallace Dement, Jr., and he was supposed to be the star, and he died. And so, my mother was always — she was really very, very much tied to her parents, and my grandmother really held that over her, I think, all her life. So, whenever she left, it was really a crisis. And they wanted my father to take over the stationery company, but he wasn't a salesman. He was shy, and he wasn't interested in taking over the stationery company. He was a chemist. That was his background. So, that really didn't happen, but that became a point of contention, and when they left to go to Baton Rouge, it was a big issue.

But we still spent a lot of time in Jackson and, and Jackson was sort of the home base, you know. Whenever we would move around, we would go to Jackson before and after and, and so I got to know Jackson very, very well growing up and spent a lot of time there in the summers, especially.

ANDERSON: And so, describe Jackson during your growing up.

EDGAR: It was a small town then. And we would chase the mosquito trucks in the summer that were putting out the DDT fog — one of my earliest memories. People would come around in carts and sell vegetables on the street in those days. It was just such a long time ago. We lived across the street from Eudora Welty, and so we would see Eudora Welty in the Jitney-Jungle all the time, which is the grocery store, and she was the first person that I knew of who was a writer, and sort of before I could even really read a lot, I knew who she was. And it was, you know, hot, because they didn't have air conditioning.

I had some friends there who lived behind my grandmother and we used to play. And I remember that they were sometimes mean to me because we were Methodists and they were Presbyterians, and the Presbyterians aren't allowed to drink and they said that my parents were going to hell because they had alcohol. And I, of course, thought that was true because, you know — as children do. But I was very familiar with Jackson and sort of with the culture of Jackson, and also with Baton Rouge.

But I just loved — there must have been something in me that felt stifled, because when we moved to Canada where it was new for all of us. I mean, my mother was petrified of moving to Canada. She was really scared. And I just thought it was the coolest thing, you know. I thought it was great, and I loved having a queen, maybe because I thought I was related to the Queen, but I was old enough at that point to realize that that wasn't quite true. But I still loved having a queen.

And I would lead the pledge of allegiance to the Union Jack, because this was before Canada had its own maple leaf flag, so I would lead the pledge of allegiance to the Union Jack in the morning. And people in school, the teachers in school, took an interest in me. That was the other thing that was great. We had this wonderful teacher — because the seventh and eighth grades in Canada were still part of elementary school at that time, and we had a great teacher who, um, just really cared about the students and he, you know, we stayed in touch and we had a reunion of our eighth grade class about ten years ago, which was great. So that was really nice. He had one of those tiny little Morris Minor cars that you had to crank. I think I sound like I was born in the 1920s, and I wasn't. It's just that it was such a different era, then, you know? This was the late '50s.

ANDERSON: What do you remember in terms of that region, Jackson, regarding race? What are your earliest memories of segregation?

11:11

EDGAR: I have a lot of memories about race, and I remember we had a maid. We were sort of a middle-class family, totally comfortable but never, ever wealthy. This was not the upper-class expectations, although my mother and my grandparents had upper-class aspirations, which none of us ever really met, but we were comfortable. Um, and we had, you know, our own house. And we had a maid who would come every day and cook and clean, and sometimes babysit. And what I remember, way, way, way early on, is when we would take her home, we would go visit her in her home sometimes and get out [of the car.] And I remember, I loved her family. I just loved it. There were so many people around and it was a very physical family and my family was not very physical. So I just — I remember that.

I also remember that they lived in poor communities. I remember they didn't have sidewalks and they didn't — and they had sort of ditches, which was probably for sewers or just rainwater and stuff. And that a lot of people lived in very small houses. And I sort of liked that

idea but I was aware that it meant that we had something and that they didn't. And I remember, in 1954, when *Brown vs. Board of Education* came down, and I was in a segregated school, obviously, and I remember that they were handing out fliers for us to take home and give to our parents that would say, We're never gonna integrate the schools.

And right after that, we moved to Canada, and it was — so we sort of moved out of the South and moved out of that context. And I don't — Canada, the town where we lived, was pretty much all white. There was an Indian reservation near us, but race was not an issue. And it was getting to be a real issue in Louisiana before I left.

But I do remember coming back for Christmas and holidays. We would take the train and we would drive to Detroit and take the train from Detroit to Chicago and Chicago to Jackson. And I remember being completely puzzled that there were separate cars for black people and white people and I remember asking my dad about that.

And my parents — my parents were conservative and they didn't believe in sort of pushing for change. But my dad, in particular, was very much open to change. My mother was much more like her parents, who were pretty rabid against change, any kind of change, which led to a lot of problems when I went back to college. So, my mother, she didn't like to rock the boat. I mean, to her, being a Southern woman was being accepted by everybody and not rocking the boat at all. And my dad had some of that too, but he was — he was not open to rocking the boat and he also believed that you needed to please everybody, but he was sort of open and accepting of the fact that society was not fair and that it had to change.

So we talked about that a little bit when I was young, but we really never had political conversations in my family, no, which was disappointing to me. I think I would have really liked it. Um, I don't remember what we talked about until I was in high school. And in high school, I tried to have some political conversations. And they usually didn't go very far. My dad and I could sometimes get into a sort of a decent conversation, but my mother would get very upset and she would take it personally if I disagreed with her, and so that didn't work.

And I remember I invited — I was in charge of getting a speaker for my high school class, and this was out in California, and I invited a speaker from the NAACP to come speak to our civics class, and that really upset her. And our church at the time was going to have a sort of joint meeting with a black church in California, and that really upset her. And so, it was getting to be very tense. And I had, have still, two younger sisters who were starting to look at all of these things, too, and I think I brought a lot of things home to them.

But they [my parents] just didn't encourage any kind of activism. And even the little things weren't supported. I remember, there were rats that used to come down from the mountains into our suburb in California and they would live in our attic. And I hated rats. I always have hated rats. I still hate rats. And I wanted to organize, somehow, to get rid of the rats. And I wanted to go to the city council or do

something and they talked me out of it. They said, Oh, you can't do anything. So, it was always the, It's too much trouble, you're going to rock the boat, and it won't make a difference anyway. So, I didn't know how I was ever — but I wanted, I knew I wanted to make a difference. And that — I don't know why. I don't know where that came from, except that my big escape from the expectations that I wasn't fulfilling was reading.

Another one of my earliest memories is that I wanted to read so badly. And in those days, when I went to kindergarten in Baton Rouge, you didn't learn how to read — now you do, but then you didn't. And my parents didn't read very much to me. I don't remember, actually, my mother ever reading to me. She was ill a lot when I was really young. And so I wanted to learn how to read myself, and I had a really good family friend, one of their close friends as an adult, who was extremely literary and loved to read and she sort of convinced me that I was going to love to read. And she would buy me books and she would read to me. And so, they told me I would learn how to read in the first grade.

And I was so excited about going to school. And I went to school. I remember the first day I went to school on the school bus. I had a dress that you tied a sash in the back and you had to always be very careful when you went to the bathroom because the sash would always drip into the toilet and I so remember the feel of wet, a wet sash on the back of my legs. But I was so excited about going to school because I was going to learn how to read and I came home the first day in tears, and they couldn't — nobody could figure out what was wrong with me. And finally I said, "You told me that I could learn how to read and I didn't." And they never explained that it was a process.

But I did learn how to read and I completely glommed onto reading, and I read all the time. I read under the covers at night. We had a tree in the backyard and I would climb up that tree and I would read, and I read everything I could get my hands on — not necessarily good stuff, but anything.

18:23

ANDERSON: And it opened up new worlds for you.

EDGAR: It opened up my world, yeah. And I read books about doctors and I saw, when I was nine years old, I saw *Gone with the Wind* and I decided that I wanted to be doctor because I wanted to cure all those soldiers who had been hurt in the war. And my mother said, "Girls can't be doctors." And I said well, I wanted to be a doctor anyway. And I would find all these books about girl doctors and they were there, you know, there was a series of things for girls if you sought them out.

And she said, "Well, you can't be a doctor." And I said, "Well, then I'll be a nurse." And she said, "Well, that's not a good profession either, because you won't get married if you are a nurse." And I thought that sounded very odd because it didn't make any sense to me. And my friend who had encouraged me to read, I remember, sent my mother wedding announcements from the newspaper of women who were

nurses who were getting married — which was very supportive. You know how everybody needs an adult in their life who will sort of support them? Well, she was that for me. So, I went back and forth on this thing about wanting to be a doctor. All through high school, and I would change from time to time. When we moved to Canada, I wanted to be an Olympic figure skater, and so there were some other aspirations there as well.

But when I got to Millsaps, I went to my guidance counselor and they said, What do you want to do? And I said I wanted to be a doctor and I wanted to go into pre-med. And they said, Well, you're going to have to take all these really hard science courses. And they went on and on and on. And finally, I said, OK. So I didn't take them. I studied history instead.

ANDERSON: So, when you say that you weren't a very good Southern girl, there are all these expectations that you were never able to fulfill, one of them obviously was about profession?

EDGAR: Yes. One of them —

ANDERSON: What were some of the others? What were those pressures and how did you not meet their expectations?

EDGAR: Well, I never enjoyed all the social aspects of being a Southerner. I was supposed to have a really good time being frivolous and I just didn't find it very much fun. It's not that I was particularly shy. I was sort of shy. I didn't have a lot of confidence, which is actually no surprise, given [that] the things I wanted to do were sort of beaten down and the things they wanted me to do, I didn't like a lot. But I didn't have a lot of confidence. And I didn't have a lot of fun doing just all of those girly things.

ANDERSON: Were you a tomboy?

EDGAR: No. I mean, I was sort of a tomboy and I liked to do tomboy things and I always had sort of cars, little toy cars and things like that. But I had dolls. I loved my dolls, and I particularly loved my paper dolls. I carried them around in a shoe box all the time until I was about 12. I mean, I remember taking my paper dolls to Canada, and I would sort of build orphanages for my paper dolls.

There was an orphanage down the street from where we lived in Baton Rouge and it was a Roman Catholic orphanage and I always sort of was intrigued by the orphanage and I thought it would be really cool to live in an orphanage, where there were lots of kids, because I always saw them playing and I thought they had a good time. And you know, it took me somewhat more maturity before I realized that an orphanage is not an ideal situation for growing up.

But I would build orphanages and I would sort of draw up plans for orphanages for my paper dolls. And I always had plenty of friends and I went to dances and I got invited on dates and things like that, especially when we went to Canada. I was sort of quite the popular thing because I was so unusual and everybody wanted to, you know, go out with this skinny kid who had a Southern accent.

But I just — you know, I just — I wasn't comfortable. And so I just wanted to do — I would have been much happier had I had a lot of friends who liked to go do things together, and we didn't have that many. I mean, we went to parties and we went ice skating and roller skating, but I just didn't do the girl thing very well.

And um, and so, when I went to college, I dated seriously in college. But I still didn't enjoy the dances. I mean, it's really too bad that I didn't discover Nia [Neuromuscular Integrative Action, a dance/fitness technique] until — it didn't even exist then, but the kind of dance that I do now, when I discovered that, I had never danced. I went to dances but I didn't like them. And you know, we went to these balls and we would have to spend, like, you know, hours and hours getting dressed and now, I actually would find it more fun than I did then.

But what really did me in was my politics. And —

ANDERSON: In terms of your parents, you mean?

EDGAR: Yeah, in terms of my parents.

ANDERSON: And when did that develop in you?

EDGAR: In college — yeah, it was college. And I joined a sorority and I didn't much like that.

ANDERSON: Is it an all-women's college?

EDGAR: No, it's not. It's coed. It started as an all men's college in the 1890s, I think, or 1880s and they admitted girls early on. And Millsaps is actually a liberal arts college in the best sense of the word. It was small and it still is relatively small. And it is supportive, and they were supportive of girls getting an education. They believed that you could, you should get an education. You know, the institution was not against girls doing what they wanted to do, but the culture was, and a lot of the individuals were.

Millsaps in the '50s had been a really liberal, liberal arts school, and they had an exchange of professors with Tougaloo College, which was an all-black college also in Jackson, right outside of Jackson. By the '60s and by the point that I came there, when segregation was falling apart and integration was making a stand and it was, like, highly political, they did not have much contact with Tougaloo College anymore. The dean of the school [Millsaps] was quite liberal and very open-minded, but the president was not, and it was a segregated school.

And there were a number of us, a relatively small group of people who started to challenge it. And we challenged it in some ways. First, we went to sort of concerts and lectures out at Tougaloo, because there was this unbelievably wonderful professor who was Polish who would bring — who got people from all over the country to come and give speeches. And it was like a center of intellectual activity, more so than Millsaps was, so we would just go out there for lectures. And then there were various concerts and things. And then, I took a course out there and that was sort of interesting. And then we started bringing Tougaloo students to the Millsaps campus.

ANDERSON: And was Millsaps all white?

EDGAR: All white. Totally segregated — except for two places. The Millsaps library had a government depository of sort of government publications, and by law, that had to be open to anyone. And this was 1963, or maybe '64. It was before the Civil Rights Act was passed, but it was — so we would bring Tougaloo students to the library and they would use the government depository. But they couldn't walk across the room and use the card catalogue because that was the Millsaps Library. So, that was sort of one thing that we would do, and then they would go across the room. They would use the card catalogue and then they would be kicked out. And we would be called into the dean's office.

And they could also go into the — I forget the name of the building, but it was where we had our lectures and plays and things like that, because for some reason, that got government funds. Anything that got government funds, they had to be allowed to go to. So they would come and we would take them there.

And then, I remember the Kappa Alphas, who were the most rabid of the fraternities. They would park their car outside the library and they would open the trunk and in their trunk, there would be guns. So they were trying to intimidate us. And the dean called nine of us into his office once, and the dean was quite actually, under the table, supportive of this, and we sort of knew that, and he said, "OK. I want you to know that you can't do this [bring Tougaloo students into the Millsaps library,] that the administration says this is not allowed. And so, if you do it three times, we're going to have to expel you." So, we sort of looked around the room and we figured, OK, there are nine of us, and nine times three is 27. We'd never get our act together enough to do it 27 times. I mean, this was not like a big organized protest. This was just our way of trying to make a case.

ANDERSON: Right. And did you have demands, or were you —

EDGAR: No. We didn't have demands. Well, the demand was that anybody could use the library.

ANDERSON: OK. It wasn't about integrating the campus?

EDGAR: Well, yes, it was. That was sort of the next stage of our demands. So we were sort of — because we weren't very sophisticated. We didn't know. There was a lot of sophisticated civil rights activity going on, but we weren't really a part of that. We were trying to sort of work with what we knew, and that was Millsaps. And so, we were trying to integrate. We believed it [had] to be integrated and we were trying to make that change. So, we had a petition and we got various people to sign the petition, and not that many people would sign it and a lot of us couldn't sign it, because they were afraid their families would crack down on them. Because almost everybody at Millsaps was from the South, from Mississippi. There weren't very many people who lived elsewhere, and I was one of the few who came from out of state, and yet I really didn't come from out of state because my roots were there. So, we had a petition and we were making the case, but we didn't have any meetings that I remember, at any rate. We didn't have any meetings. We didn't meet with the president and make all these demands, because we weren't that smart at the time.

So, the way that it became a crisis for me was, I went to a Joan Baez concert at Tougaloo. And a lot of kids came to the Joan Baez concert, even people who were not political. They just wanted to hear Joan Baez. And somebody was there and printed up a list of all the white kids who were there, somebody who knew us. And our names were there, all in lower case. We didn't deserve uppercase names. So, it was lowercase joanne, lowercase edgar. And then they distributed it all over Jackson, so all of our families found out what we were doing. And somebody called my grandmother, and my grandmother took to her bed, saying she was going to have a heart attack. My mother came from California. She was going to take me out of school. And it was, like, totally ridiculous, but very tense, because, again, it was a different time, and I didn't — it sounds so funny now. I mean, I laugh about it.

ANDERSON: You were really rebelling —

EDGAR: But, yeah, it didn't feel funny to me at the time at all. And I also had a part-time job at a newspaper. It was my first journalism experience and it was at a liberal weekly newspaper where the office had been fire-bombed. And it was also, in retrospect, very funny. My assignments were to go out and cover — that was a period where a lot of the black churches were fire-bombed, so I would cover the rebuilding of the churches and students from the North were coming down to help rebuild the churches, so I sort of covered things like that.

And the other thing that sort of shows how life and politics come together and gives you a lesson that you learn — that you realize later but not at the time — was, Hazel Brannon Smith was the editor of this paper, or publisher of this paper, and she had received a Pulitzer for her courageous editorials. But she was based in another town in Mississippi and her alcoholic husband ran the *Northside Reporter*, which is where I

worked. And he would chase me around the desk all the time, so I would spend most of my time trying to avoid this mess of a man at this liberal newspaper. So my mother found out about that and she wasn't happy.

But somehow, I didn't tell her that — she knew I had gone to the Joan Baez concert, but I never, ever told her that I had taken classes out there. I never sat down and had a conversation with her at that time about what I believed in. I never explained to her why I was doing anything or what I cared about. And it was, in retrospect, it was really, really sad, that I could not ever have that conversation with my mother. Now, my grandmother, there was no way to have it with her. My grandfather, I used to think, agreed completely with her, but I'm actually not so sure that he did. I think he might have been more tolerant than I think, but I don't have any evidence for that.

ANDERSON: How about with your siblings? Did this cause strain amongst your relationships with them?

33:03

EDGAR: No. I'm four years older than one and six years older than the other, so they were still in high school and junior high when all of this was happening to me. And we would talk when I would go home, but it was not — and they followed it and they became more interested in politically active things and started to have their own rebellion issues a lot younger than I did. But I don't remember being a mentor to them in an active way, the way I wish I had.

My younger sister now says that I was. She sees that, so that when I would come home, we would talk about all these things, because she was, like, really wanting to escape, because she was the last one and felt very, you know, smothered. But I don't remember giving her the kind the support that I wished that I had now.

And my middle sister, she dealt with my mother. She was probably the smartest of them all. When she was an adolescent, she just, for about two years, she stopped communicating with anybody and she just read. And she read everything. I mean, I read everything I could get my hands on, but she read real stuff. She read *Crime and Punishment* and *Anna Karenina*, and all of these things, you know. So, that was her way of dealing with it. And so, we all had consequences from that.

ANDERSON: So what was the upshot of all the activism at Millsaps? Was it eventually changed?

EDGAR: Well, it certainly changed my life and it made me realize that the inkling that I had felt of wanting to do something that made a difference was real and I really wanted to stick with that. But I didn't know what it was. I wanted to stay in Mississippi afterwards, after college and work in Mississippi, and I wanted to work at one of the civil rights organizations. But I decided not to, basically because of my parents, but also because it was the time that, um, the black power movement was

sort of going, and I didn't quite understand how I could fit into that. And I wasn't secure in my own self to realize that where I could fit into that was to really make a difference in my own community and to change opinions of white middle-class people, which is where I had connections, but I didn't quite understand that at the time.

And I remember, one of my greatest memories is when I was a senior in college, Marion Wright Edelman, you know her, of course — was Marion Wright at the time and she worked for the NAACP in Mississippi — and she invited a number of us from Millsaps to her home. And it was actually the only time that I should have been afraid in Mississippi, and I wasn't as afraid as I should have been. We were in a car with mixed-race people [i.e. blacks and whites in the same car] and we were driving to her home and we were chased by some, you know, some crackers, basically. But anyway, we went to her home, and she had tea for us, and the reason she wanted us to come was, she did not want the liberal whites to leave the state. She wanted to convince us to stay in Mississippi. And of course, I didn't. But I met her 25, 30 years later and I said, "I don't know if you remember that you used to have kids to your house to talk to them about staying."

So, but I didn't stay. But I did sort of stay working in that field. And I didn't know what I wanted to do, so I went to New York and I went to graduate school.

ANDERSON: How did you decide to do that? That's a big departure.

EDGAR: It was, yeah. I had been to New York my senior year in college, to a U.N. conference. Oh, that was the other thing at Millsaps. I did my senior thesis on the United Nations for my history degree.

ANDERSON: Probably also seen as very subversive.

EDGAR: Oh, it was. Oh, I used to get hate letters from people who thought I was a communist, because something was in the paper about something I had written on the United Nations. So, I did that. The other option that I had had was to get married, and I was seriously considering marrying a minister, a Southern minister, which would've taken my life in a whole other direction, and I would've stayed in the South. He was very liberal. And so we had our politics in common. But something just told me it wasn't the time to get married. So —

ANDERSON: You were feeling like you really needed to leave your parents?

EDGAR: Yeah, yeah. I needed to get out from — well, either I needed to stay in Mississippi and work doing what I cared about, which was civil rights, or I needed to just sort of get out and get away. So I decided that I was going to go to graduate school, or that I would try to go to graduate school. And I sent a letter to Princeton for their School of International Affairs. I liked reading the newspaper, so I'll find something where I

37:55

can read the newspaper. And I got a letter back from them, saying, Thank you very much for your letter of inquiry, but we do not take women. I mean, I was sort of flabbergasted, but, you know.

ANDERSON: Yeah.

EDGAR: So I sent a letter to Columbia University, and they did take women, and not only did they take women, there was this elderly woman, really quite elderly at the time, who was very much interested in women getting graduate education in international affairs. And the head of the School of International Affairs at the time was Andrew Cordier, who had been Dag Hammarskjold's number-two person at the U.N., and Dag Hammarskjold was the head of the U.N. in the early '60s. He was killed in a plane crash in the Congo as part of the — you know, it's all part of the war in the Congo that the U.N. was involved in. So, he was fabulous. And Alice Stetton had scholarships for women and foreign students — full scholarships. And not only did she have full scholarships, she sent us to Europe in the summer to visit the international organizations that were based in Europe. So, I got a Stetton fellowship, and then I bussed trays at a dorm to sort of pay for my food, and so, that's how I ended up in New York. And then, I, um —

ANDERSON: Did you have culture shock living in New York?

EDGAR: Totally — total culture shock. And I was this green country kid. I'm sure I got into Columbia only because they'd never heard of Millsaps and they thought it would be intriguing to have some kid from Mississippi. But —

ANDERSON: You were their cultural diversity?

EDGAR: Yes, exactly. And there was — I lived at International House, and also at International House was one of the students from Tougaloo that I had been taking classes with. And one of the sad things for me is that he got very much into Black Power and he wouldn't speak to me anymore. So, that was as it was. You know, I sort of understood it, but it was also sort of sad. Anyway, I still had a Southern accent at that point.

ANDERSON: You still do.

EDGAR: You think so?

ANDERSON: Yeah.

EDGAR: Not much, though — a little.

ANDERSON: It's faint.

EDGAR: And I lived at International House, which I just loved. It was like an opening to the world for me and I met people from all over the world, and I loved being in New York. I loved the city. I loved Columbia.

ANDERSON: And it was the first integration that you really experienced.

40:43

EDGAR: Yeah, it was, and it was completely integrated, of course. And especially I House, which was for foreign students. So I had a great time. Bussing trays was a fabulous job because I got to meet everybody and I — you know, I started to be much less shy.

ANDERSON: Did you seek out the civil rights movement when you got to New York?

EDGAR: Not completely, but I tutored in East Harlem. One of my first sort of part-time jobs as a student was to work with a photography project that gave Kodak Instamatic cameras to inner-city kids in Brooklyn and Manhattan, and we would work with them on taking photos. And they also had the Super-8 cameras. It was right when those cameras had come out and they donated a whole bunch. And we did a photo exhibit, which was fabulous and it turned into a couple of books which were great. And so I did that.

And then when I finished my degree, I was trying to look for a job as a journalist and I ended up with a job at a place called Facts on File, which probably is in this library somewhere, maybe not the archives, but in the Smith College library. And, it's a summary of the news. And as a writer for Facts on File, you read. You have a beat and you read everything in your beat and then you write it out, [summarize it.]

ANDERSON: Perfect for you.

EDGAR: Yes, it was great. And it was good training, because I got to know what made a good story. Because if you read 14 stories on the same topic, you knew who was a good writer, who got their facts right, who didn't, and how to do a good lead, and it was fabulous training. So, the only problem was, it was boring after a while. I mean, my area was international monetary reform in Latin America, neither of which I knew anything about, but that's what they needed me to do, so I learned it. And I learned a lot. But after two years, I was really bored and I wanted to do something else.

My dream job was to — I can't believe this now, but my dream job at the time was to be a researcher for the *Today Show*. I thought that would be so cool, to get up at 4 o'clock in the morning, and I don't know. But they weren't interested in my background.

Um, but there are two other feminist things — I mean, not feminist things, that happened to me, but if I can — you don't mind go out of order?

ANDERSON: Oh, yeah, please.

EDGAR: Back at Millsaps, I just had this idea that I could go to New York, and I was interested in journalism, so I wrote *Look* magazine, and I said that I was coming to New York and I was interested in getting a job. And they wrote back and they said — and I said I was a researcher, because I didn't have aspirations for anything more than that, um, and they wrote back and they said, Well, women aren't researchers. They start as secretaries here and, you know, when you finish your degree and you're interested in being a secretary, let us know. So.

And even in high school, I wanted to be a set decorator. I mean, I can't believe that I always set my goals sort of — I would take a field that I was really interested in, but I never thought I was very creative, so I would set my goals low. So, I wanted to be a set decorator. So I wrote a set decorator for MGM. And he wrote back — and I still have this letter — he wrote back, “Women aren't set decorators. There's a lot of — you have to move a lot of things around to be a set decorator, so you might find interior decorating more to your [taste].” So. And I would just sort of accept these things.

ANDERSON: You were never outraged?

EDGAR: No, I wasn't, really. I thought, OK, well, this is sort of curious, but this is how it is.

ANDERSON: Yeah.

EDGAR: So by the time I got to Facts on File, it was 1970 and I was more sophisticated and more aware and there was word on the street that there was going to be a march down Fifth Avenue on August the 26th, 1970, which was the fiftieth anniversary of [women's] suffrage — which I had never learned anything about in college, mind you. I had heard the name Susan B. Anthony but I never heard of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and I knew that there might have been a struggle to get the vote, but the guys gave it to us, I thought.

ANDERSON: And you were voting?

EDGAR: Yeah, oh, I voted. I was politically — the minute I turned 21, because you couldn't vote at 18 then. My first vote was for — it was the 1960 presidential election, I guess. No, I was 18 then. It was in the 1964 presidential election and I voted for LBJ.

ANDERSON: Did your parents also vote Southern Democrat then?

EDGAR: No, they had switched to Republican. They voted for Goldwater. And I think they might have voted — they voted for Eisenhower, too, I think. I remember the Eisenhower and Stevenson election. I'm pretty sure they voted for — so. They were progressive Southerners in the sense that

they switched from the Democratic Party and voted Republican, which is bizarre now, but they were, in that sense. And then they became more and more conservative. But –

ANDERSON: So, seeing that flier was your first –

EDGAR: Yes. So seeing that flier –

ANDERSON: – inkling of the movement, of the women's movement?

EDGAR: Yes. And so, I thought — well, I think that the women at Facts on File, we had just realized that we were making — we all had sort of the same degrees. We all had graduate degrees, all of the writers. We were doing exactly the same job, and we realized that the men were making, like, five, six thousand dollars a year more than we were. We were making 12 and they were making about 18 or 19 [thousand]. I mean — none of us were making very much money, even for then.

But, so, we were sort of thinking, This is not right. And we finally figured, you know, Now we have to sort of figure out what to do about it. So, the first thing we did was to strike that day, and we told them in advance we were not coming in and that we were going to do this march, and some of us marched and some of us worked for Bella Abzug, who was running for Congress. That was her first race for Congress.

And I remember our boss, who was actually very progressive in his own way, because he was the husband of Cynthia Epstein. I don't know if you know her, but she's a sociologist who had written some feminist books in the late 1960s and early '70s. He was appalled to find out that I was the one who had sort of organized it, because I was the quietest one in the office. And he was completely surprised. He thought that one of the other sort of more vocal women had done it. But, you know, I had sort of instigated this. But he actually did raise our salaries, immediately, as soon as we made it apparent to him that we knew this and that this was not fair. He was, like, in a corner and given who his wife was, and he was a friend of Betty Friedan's and there was just no way that he could get away with that. So, um, so we did that.

And then, I was looking for another job because I was bored with reading the same newspapers every day and writing and indexing the news, so I decided to go — this was 1971, and Mississippi has off-year governor's races, and Charles Evers, who was Medgar Evers's brother, was running for governor, so I decided I was going to go back to Mississippi and work for Charles Evers.

Well. I was feeling really good and starting to get my own feet, and I figured that I had to tell my mother. I wasn't going to tell my grandmother, who was still alive. My grandfather had died, but my grandmother was still alive. I was not going to tell my grandmother, but I was going to tell my mother because, you know, if I was seen down

there or if something happened, you know — I just had to let her know I was doing it.

So, I let her know I was doing it and she flipped. And she took to her bed and it was a very difficult time for my mom and dad at that point because my dad had just lost his job and he was in his fifties and there were two other kids in college and, you know, it was not easy for her, and I understand that, but she completely and totally flipped. And it was just so bad.

And I went down there for six weeks, and um, I decided to come back and it was actually OK that I decided to come back because there wasn't anything for me to do. He [Charles Evers] didn't need — I was doing this whole big research project. I still had research on my mind and I did a survey of all 82 counties in the State of Mississippi — population, income level, I mean, it was actually very interesting. But he didn't use that kind of research. That's not the kind of campaign that he ran, and he would come into the office every morning and he would go around, he would kiss every woman in the office, all the girls. He would kiss his girls, and he didn't sort of read — he didn't read very well, which is his background, because he just didn't have that in his background. So, there wasn't really very much for me to do.

But while I was there — and this is what sort of changed my life and led me into active feminism — I spent a lot of time with Patt Darien. And Patt Darien and Fannie Lou Hamer and Aaron Henry were all founders of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, which was the breakaway Democratic Party that had been active in the 1968 Democratic Party, and she [Patt] knew Gloria Steinem. And she knew Gloria through sort of Democratic Party functions and Gloria was organizing within the Democratic Party to sort of increase the role of women and Patt was doing the same, and so when I came back to New York, Patt put me in touch with Gloria, because she thought that Gloria might have some ideas of things for me to do. And this was before *Ms.* had started.

And so, I called up Gloria and she said, "Sure, come on over." And the idea that Patt had was that we would do some hearings on women and employment for — because that was their task. They were on some Women and Employment Committee for the Democratic Party but that was not at the top of anybody's mind, although the issue was an important one. That was the summer that Gloria was organizing with other people the founding conference of the National Women's Political Caucus.

So, I ended up working on that, and I ended up doing some administrative things for Gloria, and she — I remember the first time I was over there. She gave me a few things to do. We had a meeting. They were writing the statement of purpose and we had a meeting and she had to go somewhere else and she said, "Well, just close the door when you leave." She was the most open [trusting] person that I had met in a long time, and highly political and I just was completely entranced with everything that they were doing. So, I went to the caucus founding

50:59

conference and my claim to fame there was that I stayed up all night typing the statement of purpose after everybody had debated it.

And I continued to do work for Gloria in her home — some research, but more, it was just like organizing her speaking, you know, conferences and things like that and answering the phone. And that summer — Gloria had been wanting for a couple of years to start a magazine. You probably know all of this from talking to her. And everybody that she would go to for money would say, Well, where's your market research? Well, her market research was the fact that she had been, you know, beating the bushes, talking to universities, and you know, three, four thousand people would come out to speeches and there was this groundswell of feminism that was coming up from the grassroots. But she had no formal market research, and the people who had money wanted formal market research.

But Gloria was also working at the time for *New York* magazine and she was writing a political column, which was her first opportunity to do real solid feminist journalism. And the publisher of *New York* was interested in doing some spinoffs and starting other magazines, so they made a deal that *New York* would sponsor a pilot issue of *Ms.* and that they would get experience — they would pay for the whole thing and we would put it on the newsstand for three months and this would sort of be our market research. And they would get experience sort of starting something and we would get a test. And so they did, and we did, and, you know, it was successful. And that was our market research.

But one of the funniest things was that we — we had our own editorial staff, which was volunteer. There were about six of us at the very most, and we would sort of meet in this tiny little office in New York and people would sit on boxes and whatever, and we had a lot of writers who really were excited about writing. I mean, that was not the problem. The problem was putting together a magazine in a two- or three-months' span, because we wanted it to come out the end of December and we started it in August, so we didn't have very much time. And *New York* magazine sold all the advertisements for that issue and they provided the art direction and the copy editing and stuff.

But we were doing a subscriber ad to put in the magazine and we had one of those cards and we were trying to figure out, So what do we charge? How can we make this affordable? We wanted it to be affordable for women anywhere. So, we said, "OK, we'll do six dollars." And so, we printed up the card, we got it all ready to print, and we had six dollars on it, and they were all still talking to money people, trying to figure out how we were going to make this go on a permanent basis, and everybody they talked to said, I don't care how many subscribers you get, you can't give them a magazine on a monthly basis for six dollars a year. And it was too late to change the six, because this was pre-computer days. So, we cut it out and we turned it over [upside down] and we made it nine.

I'm sure you know all these stories, but the issue went out and it hit the newsstands and Gloria went on a speaking tour, and people kept

coming up to her and saying, I can't find the magazine anywhere. And she got really upset and so she called Clay Felker, the publisher of *New York*, and she said, "Where the hell is it? Talk to the distribution people. It's not on the stands." And it had already sold out and there were, you know, like, 250,000 copies out there. So then we had enough research that we could go out and we raised a million dollars for a minority investment, which was also truly unusual at the time, from Warner Communications, and we started publishing in July.

ANDERSON: OK. We want to pause right now.

EDGAR: OK. Good.

56:14

END TAPE 1

TAPE 2

ANDERSON: OK, we're back. I wonder if we should just back up a little bit before we talk more about *Ms.* Just talk about some of your evolution as a feminist, because it seems like you don't really — you're not too intellectually engaged or politically engaged with that until you meet Gloria, even though you've had this one action at Facts On File. So, how did your thinking evolve about feminism and what were the ideas that were so exciting to you at the time?

EDGAR: It was that they were doing something to change the situation. And the more I recognized that the situation wasn't just a fact of life, the more I realized that it was really rampant discrimination, the more I realized you had to be active in order to change it. On a personal level, I sort of had — because I wanted to be a doctor and they told me girls weren't doctors, because I had, you know, not been allowed to apply, even, to Princeton because they didn't accept girls, I recognized that there was an issue there of inequality. I also sort of — I don't know if you've ever heard of the book *Killers of the Dream* by Lillian Smith? I read that in college and that really spoke to me. It really resonated with something that said, you know, the potential for the life of people like me is not as great as they try to make it sound, and it sort of fit in with my rejection of this sort of silly Southern womanhood thing.

So, I sort of understood it but I didn't understand the politics of it and I didn't understand what you could do to really change it until the women's movement started in the late '60s and early '70s. And I didn't really become a part of the women's movement until 1970, when I did that march. And even then, I was sort of — it was a big, big step for me to take a job at *Ms.*, even though the job that I took was not a job at the beginning that paid a salary, it was just a [volunteer position] — but it was a full-time effort.

And that was a big step for me, because it was identifying myself with something that was very strong, and I was scared of strong things. I was scared of really taking a stand and being different. I was the kind of kid who would more want to melt and not have anybody notice her than to stand out. Being different was hard for me. And I hated conflict. That was the other thing that my mother really drummed into me, which affects me to this day — I just hated, hated, hated conflict. And how can you be a member of an activist movement without conflict?

Now, I dealt with some of that with the civil rights movement, but I wasn't on the front lines of the civil rights movement. I was sort of organizing what I knew and where I was. But I was going to be on the front lines of the feminist movement and that was a big step. And I kept a personal journal at the time, a little bit, and there's some things in there that, you know, could I really call myself a feminist? Is this what I am? And it was very much of an identity thing for me.

But the more I learned, my God, the more I was just appalled. I didn't know women couldn't get a credit card in their own name. I

didn't know that there were these sort of legal discriminations against women. And so –

ANDERSON: And your learning curve really happened when you met Gloria.

EDGAR: Oh, my learning curve was huge, yeah, absolutely huge.

ANDERSON: Did you read Friedan? Because it sounds like you might have resonated –

EDGAR: Yes. I did at the time, except that I wasn't a housewife and she really spoke very much to suburban housewives. I mean, she was doing what was relevant to her, too. And that's actually "the personal is political," and that's what's so wonderful about feminism is that it really does make a difference on all those levels. So, I read it and I did understand it and — it spoke to my mother's situation a lot more than mine, although not to how my mother felt but just sort of the life that she led. But it didn't speak to my life, because, you know, I had a different life.

ANDERSON: But it probably reframed how you got in conflict?

EDGAR: Oh, it did, yeah, it did. I started to become somewhat more understanding of my mother and her situation and her fears.

ANDERSON: Were you able to talk with her about some of your new ideas?

EDGAR: Not until when she was dying, which is — and even not very well then, because she still couldn't hear it. When I started at *Ms.*, my mother, she just didn't want to talk about that feminist magazine thing, and she would — she subscribed to the magazine, but she would put it face down in a pile of magazines in her home, and she wouldn't tell any of her friends where I worked. And in fact, it was very funny. They lived in Arizona at the time, and I would go out to visit, and one of her friends took me aside and she said, "Joanne, where is it that you work? Your mother will only say that you do some kind of journalism and that you work for a magazine, but she won't say anything, and I thought it was *Playboy* or something like that." And so, I told her, and we laughed. But she [my mother] really couldn't handle it. She was just — she was ashamed, you know. And that was really sad.

And so, we could never talk politics. The only thing we could have a have a happy discussion about was the weather and clothes, neither of which were particularly exciting to me, until she was dying. And she had Lou Gehrig's disease, which makes you lose your ability to speak. It's a neuromuscular disease, and she was paralyzed and she could not talk. And I was out visiting with her when she ill and this was in Fresno. They had moved, at that point, to Fresno, California.

And someone from the Fresno TV station knew I was coming and wanted to do an interview about *Ms.* And so, she came to the home and

she interviewed me, and she asked me about my background and how I got into feminism, and I told her. And my mother was on the side watching from a wheelchair. And I told her things that I had never told my mother, which I just find so sad, now, because I could never — I never felt like I could have told her. I could have, I'm sure, but I never had the guts to do it. So I told her, and so I was really speaking to my mother, on Fresno — some funky news channel. And that was that was the sort of small amount of communication. But she couldn't talk back at that point. So it was really sad.

I met that journalist, actually, at a journalism conference years later, about four years ago, and she remembered interviewing me at that point. And it was wonderful to revisit that moment.

ANDERSON: Do you have a copy of the tape? I bet you could get it from an archive, right?

EDGAR: No. I don't know if they kept copies in those days. This was 1978 when she died, so, I don't know.

ANDERSON: So, tell me about the women that were part of *Ms.* at the time and what the effect of those relationships had on you. I imagine that meeting women like Gloria and some of the others were the kind of women that you hadn't really known before.

EDGAR: No, I hadn't. I had known a few. I mean, my friends at Millsaps who were involved in civil rights issues and things like that were like that. But they were amazing women, because nothing was out of the question for them, nothing was impossible, and they — I loved strategizing and I loved editorial meetings and that's why I started taking all those notes for editorial meetings, because I was the only one who took notes. I wrote everything down. And Gloria and I shared a desk at one point and a phone at one point, and then we had two desks and two phones, so I was frequently answering her phone. Even when we became larger and she got her own assistant, I still was sort of — Gloria and I had our desks together. And so, I just was open to meetings and it was possible for me to meet so many people and so many new ideas and just listening to these people talk was like a dream come true.

I mean, it was wonderful, and we also had such a good time. I mean, we laughed a lot and we would have wine in the evenings and, you know, the liquor store would call us up if we hadn't ordered our bottle of wine. And we would sit around and talk and shoot the breeze and plan things. Oh, we planned everything and that was what was so great about *Ms.*, because it was more than a magazine.

And that was the other reason I liked it so much, is I sort of carved out a lot of different roles for myself and I was, um, I was the censorship person. Whenever somebody would start to censor the magazine, which happened from time to time —

ANDERSON: Internally or externally?

EDGAR: Externally, like high schools. I would sort of be on the case and I would defend the magazine and I went up to Bennington, Vermont, once and spoke at the school board and we would get the ACLU involved in law suits and things like that. So I was the paralegal, basically, on staff. And we did a concert of all women composers — you've probably heard of that, at the New York Philharmonic — and got to meet all those composers.

ANDERSON: So, did you organize that?

EDGAR: I didn't organize that, but I was part of that, yeah. And so there were people coming in and out of our office all the time who were like the complete movers and shakers within feminism and women's issues. And we got to meet them and organize with them and then we did editing. And the experience I had at Facts On File was really, really good experience for being an editor, because I knew how to organize a piece. I knew how to take something that might have good ideas in it but wasn't written well and turn it into something that really worked.

10:20

Now, you've probably heard that we got all kinds of criticism within the feminist movement: one, for not taking enough pieces; two, for making too many edits and things like that. And some of that was true and some of that wasn't true. We used to get letters from people, saying, How dare you reject my manuscript? I'm a woman and you're a woman's magazine and this is my magazine — they always called it "my magazine"— and I want my piece to be in my magazine. So, we had to deal with things like that, too.

But I loved editing. I really thrived on it. And I didn't write very much during those years. I wrote some. I wrote the cover story for the first issue on Wonder Woman. And the reason I wrote that cover story was because Gloria was supposed to write it, it was supposed to be by her, and she was also writing a big piece on voting rights and women and she was actually the first one to sort of identify the gender gap. I'm not sure she used the term "gender gap," but in that article, that's what she was talking about. And Gloria has a reputation for not really always meeting her deadlines. Mm-hm. (smiles) So, I was doing the research for her on this Wonder Woman piece and she didn't meet her deadline and it was getting closer and closer and closer. So it turned out that I wrote it.

And I loved Wonder Woman, because as a child, I had comic books, I collected comic books, and I loved the *Wonder Woman* comic books. So it was an appropriate assignment, but it was really funny that the only reason that I got the assignment was because Gloria didn't do it on time.

ANDERSON: How did it work for you in terms of the structure and the collective part of that?

EDGAR: I loved the collective. I loved being part of a collective. I mean, it probably goes back to my desire to be part of a big, happy family, because that's what we were. It was a family. It was a chosen family. And it was not always happy, but it was big and I loved the fact that I could participate in everything and that I was welcome. Now, there were some glitches in it, not really from my point so much, but from the younger women who came in the mid and late '70s. They didn't feel as accepted a part of the quote collective as those of us who were there from the beginning did. And so, Gloria started coaching them on how to speak up, which was actually really wonderful. And you know, I was afraid to speak up still, too, I mean, especially if I had to disagree with anybody, because that might cause conflict.

ANDERSON: So you were pretty quiet.

EDGAR: Yeah, I was pretty quiet. My role was to sort of pipe up with information. I was the information maven, and so I would come up with the facts. But we weren't really a collective in the sense of a pure collective. We did not ever sit in a circle on the ground and vote on every manuscript. There's one manuscript I remember voting on, and it was because it was so controversial. We didn't know whether to run it or not and it was a short story and it was extremely graphic. And there were some people who didn't want to run it and some people who did. So we all read it and we did vote on that. But for the most part, we would circulate a manuscript to three or four different editors and then we would weigh their comments and then we would make a decision about whether to run it or not. And Suzanne Levine was, as managing editor, was really the executive editor and actually did the role of an editor and it really was the role of an editor.

Where we were more open is that everybody was invited to editorial meetings, including outsiders. We brought them in all the time. Everyone was listened to at editorial meetings. You could bring up ideas anytime you wanted to. We, for the most part, had our desks in the same room, and so in that sense, we were different from a usual magazine. But it wasn't ever the classic collective.

ANDERSON: Describe one of the more difficult moments at *Ms.* What would be hard there, what would be controversial or painful?

EDGAR: I should have tried to think of this before, because there were some hard times. There were a lot of hard times in terms of money, uh, because we never had enough. We set our own salaries in the beginning — I'm sure you've heard this story, too — at a Chinese restaurant. We had a round table in a Chinese restaurant and we went around the table and said how much money we needed for the first set of salaries. But then, thereafter, we had a more formal salary structure. But we didn't have a sense of evaluation. Nobody really, really — but you had to ask for support to

get it. And that was hard for people like me, because I had trouble asking for support. So, um, I never asked for a raise, ever — still actually have not ever asked for a raise. I hate to admit that to the Sophia Smith —

ANDERSON: I hope that doesn't mean you've never gotten one.

EDGAR: No. But I remember I did — *New York* magazine used to do this feature on what are people in New York earning. And they used to use my salary as an example, and I was making \$12,000 in 1978 or something, and I would get — and the publisher [Pat Carbine] of the magazine [*Ms.*] was not happy that I would make my salary public, because it just wasn't really good — so I would get notes from friends saying, You need a raise. And I did. I needed a raise.

But we should have done things. Like, we never had a pension plan, ever. And that was pretty outrageous, given what we were — we wrote articles about pensions and women and the fact that, you know, women who didn't ever work would get their, some of their husband's social security but they didn't have enough to live on.

ANDERSON: Did you talk about it?

EDGAR: We talked about it to a certain extent, but not enough. We didn't — it was an issue of conflict and they said we didn't have enough money and so, we didn't do it. There were periods where Pat Carbine and Gloria didn't take salaries, because we didn't have enough money. And we just didn't make it part of doing business. Now, Pat's argument, and she may be absolutely right, is that we wouldn't have been in business had we done that. And so, it's really hard to tell. But so that was an issue of conflict.

There was a lot of conflict at the point that Gloria's Redstockings thing came up — not so much conflict within the office, although there was some within the office, because there were a couple of people who, particularly contributing editors, who were very unhappy with Gloria's response. Most of us there were extremely supportive of Gloria, but there were a couple who weren't. So that was very awkward and that was hard for all of us and, um, it just made it difficult.

And there were a couple of other times where women's collectives came in to complain about the magazine because we were too middle-class and we weren't radical enough. And there were a lot of different, sort of, variations of feminism that were critical of *Ms.* and our version of feminism. And we met with them and sometimes we would have good ideas that came out of that meeting and those meetings and sometimes we didn't. I found those painful.

However, we didn't get bogged down in the conflict. And the reason we didn't was because we had to publish an issue every month and we had a deadline. And that saved us, because I really, really think — and I've seen it in other women's organizations — that you can talk an issue

to death. And we recognized that at the time, too, and we were open to talking about it, and to listening and, you know, we would defend ourselves, or not. But we still — if we were going to exist as a magazine, we still had to publish every month, and so therefore we had to get our act together. So it could not be an endless debate.

ANDERSON: What conversations do you remember around questions of sexuality or race? Do you remember?

EDGAR: There were some, yeah, on — well, there was the usual, that it's a white middle-class magazine and a white middle-class movement, which, actually, was not true of *Ms.* and was not true of the women's movement, either, although there were aspects of the women's movement that it was true of. And it was not an upper-class, middle-class movement. It was always — *Ms.* always had working-class articles. Nevertheless, there were a number of people who thought we didn't have enough. The lesbian groups thought we didn't have enough on lesbian issues, and they were probably right, because we would do an article, but we wouldn't sort of integrate that into the other things that we did. But that was a much more — that took a while. That took a lot longer to get there.

ANDERSON: Was it contentious among you as a group, in terms of your editorial decisions? Do you remember disagreements about that content?

EDGAR: No, I don't remember that, and it may be because I was one of the founders and I was one of — there was sort of the inner circle and then the younger women didn't feel part of the inner circle. But I was the inner circle and I felt more comfortable, and I understood their position, but I think they had more conflict about some of those issues than we did. I mean, I thought that we tried to respond to them and take things into account. Sometimes we went way overboard. I mean, we — Oh, my God, we didn't have enough articles on housewives. That was another one of the criticisms.

We did try to be all things to all people, which was probably not the smartest — but we did try. And we put on the cover, this woman who had nine kids, and I think was a Right to Life. She didn't talk about Right to Life in the article and I don't think we knew it when we wrote it, but she talked about how wonderful it was [to have nine kids,] and that it was work and, you know — and that was sort of over the top.

But we also did, you know, what is a housewife worth, [what is her] work worth, monetarily, and we did some groundbreaking articles on trying to come up with the monetary amount that it cost to do those kinds of jobs, and why don't they have job security and why, you know — so we did that kind of piece. But we would sometimes just, you know, go over the top.

ANDERSON: What were the '80s like at *Ms.*?

22:00

EDGAR: The '80s were just a struggle to survive, I mean, the whole way through. We hit — the '70s were amazing. The '70s — we cracked the advertising field. We got all those ads that had never ever advertised in women's magazines and we cracked it for the whole women's magazine world. And in the '80s, they [the advertising staff from some of the other women's magazines] took it and ran with it and they sold against us. And so, they would take every article that we did. We did an article on female genital mutilation. They would take this to the advertiser. Do you want to advertise in a magazine that talks about this? And so, we were losing ads. We would kill ourselves to do these packages that would talk about the feminist version of health and beauty and try and sell ads around it. Sometimes it worked, you know, because body image is a real issue and was then and still is, but sometimes it didn't work.

And we were a nonprofit foundation at that point. I had been the paralegal on our transition from for-profit to nonprofit, too, so, and the IRS made us go through all kinds of hoops and things like that. But we were able to raise tax-deductible donations, which meant we could go out and get foundation grants and individual grants and so we had a whole new fundraising sort of arm, not in a formal way, but it started draining Gloria in a major way. And so we were all worried about that. And it was draining Pat Carbine as well, and we were still trying to keep the magazine going.

Our circulation was doing fine. We never really had huge problems with circulation. We had this incredibly loyal readership who believed in the magazine, and so that was not the issue. The issue was making enough money to keep publishing and to pay writers, because we weren't able to pay enough, and people would get really angry and they, you know, they would want to write for — and the other magazines were wanting feminist articles, and so they would get paid very well to do good articles there.

Because we were nonprofit, we also couldn't endorse candidates, so we had to be much more careful about how we covered campaigns. We still covered campaigns, and I was in charge of sort of monitoring how we covered them and sort of tallying up at the end of the year how much lobbying we had done around issues and things like that, so, so that was another one of my little jobs.

We also, we sent a cover with Sally Ride on her first shuttle trip, which was sort of cool, and I was the liaison with NASA, so that was fun. I mean, I had all these little jobs that I did.

ANDERSON: Was your title always editor, or did it change?

EDGAR: It was always editor. We didn't have titles at the beginning. That was the other thing we did that was different I forgot to mention. We were editors and we were listed in alphabetical order. We did have functions and we did, even at the beginning — not during the first year, but as we got sort of stabilized — we did develop fields. We had someone who

did health. We had someone who did the front of the book columns. I did politics and international and, as we moved on, I did travel. And we would sort of have our favorite writers that we would edit, and I got to edit Alice Walker, because she lived in Jackson and I lived in Jackson and that was — but, so we did develop specialties, and that was important, because then we would be able to do sort of outreach into our field and find out what was going on and get the latest info.

But my title was always editor — until we sold the magazine to the Australians in 1989, and then they wanted to do it the old-fashioned way and they wanted to have formal titles, and I became managing editor at that point, and then I had a managing editor's job, which was administrative.

ANDERSON: A lot less fun?

EDGAR: Oh, much less fun. Yeah, oh, my gosh — much less fun.

ANDERSON: How would you describe the Australian period?

EDGAR: Well, we were happy to find them. I mean, they were Australian feminists and they really cared about the issues. They had a totally different picture of running a magazine and it was a much more traditional way and our ideas weren't discussed collectively in nearly the same way. Unilateral decisions were made. We disagreed with some of the things that they did. They ran an article by Susan Brownmiller on the Lisa Steinberg case. I don't know if you remember, she was a little girl who had been murdered by her husband — I mean, by the father [Joel Steinberg]. What was the name of the woman? [Hedda Nussbaum, who was also charged.] She just got out of prison. Anyway, it was a brutal child-abuse case and she was murdered, and the woman was on trial. He was in prison. She was on trial, and Susan Brownmiller wrote a piece, basically not defending her, because she did not save the child, and could have. And it was classic battered women's syndrome.

And we [some of us] were really, really upset about that article, and the most we could do was to assign another article where Susan Schecter, who was brilliant in the domestic violence movement, wrote a piece on the domestic violence syndrome and how it paralyzes you. And so, we weren't heard [by the Australians.] You know, in the past, we would've discussed those issues out and we would've come to some kind of — we were much more consensus in the past and the Australian period was not a consensus period. They still did some good things, but they introduced some much more traditional things. They introduced — and also, in order to get ads. I mean, it was the same conflict.

We did some articles on fashion, but [in the past] our articles were sort of the cost-per-wear factor, and if you spend a lot of money but you wear it a lot, that's a good thing. And that's not what the fashion advertisers wanted. They wanted you to just spend a lot of money all the time. So, that really didn't work.

ANDERSON: And so you left in the middle of the Australian –

EDGAR: Yeah, I left in 1989. Actually, we sold it in 1987, so I was there for a year. I was there for 1988 and a little into 1989 with the Australians. And then I left and I went to the foundation world. There wasn't another women's magazine I wanted to work for.

ANDERSON: Why did you leave?

EDGAR: Somewhat — well, I was bored. You know, we didn't do all the fun things that we used to do, in terms of all the other issues that we worked on. My role was very much administrative. I didn't agree with a lot of the things that Anne Summers, [the Australian editor,] was doing. I mean, it's not that there were a lot of things I didn't agree with, but there were some things that I didn't agree with and that I wasn't — I didn't feel comfortable in terms of having my opinion heard. So, I didn't feel hurt, basically, it was just time to leave. And there wasn't another women's magazine that I wanted to work for, really, because where else would I be able to do what we had done at *Ms.*? And another magazine, especially at a senior level, I would've done the same thing I was doing with Anne, and possibly with less interesting content. So I looked at public policy organizations and foundations and then I went to the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation.

ANDERSON: You were there ten years.

EDGAR: I was there ten years, and that was a great move for me, because it allowed me to take the journalism skills and the information skills and the communication skills I had and then apply them to a whole different area that wasn't really thought of as feminist — but to me, if you're working in child welfare, you're working with women and children, and that's a feminist issue. If you're working on education reform, you're working on women's education rights, and that's a feminist issue. Even if you're working on prison reform, which was another one of our areas [at the Clark Foundation] — I mean, the fastest growing rate of people going to prison is among women, so that's — I mean, there are all kinds of things to work on.

And what it gave me was expertise at a different level from what I was learning at *Ms.* The journalism, even at *Ms.*, which was in-depth journalism — I mean, we did, like, really mega-in-depth issues, partially because in the beginning, we had this feeling that we had to say everything all the time because we might not ever have a chance to say it again, but all the way through, we had incredibly in-depth coverage of issues. But we had a very, very focused point of view.

And what I learned, actually, at the Foundation — [at *Ms.* we had a focused point of view, but we also had allies that we worked with and sort of — enemies is not the right word, but people who were not on our

31:12

side that we didn't work with. At the Foundation, what I learned is, I learned to work with everybody on the same issues. We still had a focused point of view. We were trying to do reform of child welfare systems. We were trying to do reform of how middle-school kids are taught. But we had to work with everybody.

So I learned a lot more of sort of the grayer shades of communication. And that was really good for me, because we made a lot of progress. I mean, we were in Alabama and we were working with these good ol' boys that I would've have hated when I was in college, and I still would hate them on a lot of issues, but, you know, they came around on alternatives to sentencing for non-violent offenders. And so that's what we were working on, and that was really good. So it was — anyway, it was a sort of interesting leap for me.

ANDERSON: Did you ever feel like you were swimming upstream, in terms of women's issues or a feminist lens there?

EDGAR: Oh, sure, all the time, because they didn't sort of think of these issues as feminists. And I didn't sort of push that with my colleagues, but I saw it. It was totally, totally clear to me that it was a logical in-sync progression from my work at *Ms.* I had no qualms with that. It was interesting to talk to my colleagues at the Foundation about whether they were feminists or not, the women especially, because some were and some would say, I'm not. And I'd say, Well, why aren't you? And then they would come up with some answer which was like, Well, because I don't march all the time. And I said, "Well, marching is good, but there are lots of ways of making change and, you know, that's not the only definition of a feminist." And they'd say, Well, I'm not a lesbian. And I'd say, That's not the only definition of a feminist. So, I had to do a lot of one-on-one education, which I still have to do and I'm sure you probably do, too.

ANDERSON: Did you stay involved with the Women's Political Caucus after that original meeting?

EDGAR: Not in a formal way. I mean, I used to go to their conferences when I was at *Ms.*, and I went to one, I went to the twentieth anniversary, I think, conference, but not — I might still be a member. I might still be a member of all the —

ANDERSON: You paid life-long dues? (laughs)

EDGAR: Exactly right, but I'm not active there.

ANDERSON: Yeah. Were there other organizations after *Ms.* that —

EDGAR: That are specific feminist organizations?

ANDERSON: Or did you go to Houston?

EDGAR: Yeah. Oh, that was during *Ms.* Oh, that was a great time.

ANDERSON: Tell me about that.

EDGAR: Oh. That was amazing. That sort of brought a lot of my life together, together, too, because it was both empowering and full of fear for me. We helped organize the New York State delegation and we went up to the meeting in Albany and Bella Abzug, I think Shirley Chisholm, Mary Anne Krupsak, Gloria. And then a bunch of *Ms.* folks stayed up all night doing fliers and Xeroxing and getting everything ready to make sure that we had a feminist delegation that was going to Houston. So we won that, and then we went down to Houston and we had a one-bedroom suite and there were maybe eight or nine of us, and we would sleep in cycles, and we had a king-sized bed and three or four people would sleep in the king-sized bed and somebody on the couch.

And there was so much right-wing activity around that, organizing around that, and I was so petrified that they were going to take over, I got hives. I was completely covered in hives, and I had to get cortisone shots. And I don't get hives. I mean, that was the first time I'd ever had them. But it was just — I was petrified.

My job was to — one of my jobs — organize behind the scenes, but the first of my many jobs, organizing behind the scenes, was to organize the carrying of the torch for the press conference and then up the — there was this sort of procession up the aisle for the opening session. So that was, like, wonderful and it was magical the way it happened, and it was just the best. And then, we also organized, and we were runners and we would sort of get messages from one of the committee meetings to another committee meeting, and things like that, so. So that was fun.

But in the end, it was the most empowering thing. It was just fabulous. And I remember seeking out the Mississippi delegation and getting to meet them. And that was great, because it was like — I didn't know them, but seeing feminists from Mississippi was like this big deal and it was great. Have you seen the documentary that was done on that?

ANDERSON: No, I haven't seen it yet.

EDGAR: Oh, it's great.

ANDERSON: Did you like it?

EDGAR: I did. I mean, there were some things I disagreed with on it, because — but still, it was just really interesting, and the way they interviewed people now and then did all the flashbacks was well done. I did like it.

ANDERSON: Did you think about going back to the South after *Ms.* was done?

EDGAR: Well, not after *Ms*, but when I went down there to work for Charles Evers, I thought about staying, but then — because I was offered a job at a TV station and since, you know, my *Today Show* fantasy was still going, but then I thought, It's just asking for too much trouble. And I thought, Maybe I'm selling out by leaving, but I went back to New York where I could be safe with my politics.

And I wasn't physically afraid for me, I was afraid of the conflict of my family, and it wasn't — so it was that. I just could only take so much of the guilt of putting my mother into her, you know, her deathbed, and my grandmother, too. My grandmother, needless to say, held on till after my mother died. I was so pissed at her. She was too much. But still, I didn't think of going back.

And then I was in Jackson, actually for a work project in May. I did a pro bono project down there for the Mississippi Center for Justice, which was just fabulous. My philosophy professor's daughter, who's a lawyer and just started this new community lawyering group down there to do civil rights litigation — so I went down to write a report for them. And you know, I kept thinking, would I come back here? And what I liked about it is that there's a community of progressive people who are so supportive of one another.

And for me, it always comes back to that community. That was what was important to me about *Ms*. That's what I missed when I left *Ms*., because I didn't have that at the Clark Foundation, that's what I loved about the civil rights movement and the work in Mississippi. That's what I actually love about the fitness work I'm doing with Nia, is because there is a community of people who are artistic and active in their body and care about the mind-body-spirit connection and it's a community and it's like an extended family. And my *Ms*. family is still my extended family. We still have dinner. I mean, Gloria, Suzanne, Robin Morgan, Mary Thom and I meet at least once a month for dinner.

ANDERSON: That's great.

EDGAR: So we have never, ever left that go. So, it's still a community. But you do have a community like that in a conservative place if you're a progressive, because you're not with everybody else, and it's great. And I would be free to go down there now. It wouldn't be an issue. But I don't think so.

ANDERSON: Well, now you've been in New York for years.

EDGAR: Yeah, I've been here. I'm a New Yorker.

ANDERSON: It's home now, it sounds like.

EDGAR: Yeah, it has to be, yeah.

ANDERSON: Do you want to say anything more about what you're working on now, in terms of the Nia stuff, or your writing?

EDGAR: Well, I love the writing that I'm doing now. I love being a freelance consultant. I love the flexibility of the time, because that allows me to do the Nia work. I mean, I'm at Smith College this week because I'm organizing a Nia teacher conference. I wouldn't be able to that if I were working at a magazine or if I had a day job.

ANDERSON: And what kind of writing projects are you taking on?

EDGAR: I'm doing work with other foundations, and the most important one that I love to death and that finishes this year and I'm sorry about that is, I have been chronicling foster-care reform in the state of Massachusetts for six years. They are totally rejuvenating the way they are taking care of abused and neglected kids and the families of those kids, and it's fascinating. It is really, really fascinating. So, I've been following that for six years and writing about it regularly. And I love it. I really love it. And then, I have lots of other different sorts of writing projects. And I'm at a transitional stage right now. I'm trying to figure out where I'm going from here, because that was my bread and butter project and it's finishing in December, so I get to rethink my life once again. We do it all the time.

ANDERSON: Yeah, but probably not much time for just sitting quiet?

EDGAR: No. I'm incredibly busy. I don't know where. I have always too much to do.

ANDERSON: Before we stop, I'd just like for you to reflect a little bit about feminism and sort of where you've seen it go over the last 30 years. How are you feeling in terms of taking the pulse of the movement of these days? Do you feel sort of cynical or optimistic or hopeful? Did you go to the March [for Women's Lives] in Washington last year? I mean, where do you think we've come in this last three decades?

EDGAR: Oh, in the last three decades? We have made huge progress, and actually, I'm more optimistic than I think a lot of my peers are, and it may be because — well, I don't know why, maybe just because I've become more optimistic in my old age. But the changes are so great that the younger women today don't even realize that it was different. Now, the advantage that the younger women have that we didn't is that they have a sense of history and most of them, I hope, are getting a picture of what it was like in the nineteenth century for women, and the seventeenth century and such. Certainly at places like Smith, they are — I don't know about places like Millsaps. But we have come, like, so, so far and it's so different, and I think what's harder for the young women now is that all of the possibilities are there and the pressure for

everything else is also still there. So they have, in a way, more pressure than we did.

It was easy for women, in a way, to just be taken care of, you know. They never found themselves, but it was easy. And it was easy for me to say, "OK, I don't want to work that hard in college so I'm not going to take pre-med." That was easy. And it would've been easy for me to say, I'll get married and have a family and have somebody take care of me. But that's not what I wanted and I don't think that's what women want today.

And I have two nieces, who are six and eight, and one of them — they're both Chinese. And I have to tell this most wonderful story. We were having dinner and we were talking about the election. It was last November, December, and her grandmother said to her, "You know, Annie, when you grow up, there could be a woman president." And Annie said — she's the eight-year-old — she said, "But I was born in China. I can't be president." So, what's wonderful about that — I don't know how she ever knew that if you're born in another country, you can't be president, because she's only eight — but what's wonderful is that she just assumed that we were talking about her. And that is just great. Now, what I worry about, of course, is all the body image things that are already starting to go on with her and what's going to happen when she's a teenager and when her sister's a teenager and are they going to lose that confidence when they're adolescents and you know, and we just have to make sure that they don't. But the opportunities are there.

What's hard now is that organized feminism is different from what it was, because the people don't see the crises that we saw, because it's not as black and white — except, of course, around *Roe v. Wade*, where it's probably going to be very black and white. But, so that's more difficult, it's more difficult to organize around. But in terms of what the possibilities are and in terms of the changes, that's really great.

And I think men are changing a lot. I don't think they're changing enough. And it's still not true that a man's family is as important to [him as] his career [or that a woman's career is as important as her family] — well, that the corporate world and the professional world in America still doesn't recognize the family role for men as they do the family role for women as much, but that's sort of changing, too, so.

ANDERSON: Are there places that you look back and have regrets around what the movement strategies or priorities were? Or do you see it all as gifts and benefits?

EDGAR: It depends on where you were in the movement. You know, there were a lot of people who were hurt by feeling put down. I mean, there were a lot of people who felt the movement was not tolerant enough. And I'm sure that, in places, the movement was not tolerant enough. And, you know, having been hurt by being put down, I can understand that. But it depends on where you were. I think, for the most part, what the

movement has done has been incredibly positive and I cannot imagine my life without it, and I can't imagine the life of women in this country today without it. I mean, I just — it's beyond my ability to even imagine what it would be like if we hadn't sort of taken up the call again in the late 1960s and sort of built on all those women who went before. But is there a lot more to do? Oh, yeah, there's tons and tons and tons to do.

ANDERSON: Like you said, without as much recognition —

EDGAR: Yeah, without as much recognition. And you don't get the gratification for it. You don't get the support for it. It's harder to organize around. There are tons of little organizations that are doing it and that's really great. And you know, that may be the time and another time will come. There are the big marches like there was last year that was so wonderful. [The March for Women's Lives in Washington D.C., April 2004.] And, you know, I took some of my Nia community to that march, and they'd never been to marches before, so that was great for me. And they loved it. They were happy to be there. They just hadn't been very political. So, the possibility is there. But then, of course, look who — what happens with our presidential elections and who we have. You know, that's really depressing.

ANDERSON: Right. And yet, you're still optimistic?

EDGAR: Yeah, oh, I am, I am. I used to be a pessimist, but now that I'm old — I'm not old, no — now that I'm sort of getting to be mature, I'm much more optimistic now. I really am.

ANDERSON: All right. I think that's it.

EDGAR: OK.

ANDERSON: Thank you, Joanne.

EDGAR: You're welcome, Kelly.

47:30

END TAPE 2

END OF INTERVIEW

Edited for accuracy by Kate Mitchell, February 2006.

Edited for clarity by Revan Schendler, March 2006.

© Sophia Smith Collection 2005